UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The significance of the Russian revolution has often been discussed. Was this event basically a coup based on the primary role of a party elite or was it a genuine expression of the aspiration of the working class to end the domination of capitalism. This point is important to discuss because it relates to the issue as to whether the workers are capable of overcoming capitalism in the present. This issue will be discussed in relation to a study of Trotsky’s: ‘The History of the Russian Revolution’ (Pluto Press, London 1977) The author was the major leader of the attempt to overthrow the provisional government and instead establish the supreme authority of the Petrograd soviet. But was this development essentially an expression of the determination and will of Lenin and Trotsky or was it instead the culmination of the increasing aspiration of the workers to overcome the domination of the bourgeois Provisional government? If we can outline the view that the revolution was an aspiration of the logical development of the consciousness of the workers we can then indicate in a convincing manner that the events of 1917 were the expression of the discontent of the people and that the success of the revolutionary process was the development of a genuinely popular manifestation of the working class to create the possibility to be able to organise and administer society in terms of the expression of their interests. If we are able to establish the credibility of this viewpoint this is not to deny the importance of the role of Lenin and Trotsky in relation to the success of the revolutionary process, but that this conclusion will be based on the understanding that they were a genuine expression of the will of the people in the Russia of 1917. Such a conclusion does not mean that the Bolsheviks had an insignificant role in 1917, but rather that such a role was as the instrument of the aspirations of the workers and peasants and that this meant a genuine workers state was created with the success of the October revolution. The potential of this situation was to create the possibility for the victory of a process of international revolutionary change. However, if we conclude that a party elite acquired political power this would seem to compromise the view that what was occurring was a process of the possible beginning of international revolutionary change. In this context the character of the Russian revolution was problematical and instead it is necessary to create a different tradition of genuine Marxism if the possibility of genuine social change is to occur in a more principled and revolutionary manner.

In his preface, Trotsky is adamant that the process of revolutionary change involved the masses in being able to define and transform the actual situation: “The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.”(p18) But what we have to try and determine is to what extent the influence of the role of the Marxist party confirms or undermines the realisation of this contention. Can there be a genuine process of interaction of party and class, or does the party become a dominant expression of this relationship of party and class to the extent that the class acquires a subordinate role in the process of the successful attainment of the revolution? The problematical aspects of the relation of party and class are unintentionally outlined by Trotsky when he comments: “Only the guiding layers of a class have a political programme, and even this still requires the test of events and the approval of the masses:”(p18) In other words the leading and conscious role of the party is taken for granted and the essential role of the class is to support and promote the realisation of the programme of the party. But in what manner does this mean that the class has a genuinely active and importance role in the successful realisation of the process of revolutionary change? The answer to this question by Trotsky seems to be ambiguous: “Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston, or the box but the steam.”(p19) Therefore Trotsky seems to be expressing the view that the working class has an important role in the possibility of the success of the revolutionary process, but this very aspect is based on the support of the class for the leadership and strategy of the party. Without the party the role of the class would not be able to realise its revolutionary potential. This means the development of the significance of the party is the vital aspect for the development of the capacity of the workers to be able to effective challenge and overcome the domination of capitalism. But does this mean that the primary task of the party is to facilitate the realisation of the revolutionary potential of the workers, or what is important is the willingness of the workers to support the strategy of the Marxist party? This is an apparent tension that has not been resolved by Trotsky in his introduction. We will have to try and establish whether this aspect of the relation of party and class is resolved in the popular period of unrest in terms of the genuine revolutionary role of the working class to change society in 1917.

This possible problem of elitism is not meant to deny the importance of the role of the party. The task of the Marxist organisation is to challenge the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class so that the possibility of the increased influence of the role of revolutionary politics can be advanced in popular terms. Only this interaction of Marxism with the workers can generate the ideological conditions to generate the increased importance of the aim of socialism, and in this manner the character of the class struggle acquires conscious aspects that overcome the reactionary aspects of the importance of spontaneity. But this type of relationship should not mean that the workers become merely the expression of the influence of Marxism. Only the genuine initiative of the workers can change society, and so in this manner the task of the party should be to encourage the initiative and self-activity of the workers rather than expressing an elite process of domination by the Marxists in relation to the character of the economic and political activity of the workers. Trotsky outlines how the belated development of capitalism in Russia led to the creation of modern factories based on the importance of the cooperative character of labour. This was the economic aspect that facilitated the development of the collective class consciousness of the workers which led to the formation of revolutionary political organisation with the creation of the Soviets in the 1905 revolution. The very belated development of capitalism in Russia had created a working class with traditions of collective struggles and an awareness of its revolutionary possibilities. In other words, the soviet system was the expression of the development of a form of socialism within the continuation of the capitalist and feudal economy. However, it has to be suggested that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had strategies in 1905 that were not based on the revolutionary potential of these developments. They could not advocate a strategy for the soviets to become the basis of the realisation of a new type of political power and instead failed to argue that the soviets should be utilised in order to facilitate the process of the transformation of Tsarist society. Hence in an important respect the perspectives of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was not adequate basis to promote the activity of the workers to overthrow the Tsarist system. Instead the workers organised in Soviets had a more principled and dynamic understanding of the possibilities of the situation. The role of the two major Marxist organisations could only undermine the realisation of the potential of the dynamic actions of the workers during 1905. Instead Trotsky leadership role in the Soviet indicated in a more principled manner what could have been possible with the perspective of a revolutionary strategy based on the importance of the advocacy of a general strike by the soviets. But to some extent the political limitations of the Bolsheviks were overcome with the onset of the first world war, and they began to develop popularity within the working class because of the success of their agitation against the imperialist character of the first world war. The Bolsheviks were able to indicate that the issue of the character of principled class consciousness was connected to the rejection of the imperialist aims of the Tsarist government, and that instead the expression of class interests was based on opposition to the militaristic objectives of the administration. Trotsky outlines how the important political limitations of the Tsarist government in the period of the first world war also facilitated the development of mass discontent that facilitated the conditions for the demise of the role of the monarchy. Trotsky outlines the dynamics of the development of the February 1917 revolution which was based on the popular mass actions of the workers. Their demonstrations and other forms of spontaneous activity created the situation of Trotsky indicates the difference between the situation in February and October: “In October the party directed the insurrection from day to day…..Not so in February. The masses had almost no leadership from above…..Without a look back the masses made their own history.”(p137) But the question was to what extent could the spontaneous dynamism of the workers generate the possibility to realise aspirations that were not precisely formed and expressed in a definite manner? The point was that it would be possible for politicians to relate to this situation and utilise it in terms that suited their own interests. However, despite this ultimate result of the events of February 1917,

Trotsky is adamant that what was occurring was a combination of the role of spontaneity and conscious action: “Elements of experience, criticism, initiative, self-sacrifice, seeped down through the mass and created, invisibly to a superficial glance but no less decisively, an inner mechanics of the revolutionary movement as a conscious process. To the smug politicians of liberalism and tamed socialism everything that happened among the masses is customarily represented as an instinctive process…..In reality the though which was drilling through the thick of the working class was far bolder, more penetrating, more conscious, than those little ideas by which the educated classes live. Moreover, this thought was more scientific: not only because it was to a considerable degree fertilised with the methods of Marxism, but still more because it was ever nourished itself on the living experience of the masses which were soon to take their place on the revolutionary arena. Thoughts are scientific if they correspond to an objective process and make it possible to influence that process and guide it.”(p170) This action of the masses in a spontaneous manner could realise the success of the revolution in terms of the overthrow of the regime, but it could not result in the formation of a government based on the interests of the workers. In other words, however dynamic and influential is the action of the masses this is not sufficient to ensure the realisation of their objectives at the level of the achievement of a government that expresses the aims of the workers. The only logical conclusion that can be made is that what is required is the role of a revolutionary party that can connect the spontaneous dynamism of the workers with conscious objectives concerning the logical result of this mass unrest. However, the possible tension of this process is that the party could come to dominate the workers in terms of the increasing imposition of its objectives onto the development of class struggle. An important issue to ensure that the importance of the leadership of the party in terms of the influence of its revolutionary strategy does not become the basis of the justification of the domination of the class by the role of the part. The question we have to ask is whether Trotsky was sufficiently aware of this possible problem. But in terms of the events of February 1917 his emphasis is about the dynamism of the workers and their ability to be able to transform the situation because of the connection of their discontent to effective mass actions. But the problem was that this development could not realise its successful conclusion because of the lack of a perspective of change of the workers. The result of this limitation was that the bourgeois politicians of the Duma could take advantage of the lack of political clarity of the workers and so form a coalition government. However, despite the strategic limitations of the workers they also had sufficient consciousness and political experience to repeat the lessons of the 1905 revolution and form their own popular organisations in the form of Soviets. Hence Trotsky is indicating that whilst the workers lacked the level of political awareness that would result in the possibility of a immediate seizure of power as an expression of the possible dynamic outcome of the situation of mass unrest, they still had the sufficient consciousness to understand that they had to have effective forms of organisation that would defend their interests in this situation. This meant that any principled revolutionary party would have to relate to the role of the Soviets because they expressed the aspirations and interests of the workers. Only the creation of a situation of dynamic interaction of class, party and soviets could generate the possibility of authentic revolutionary change. Therefore, in this manner the party would have to respond to the importance of the role of the class organised in the soviets. This meant that we have to establish whether the eventual October revolution corresponds to this situation of the importance of the working class in relation to the dynamic role of the Soviets. What is being suggested is that the dynamic spontaneous activity of the workers was able to acquire an increasingly ambitious and conscious character with the formation of the soviets. The role of the Soviets, if they were to be effective, could be nothing more than the questioning and scrutiny of the policies of the bourgeois Provisional government. Ultimately the logical development of the tensions between Soviets and Provisional government could be nothing more than express a challenge by the former concerning the authority of the latter. Hence if the Soviets acted to accept the legitimacy of the Provisional government, this would not be because of the effective functioning of this administration but instead because of a process of the development of an incapacity by the Soviets to realise its potential to become the government of Russian society. In this manner the aspirations and interests of the workers would not be realised because of an opportunist degeneration of the role of the Soviet. Hence the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary domination of the Soviet could not genuinely express the interests of the workers because these parties were based on an uncritical acceptance of the authority of the role of the bourgeois Provisional government. In this context they accepted the subordination of the working class to the domination of the capitalist system which was the objective of the administration led by the former members of the Duma. Only the Bolsheviks consistently argued that the Soviets should realise genuine political power because that objective was in the interests of the working class. The obvious question that is created by this perspective is whether this meant the Bolsheviks were an authentic expression of the aspirations of the working class in 1917? In terms of the revolutionary strategy that was being upheld the answer would seem to be in the affirmative.

Trotsky outlines the relation of the Soviet to the people in the following manner: “The tasks and functions of the Soviet grow unceasingly under the pressure from the masses. The revolution here finds its indubitable centre. The workers, the soldiers, and soon also the peasants, will from now on turn only to the soviet. In their eyes the Soviet becomes the focus of all hopes and all authority, an incarnation of the revolution itself.”(p178) But in a situation in which the Soviet has the effective political authority because it represents the mass power and aspirations of the workers, it refuses to logically assume the possibility of the realisation of domination by the overthrow of the Provisional government. Instead the distorted expression of the aspirations of the workers is defined by the acceptance of the role of the bourgeois administration and the accommodation of the Soviet leadership to this unsatisfactory situation. What is genuinely problematic is that the workers lack the apparent consciousness to be able to create the possibility to realise the power of the Soviets given the importance of the opportunist leadership of these mass organisations. The issue is that the workers lack the apparent capacity to create a situation in which the Soviets assume power because of the importance of the role of the major parties in these organisations. It would seem that the only manner in which this problem can be resolved in a revolutionary manner is for the development of the role of a genuinely revolutionary party that would provide principled leadership of the Soviets. Only in this manner can the issue of the opportunist role of the leadership of the Soviets be resolved in principled terms. But would this very development mean that the actual aspirations of the workers become secondary to the interests of such a revolutionary organisation? This problem is the tension involved in the development of a relationship of party and class. How is it possible to ensure that the party remains supportive of the genuine aspirations of the class, which have been expressed in its support for the Soviet. In other words, if the revolutionary party comes to dominate the Soviet, how is possible to ensure that it remains genuinely based on the actual aspirations of the workers and does not in some sense exploit their aims in order to establish a privileged position within society? Trotsky is not primarily concerned with this issue because instead his emphasis is about the problems created by the accommodation of the opportunist leadership of the Soviet to the domination of the bourgeois government. He outlines in vivid terms how the Soviets had the effective political power in February 1917, but the role of their opportunist leadership was to bestow political authority onto the role of what became the provisional government. But the problem was that the workers lacked the apparent consciousness and capacity to challenge this situation. Only the emergence of an effective revolutionary party could provide a strategy for the realisation of the genuine domination of the role of the Soviets. But the problem this situation would create concerns the relations of party and class. In what manner could it be considered that the party would express the interests of the workers in a principled and progressive manner. Would the revolutionary party encourage the realisation of the aspirations of the workers in terms of the expression of effective participation of the workers in the process of the revolutionary transformation of society? If the workers could not overcome the domination of the bourgeois government because they had allowed the role of the Soviets to be expressed by the influence of the domination of opportunist parties, did this mean that the only principled alternative was the importance of a revolutionary organisation which effectively dictated to the people a strategy for the transformation of society? This seemed to be the lesson made by Lenin in 1917, and the interpretation of events by Trotsky does not seem to challenge this conclusion. However, Trotsky tries to resolve the dilemmas of his position by suggesting that the reactionary role of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries meant that there was no other principled alternative than to uphold the role of the revolutionary party of the Bolsheviks. But this conclusion is not in dispute, but the important question becomes how this relationship of class and party is expressed. Can it be possible to uphold a progressive approach in which the party promotes the realisation of the political potential of the workers? This is the question that has to be addressed because the immediate conclusion of the spontaneous struggles of the workers is to elect an opportunist leadership of the Soviets. The only manner in which the reactionary implications of this situation can be resolved is by the importance of the role of a revolutionary party. But this conclusion raises the importance of the question of what will be the relation of party and class? On the one hand the conclusion of the spontaneous dynamic of the role of the class is to create the political conditions for the domination of opportunism. On the other hand, the leadership of the revolutionary party implies that it cannot promote the spontaneous dynamic of the workers because of possible political limitations. Does this situation mean that the only possible principled development is for the domination of the class by the role of the genuinely Marxist party? This important problem could be resolved if the party seriously attempts to develop a strategy of change in which the aspect of initiative is still with the role of the workers. The issue in this context is whether the approach of the Bolsheviks does express this standpoint. Therefore, on the one hand can the Bolsheviks challenge the influence of opportunism within the workers that results in support for the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, and on the other hand can they uphold and advocate a strategy that does genuinely enable the workers to transform society. But what happens if the spontaneous dynamism of the workers becomes a challenge in relation to the approach of the party? This was an issue that was not anticipated by the Bolsheviks and yet it was to become important in relation to the events of 1917. Could the Bolsheviks actually advocate patience and moderation in these circumstances whilst not becoming a new form of opportunism and an expression of rejection of the realisation of the challenges of the class struggle? This question was to become an issue in 1917. Ultimately the Bolsheviks seemed to resolve it by maintaining control of the dynamics of the revolutionary process. But could it be seriously argued that tis very role of moderation enabled the dynamics of the class struggle to be realised in a principled manner? It was possible to outline a principled resolution of this issue as long as the dominant role of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries had a major role in undermining the realisation of the potential of the revolutionary process. But when the Bolsheviks acquired increasing political influence the question would become to what extent could they express the aspirations of the workers to realise genuine revolutionary change?

The point being made is that the working class has indicated its capacity to be able to bring about important changes in society such as the overthrow of Tsarism. But this very development does not in and of itself express the potential for the successful realisation of the process of proletarian revolution. In other words, can this spontaneous dynamic of the generation of powerful collective mass action be sufficient in order to generate the successful attainment of the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. Is this objective an aim that is too complicated for the workers to realise without the related and hegemonic role of a revolutionary party? This question seems to have been at least partially addressed by the formation of soviets, or the development of popular organs of power that are accountable to the aspirations of the workers. But the problem is that this very principle is also connected to the role of the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary organisations that are opposed to the realisation of the aim of proletarian revolution. The actual dynamic role of the workers has resulted in the formation of the dominant influence of political organisations that support a situation of collaboration with the bourgeois Provisional government rather than aspire to its overthrow by the successful completion of a process of proletarian revolution. The very organisations of the workers and peasants are the major problem undermining the successful realisation of a revolutionary process of change. But the workers are apparently not able to oppose this development efficiently because they are initially supportive of the role of the Menshevik led Soviets. In this context it would seem that the role of Lenin is crucial because he is the major critic of this development, and instead advocates that the situation of dual power between the Soviets and the provisional government be resolved by the ascent of the Soviets to the realisation of genuine political ascendency. In this context the workers have obtained the support of what seems to be an effective revolutionary party that is opposed to all forms of class compromise and instead advocates that the objective of the overthrow of the provisional government by the soviets should become the major objective of the workers. Hence in emphatic terms the policy of class compromise is being rejected by what seems to be the emergence of a party that is genuinely able to articulate the aspirations of the workers in the most conscious manner. But could the very role of the revolutionary party mean that it undermines the actual capacity of the workers to articulate and express their own interests in the most effective and principled manner? What has to be remembered is that Lenin has never rejected his initial view that the party is the expression of the socialist consciousness of the workers, and that the dominant ideology of the working class is an expression of the limits of the present system. Hence it is implied that the working class can not act in a principled and genuinely revolutionary manner without the leadership of the Marxist party. Has Lenin modified this viewpoint in relation to the importance of the events of 1917? He seems to imply that the workers are deceived by the role of the Menshevik leaders of the Soviet, but can they overcome these illusions by their own actions, or is the importance of the revolutionary party crucial in this situation?

Trotsky seems to provide a perspective in relation to this issue which is ambiguous. He maintains: “But all the active elements of the masses poured into the Soviet, and activity prevails in times of revolution. Moreover, since mass activity was growing from day to day, the basis of the Soviet was continually broadening. It was the sole genuine basis of the revolution.” (p213) This comment seems to imply that the popular and dynamic character of the Soviet was the primary and most important aspect of the revolutionary process. In this context the role of the Marxist party was merely to express and articulate this aspect in terms of the logical realisation of the political power of the Soviets. The function of the party was to be the most genuine and faithful expression of the Soviets, and in this manner to advocate a strategy that could contribute to the realisation of the establishment of the hegemony of these organs of popular democracy. But this very task implies that the party would establish a dominant relation to the role of the Soviets, and so possibly undermine the expression of their role as a genuine organ of popular democracy. How could this problem be resolved in terms of the interests of the Soviets? Trotsky outlines how the formation of the Soviets is an expression of the development of dual power between the workers and the bourgeois Provisional government. But literally only Lenin considers that this is a problematical situation that has to be resolved in terms of the overthrow of the government by the actions of the workers in terms of the creation of Soviets with revolutionary aspirations. But such a possibility would seem to be only feasible if the Bolsheviks become the majority party within the Soviet. However, such a development is not what the workers are supporting in February and March of 1917. The party has objectives that the workers do not support, and as a result the possibility of new advances in the revolutionary process cannot occur. The Bolsheviks are isolated and powerless without the support of the workers. They can only argue in illusory terms that the aim of ‘All power to the Soviets’ should be realised under its present Menshevik leadership. However, there is no possibility that this perspective will have any success. Therefore, the Bolsheviks are reduced to being propogandists for this policy. The actual power is with the workers, but they are not yet ready to challenge the opportunist limitations of the Menshevik led Soviet. However, this present situation is problematical because if it continues the power and the influence of the Soviets will be undermined and instead the importance of the bourgeois government will be strengthened. Hence Trotsky is right to suggest: “For the question stood thus: Either the bourgeoisie will actually dominate the old state apparatus, altering it a little for its purposes, in which case the soviets will come to nothing; or the soviets will form the foundation of a new state, liquidating not only the old governmental apparatus, but also the dominion of those classes which it serves. The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries were steering toward the first solution, the Bolsheviks towards the second.” (p230-231) But the point is that this situation could not change if the workers remained supportive of the approach of the Mensheviks. If this became a prolonged situation then the possibility for the Bolsheviks to provide effective revolutionary leadership would be undermined. Therefore, the attitudes of the workers were of vital importance if the durability of the present situation of dual power was to be replaced with more progressive and revolutionary possibilities. The capacity of the Bolsheviks to act in a revolutionary manner depended on the active support and involvement of the workers in the realisation of what could be understood to be common objectives. But to what extent was this development a situation of a relationship between genuinely equal partners, or did the party in some manner manipulate the workers to become a subordinate part of a revolutionary alliance? This is the question that Trotsky ultimately has to address, but it is questionable whether he does in a satisfactory manner because he assumes the consistent harmony of interests between the roles of the revolutionary party and the working class. However, he is more consistent when claiming that the opportunism of the role of the Mensheviks within the Soviets was increasingly generating discontent within the working class and so leading to increased support for the Bolsheviks. But the major aim of the workers was to realise the effective supremacy of the role of the Soviets in political terms. This objective was undermined by the increasing opportunist actions of the Mensheviks, but did the Bolsheviks have a valid and coherent alternative to establish the supreme authority of the role of the Soviets? This is a question that Trotsky has to address if he is to consider that the October revolution was a genuine expression of the aspirations of the working class. It could be argued that he is able to outline how the opportunism of the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets is unable to realise the aspirations of the workers. But does such criticism suggest that the Bolsheviks were a principled alternative basis of the objectives of the logical development of the revolutionary process in terms of the generation of the realisation of popular self-emancipation of the proletariat. The point being made is that the self-proclaimed vanguard role of the Bolsheviks could create important tensions concerning the realisation of the consistent initiative of the workers. Was Trotsky sufficiently aware of these problems? This is an important question that has to be tackled in detail. The very issue to be addressed concerns the question as to whether the revolution was an effective expression of the revolutionary potential of the workers in the Russia of 1917.

The importance of this issue is not meant to deny the revolutionary potential of the working class in Russia in 1917. Workers were discontented with the system and wanted an end to the first world war in terms of the realisation of a democratic peace without annexations. But what is possibly problematical is whether the Bolsheviks adequately expressed the aspirations of the workers and therefore were able to establish what was their actual objectives in relation to the role of the Soviet. The problem was that the workers knew what they were against in terms of opposing the reactionary role of the bourgeois Provisional government, but did this mean that they were for the revolutionary overthrow of this administration? It was difficult to provide a coherent answer to these types of questions because the workers were definitely confused concerning what was the most effective manner in which to articulate their class interests. But in this situation Lenin seemed to promote the realisation of a definite and principled perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. However, there is a problem in relation to this standpoint. Did this mean the attempt to establish the genuine involvement of the workers in the organisation of the political system and the economy, or alternatively what was important was the establishment of the domination of the Bolsheviks who would act on behalf of the workers? This apparent tension did not seem to be important because of the apparent increased support for the revolutionary objectives of the Bolsheviks by the workers. But the problem was the composition of the Soviets. They continued to express a majority for the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries. Hence it would seem that the very political expression of the social importance of the workers was not necessarily able to express the increasing radical objectives of the workers. Instead only the Bolsheviks became able to articulate the increasingly revolutionary type aspirations of the working class. Hence the organised expression of the aspirations of the workers became ambiguous and this situation led to increasing development of unorganised radical actions by a discontented proletariat in Petrograd. To Trotsky these various tensions between the conservatism of the executive committee of the Soviet and the spontaneous militancy of the workers was resolved with the election of a majority of Bolsheviks to this primary organisation of the revolutionary process. But we have to suggest that this very development created the possibility of a new tension between workers and the Bolsheviks that was only temporarily resolved by the actual expression of the October revolution. The problem was how could the aspirations of the workers be realised in a situation of unfavourable economic conditions? This issue was only temporarily resolved by the Bolsheviks effectively carrying out a successful revolution on behalf of the workers via their domination of the Soviet from August 1917. Bu this very development meant that the possible tensions between workers and their political representatives were only temporarily resolved in terms of the success of the revolutionary process. The point is that the workers had initially supported the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries control of the Soviet. But Trotsky makes the point that the opportunism of these organisations had led to the workers rejecting this allegiance and instead becoming supporters of the Bolsheviks. However, the Bolsheviks had inherited the problems that the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries could not resolve which had meant as a result that the workers became adherents of the Bolsheviks. But could the Bolsheviks be any more successful in the resolving of these issues such as providing food for the cities, ending the war, and being able to promote economic prosperity? The apparent complexity of these problems led to authoritarian policies that led to tensions between the working class and the ruling party. It was fairly straight-forward to carry out a revolution given the increasing unpopularity of the bourgeois government, but the complexity of the problems meant that the development of authoritarianism seemed to be inevitable. But the most important question to address in this context is to what extent did the various aspects of the revolutionary process contribute to this development? Did the Bolsheviks resolve the tensions of the relationship between party and class in 1917 which meant that the possibility to create a genuine progressive perspective was possible?

Trotsky would answer in the affirmative because the workers increasing supported the Bolsheviks in 1917 because of the opportunism of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries: “The Russian proletariat had waged its struggle for democracy in irreconcilable antagonism to the liberal bourgeoisie. The democratic parties in entering a bloc with the liberal bourgeoisie, had inevitably to enter into conflict with the proletariat. Such were the social roots of the cruel struggle to come between the Compromisers and Bolsheviks.”(p241) But the problem is that whilst this situation may explain the increasing support of the Bolsheviks within the working class it does not necessarily indicate conscious support for the perspectives of the Bolsheviks. The workers were increasingly discontented during 1917 but does this mean that the result was conscious adherence to the policy of the assumption of political power by the Soviets? In other words, could the Bolsheviks actually articulate the complex spontaneous discontent of the workers in the form of a definite political policy? Lenin obviously considered that this task could be realised in terms of the slogan of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. But what did this mean in precise terms? How could the apparent popularity of the Soviet executive committee be undermined and replaced with a new type of political authority? The actual answer to this question was expressed by the apparent reluctance of the Soviet executive committee to try and resolve economic and political issues in the interests of the workers. For example, they we reluctant to support the development of workers control of industry. The result was the increased influence of the role of the Bolsheviks who led a struggle for the development of workers control and the introduction of the eight-hour day. The independent actions of the workers were opposed by the Menshevik leadership of the Soviet because they had the following policy: “The democracy must limit itself to bringing pressure on the liberal bourgeoisie, beware of pushing it over by some incautious step into the camp of reaction, and conversely, support it insofar as it backs up the conquests of the revolution. In the long run that half-minded regime would have ended in a bourgeois republic with the socialists as a parliamentary opposition.”(p262) But this defensive approach meant that the policies of the government were not challenged in an effective manner by the Soviet executive committee. But this meant that the workers were increasingly discontented with this cautious and defensive approach because they had expectations that the Soviets would become the dominant expression of political influence within society. Hence the superiority of Lenin’s advocacy of ‘All power to the Soviets’ was that this expressed the increasing aspirations of the most militant workers. Only the most reactionary forces within society still opposed this objective. But the problem for the Bolsheviks was that the increased radicalism of the workers was not based on the understanding that it was necessary to overthrow the government. Instead they considered that the Soviets should dictate to the government about what its policies should be. This was a manifestation of radicalism, but it also represented a type of spontaneous naivety that assumed the government could be accountable to the working class organised in the soviets. The point is that the dynamic of mass action is not explicit about its objectives and instead is based on the naïve view which assumes the government will be responsive to the pressures of militancy. In this context the approach of Lenin is not necessarily popular because it is still advanced in comparison to the aspirations of spontaneous consciousness which consider that the most satisfactory situation is for the Soviet executive committee to use its influence in order that policies are realised that are based on the aspirations of the workers. Hence the policy of Lenin is not immediately popular because it is based on the rejection of these very illusions of the workers that the balance of political power is in their favour and so they can extract important concessions from the government.

In other words, the dilemma for the revolutionary party is that its objectives seem either remote for the workers, and so unrealistic, or alternatively the spontaneous dynamism of the class struggle seems to make the role of the party apparently irrelevant. However, as Trotsky indicates the initial opportunism of the Bolsheviks was an indication that it expressed a position of accommodation to the leadership of the Soviet and so was not based on the acceptance of the influence of the most militant workers before Lenin’s return to Russia. Without Lenin’s guidance the Bolshevik leadership of Kamenev and Stalin supported the accommodation of the Soviet leadership to the dominant position of the Provisional government. However, with Lenin’s return to Russia the principled policy of the advocacy of the formation of a government of the Soviets was advocated. This meant that a perspective was being adopted that corresponded to the most radical aspirations of the workers. A principled strategy was being advocated that suggested the discontent of the workers could only be overcome by the formation of a Soviet government via the demise of the domination of the bourgeois administration. But the problem that was then created concerned what would be the political relationship between party and class. Would the primary task of the party be to assume a position of domination over the class, or instead is the central role of the party to facilitate the realisation of the dynamism of the workers? Trotsky is explicit that the possibility for revolutionary change is not possible as long as the majority of the workers support the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Instead only when the Bolsheviks develop the genuine adherence of the working class will change become possible. But does this mean that the workers will merely have a supporting role in the creation of this potential for change or will there be a genuine process of democratic interaction between party and class? This question is initially answered by Trotsky by his support for Lenin’s view that the workers were initially more advanced than the Bolsheviks in February 1917, but the resulting lack of leadership meant the spontaneous dynamism of the masses could not be realised in a revolutionary manner: “The proletariat did not seize the power in February because the Bolshevik party was not equal to its objective task, and could not prevent the Compromisers from expropriating the masses for the benefit of the bourgeoisie.”(p320) Hence this comment seems to make it apparent that the workers can only act in a conscious revolutionary manner, or in terms of the possibility to realise radical political objectives, on the basis of the leading role of the party. If this aspect is not expressed, then the spontaneous revolutionary dynamism of the workers will be utilised by opportunist forces in a reactionary manner of connecting the radicalism of the people to the aim of upholding the role of a bourgeois government. This development can only be altered in terms of the genuine revolutionary party adopting a principled perspective that attempts to connect the discontent of the workers to the conscious objective of the realisation of the success of what is initially a spontaneous revolutionary process. This comment indicates that the potential for the victory of the workers over the capitalist class is dependent on the advocacy of a principled revolutionary strategy by a principled Marxist party and so in that manner connecting the spontaneous discontent of the workers with the conscious aim of the overthrow of capitalism. Without this relationship Trotsky is implying that the mass discontent of the workers cannot achieve this objective. It is being suggested in an explicit manner that the workers in terms of their own militancy and even opposition to capitalism cannot achieve the successful demise of the system. Only the interaction of party and class can realise this objective of the overthrow of capitalism. But the immediate question arises: what is the nature of this relationship? Does the party primarily learn from the working class about the tasks of the process of the present system, or is the role of the class to effectively support the directions of the party? It could be argued that this issue was never adequately resolved during 1917, and that ultimately this meant that the party took the initiative and therefore carried out a party type of revolution. This is an important question that requires more analysis before developing a more satisfactory conclusion. But what is immediately apparent from Trotsky’s study of the Russian revolution is that the influence of the personality of Lenin was crucial to the success of this process of change. The assumption being made is that without the dynamism of Lenin the possibility of the victory of the October revolution would have been doubtful. But what does this imply about the role of the workers. Were they merely to have a role that expressed the objectives established by Lenin? This is an issue that has to be analysed in more serious detail. The answer to this question will determine to what extent the October revolution was also a genuine proletarian revolution.

What is being suggested is not that the workers are able to overthrow capitalism without the role of the revolutionary party and its elaboration of a strategy of change. Rather the issue is about the character of the relation of party and class. Does the revolutionary party sufficiently express the increasingly influence of the aspiration for change in a progressive manner that indicates the major aim is to promote the ability of the workers to be able to realise a process of the revolutionary transformation of society. Or, alternatively is the approach of the party about dictating to the workers in an elitist manner and therefore promoting a conception of the realisation of a process of the effective introduction of change by the dynamic role of the party, with the workers in a supporting role. This is the issue that Trotsky has to tackle in terms of his understanding of the events of 1917. To some extent he tries to justify both an elitist and democratic approach. On the one hand the dynamics of the revolutionary process are defined by the determination and brilliance of the role of Lenin as the leader of the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, the spontaneous power of the workers expresses a dynamic force that enables the revolution to develop and realise its potential. The combination of Lenin and the workers is the unification of these two aspects. Thus, Trotsky explains that as long as the influence of opportunism is dominant within the Bolsheviks, and its adherents have not accepted the intransigent standpoint of Lenin, the very advance of the revolution has been called into question. Only with the definite assertion of the leadership of the Bolsheviks by Lenin enables the progress of the revolutionary process to become a definite possibility. The very prospects of the advance of the revolution are defined by the assertion of the leadership of Lenin. Until this development the ability of the Bolsheviks to act as a revolutionary party are called into question. If this uncertainty had continued the very possibility to connect the role of the party with the militant aspirations of the workers would have been called into question. In this context the potential for the success of the process of change would have been seriously undermined. But it is necessary to also suggest that it is the very revolutionary ferment of the workers which enables Lenin’s policies to be credible. The point is that Lenin is essentially articulating the character of the militancy of the working class. His approach would not be credible if it were not for the development of the dynamic militancy of the workers. The fact is that it is the spontaneous demand of the workers for the realisation of the political power of the Soviets which provides the approach of Lenin with credibility. It was the very dynamism of the consciousness of the workers which meant that the conception of a stageist understanding of the revolutionary process had been discredited. The two-stage schema of revolutionary change had been discredited by the actions of the workers. Their activity represented the rejection of the character of the revolutionary process as consisting of two distinct stages: “The further development of the revolution must obviously proceed from new facts, not old schemas. Through their representatives the masses were drawn, partly against their will, partly without their consciousness, into the mechanics of the two-power regime. They now had to pass through this in order to learn by experience that it could not give them either peace or land. To recoil from the two-power regime henceforth meant for the masses to break with the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. But it is quite evident that a political turning of the workers and soldiers towards the Bolsheviks, having knocked over the whole two power construction could now no longer mean anything than the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat resting upon a union of the workers and peasants.”(p331) In other words the very logic of the dynamic struggle of the workers was the basis of this conclusion that previous forms of the conception of the revolutionary process had become antiquated. The militancy of the working class was an indication that the character of the political situation had become defined by the possibility of the formation of a revolutionary government that expressed the realisation of the potential represented by the increasing ambitious aspirations of the discontented proletariat. But this understanding on the part of Lenin does not resolve the issue concerning the character of the relationship of party and class. Does the party essentially instruct the workers in how to realise the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism, or instead is the party the basis to facilitate the expression of the dynamism of the workers in the revolutionary process? Trotsky does not yet provide an answer to this question.

Trotsky outlined how Lenin had re-orientated his position so that the conception of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat became replaced with the understanding that the revolutionary process in 1917 had now created the possibility of a socialist type character in relation to the task of the overthrow of the Provisional government.(p332) But the issue remained about what this meant in terms of the relation of the party and class. The point was that it would require the revolutionary leadership of the Bolsheviks to challenge the support presently given by the workers to the role of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. This would be an unpopular task because of the apparent high level of popular support for these parties and their role in providing an influence on the role of the bourgeois government. But the point made by Lenin was that the period of the perspective of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had become outmoded because of the changing conditions which meant that the possibility of world socialist revolution was increasingly possible, and that a proletarian revolution in Russia would be part of this possibility. But how would it be possible to obtain support for what seemed to be an unpopular approach? Trotsky outlined how Lenin was able to impose his will on the party because his approach was based on the actual demands of the situation: “Lenin became the unqualified leader of the most revolutionary party in world’s history because his thought and will were really equal to the demands of the gigantic revolutionary possibilities of the country and epoch.”(p337-338) But this determination does not explain how the Bolsheviks could obtain support for what seemed to be an approach that was apparently contrary to the apparent illusions of the workers in the role of the leadership of the Soviets. Trotsky tries to answer this question by suggesting that the militancy of the various Bolshevik organisations was popular and expressed the ultimate aspirations of the workers. But such aspects could not undermine the issue of the apparent support of the workers for the role of the Soviets. The point is that it would require the leadership of the Soviets to increasingly discredit themselves as the basis of the creation of the increased influence of the perspective of Lenin. If the Soviets had been able to realise a situation of democratic peace and to advance the possibility of elections for a Constituent Assembly, the development of popular support for the Bolsheviks would have been undermined. Hence it was the opportunist limitations of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries that increased developed popular support for the approach of Lenin. If these organisations had advanced the realisation of peace, economic reforms and the advance of the formation of a Constituent Assembly, the revolutionary position of the Bolsheviks would have been discredited. The development of increased popular support for the standpoint of Lenin was because of the increasing failure of what were the influential parties of the workers and peasants. But this did not mean that there was the creation of positive support for the aims of the Bolsheviks. Instead the workers wanted peace, the formation of a Constituent Assembly and improved economic conditions. It could have been quite possible for the Mensheviks to support these types of aspirations. In other words, it was questionable that the workers wanted the formation of a dictatorship of the proletariat under the leadership of the Bolsheviks. Trotsky does not directly address this point, but instead contends that the workers in the Bolshevik party support the militant approach of Lenin. This point has validity, but it does not mean that the majority of the working class was increasingly supportive of this revolutionary perspective. Instead it would seem apparent that the workers initially supported the tactics of the Soviet in applying its influence on the role of the Provisional government. Furthermore, within the Bolsheviks the influence of the view that the major task was to support the Soviet had the support of many of its leaders.

Hence Trotsky has to establish that what changed this situation was the determination of the role of Lenin. He obtained the support of the party for a revolutionary perspective and this created the possibility to create an interaction of party and class based on adherence to these objectives: “It remains to ask – and this is an important question, although easier to ask than to answer. How would the revolution have developed if Lenin had not reached Russia in April 1917? If our exposition proves anything at all, we hope it proves that Lenin was not a demiurge of the revolutionary process, that he merely entered into a chain of objective historic forces. But he was a great link in that chain. The dictatorship of the proletariat was to be inferred from the whole situation, but it still had to be established. It could not be established without a party. The party could fulfil its mission only after understanding it. For that Lenin was needed. Until his arrival, not one of the Bolshevik leaders dared to make a diagnosis of the revolution……..Without Lenin the crisis, which the opportunist leadership was inevitably bound to produce, would have assumed an extraordinarily sharp and protracted character. The conditions of war and revolution, however, would not allow the party a long period for fulfilling its mission. Thus, it is by no means excluded that a disorientated and split party might have let slip the revolutionary opportunity for many years. The role of personality arises before us here on a truly gigantic scale. It is necessary only to understand that role correctly, taking personality as a link in the historic chain.”(p343) In other words it is being suggested that the very possibility of the success of the revolutionary process is dependent on the role of the individual personality and determination of Lenin. But what does this assessment mean about the importance of the activity of the working class? Is it being suggested that only the role of Lenin is ultimately of primary significance in relation to the task of bringing about the successful realisation of the overthrow of the provisional government? This indeed seems to be what Trotsky is suggesting in ambiguous terms. But what does this mean that the relationship between party and class? If the success of the revolutionary process is ultimately based on the will and determination of Lenin, how can we suggest that what can occur is a genuinely expression of the possibility for the self-emancipation of the working class? Trotsky tries to ignore the importance of this issue because he assumes that there will be an inherent situation of unity between Lenin’s determination and the aspirations of the workers. But the point is that the ultimate loyalty of the workers was to the role of the Soviet. In this context it is doubtful that they wanted the domination of one single party. Instead they seem to have supported the unity of the various parties of the Soviet as the basis of the imposition of the influence on society of this organisation. Hence the possibility of government by the Soviets meant the formation of a coalition of all the Soviet parties. Instead of this apparently popular view amongst the workers, Lenin’s aim was always for the formation of the dominant governing role of the Bolsheviks. The role of the Soviets in this context was only the form, and the content of this situation would be the domination of the only genuinely revolutionary party. Hence there was always a possible tension between the character of the revolutionary determination of Lenin in contrast to the general aspirations of the workers. But Trotsky tries to deny this contradiction, because he effectively equates the will of Lenin with the ultimate expression of the aspirations of the Soviet. In this manner the role of the party is considered to be subordinate to that of the Soviet. But that is not how the situation developed. Instead the Soviet became subordinated to the dominant role of the party, which was also the expression of the personality of Lenin. Hence whilst formally the Soviet assumed hegemonic political power in October 1917, the actuality was the realisation of the ascendency of the importance of the personality of Lenin. This contradiction had to be resolved in terms of the increased importance of either the role of the Soviet or instead the imposition of party rule under the domination of Lenin. But the former possibility would require the formation of a coalition of Soviet parties, and this was ultimately not acceptable to Lenin. Instead the particular logic of the revolutionary process was expressed by the domination of the revolutionary party, and in that manner the actual aspirations of the workers became expressed in a contradictory manner. This view does not mean that a worker’s state was not formed but that it was based on the dominant role of the specific revolutionary party. The party could express the interests of the workers in an elite manner.

Do these critical comments mean that the role of revolutionary leadership and the importance of the party is inherently problematical? Not necessarily because the primary issue is to establish a democratic and principled relationship between party and class. In the context of the Russian revolution this means the realisation of a Bolshevik majority within the soviets, and in that manner the unity of party and class is established. The point is that the expression of compromise by the parties of the Soviet, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, was a rejection of the aspiration of an increasing majority of the workers in favour of the realisation of a situation of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. In this manner the Bolsheviks under Lenin’s leadership seemed to be in increasing correspondence with the views of the workers in the major cities. But this did not mean that the works were in favour of a Bolshevik dictatorship as the basis of the expression of a revolutionary regime. Instead they seemed to favour the unity of the parties of the Soviet as the basis for the effective expression of revolutionary power. In this context the most popular manifestation of this sentiment was for the Soviet to reject any further collaboration with the Provisional government and instead become the basis of the formation of a revolutionary government. Lenin initially recognised the importance of this view and so called upon the Soviet under its existing reformist leadership to take power. It was understood that there was no serious support for the formation of a Bolshevik government. Trotsky always understood the difference between the actual popular legitimacy of the creation of a Soviet regime and in that manner the effective rejection by the workers of the objective of the formation of an exclusive Bolshevik government. But it is questionable whether Lenin had the same view in consistent terms. Instead there was always a tendency in his approach to suggest the justification of the formation of a Bolshevik dominated administration as the most principled expression of the objective of Soviet power. His standpoint veered between making demands on the Mensheviks to realise the overthrow of the bourgeois government in the name of the Soviet, and a contrary understanding that only the Bolsheviks could realise this objective. To some extent this tension was caused by the Mensheviks because of their stubborn adherence to a policy of collaboration with the provisional government. But the Mensheviks also had a grouping led by Martov that was critical of this opportunism. Unification between this group and the Bolsheviks could have enhanced the arguments in favour of the creation of a coalition government of working-class organisations. But such a possibility was never realised. Hence it was also the lack of political decisiveness of the other socialist organisations that motivated Lenin to recognise that ‘All power to the Soviet’s could only mean the formation of a Bolshevik dominated regime. But such a development was not really welcomed by the majority of the Bolshevik leaders. Trotsky possibly only supported the approach of Lenin because he recognised that he was the most resolute and determined leader, and so was opposed to the vacillation of some of the other Bolshevik leaders. However, this was not an ideal situation because it meant that the actual character of the October revolution seemed to be like a coup by a particular elite group. In these circumstances the Bolsheviks had to make a virtue out of necessity. But this meant that the workers who still supported the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries would be alienated by the exclusive character of the October revolution. To some extent this problematical issue was partially resolved by the formation of a coalition administration between the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries, but the Mensheviks were opponents of what they considered to be a coup by an elite party. However, it could be argued that Lenin was not surprised by these developments and indeed anticipated them given his uncompromising perspective of upholding the aim of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ in terms of the consistent activity of the working class led by the Bolsheviks. But this very development was to create questions about the genuine popular character of the revolutionary administration. However, it could be argued that it was the unprincipled opportunism of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries which left Lenin with little option than to promote the uncompromising approach he adopted. But the question that arises is to what extent did the events that occur correspond to the realisation of a coup led by the Bolsheviks? This is the issue that Trotsky has to address in his history of the Russian revolution.

In his history of the Russian revolution, Trotsky outlines how the very ability of the Provisional government to be able to administer society was based on the permission of the Soviet. The Soviets had the effective political power, but because of the opportunist character of this leadership they refused to realise the logical expression of this situation in terms of the overthrow of the government. In this context the policy of Lenin was quite logical because it was based on the actual situation that the soviets had more effective political power than the bourgeois administration. However, this potential for the realisation of the ascendency of the Soviets was not realised because as Trotsky outlined: “This crying contradiction between the decisiveness of the mass offensive and the half-heartedness of its political reflection was not accidental. In a revolutionary epoch the oppressed masses turn more easily and quickly to direct action, than they learn to give their desires and demands a formal expression through their own representatives. The more abstract the system of representation, the more it lags behind the rhythm of those events which determine the activity of the masses….But with all the advantages of their organic connection with the factories and regiments – that is with the masses – the soviets are nevertheless representative organs, and are therefore not free from the qualifications and distortions of parliamentarianism. The contradiction inherent in representation, even of the soviet form, lies in the fact that that it is on the one hand necessary to the action of the masses, but on the other hand becomes a conservative obstacle to it. The practical way out of this contradiction is to renew the representation continually. But this operation, nowhere very simple, must in a revolution be the result of direct action and therefore lag behind such action.”(p364) But the logical character of this analysis is to suggest that the Soviets had an inherently conservative character when compared to the dynamism of spontaneous mass action. However, this actual contradiction is caused by the conservatism and opportunism of the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets. The logical conclusion is to strive to create a more principled and revolutionary influence within the decision-making process of the Soviet. Indeed, this is the conclusion that was accepted by Trotsky, who strived to realise the hegemony within the Soviet of a principled revolutionary leadership that would correspond in a more effective and principled manner to the spontaneous dynamism of the workers. The point is that the spontaneous dynamic of mass unrest is not sufficient, even if it is indispensable to the success of the revolutionary process. Therefore, the role of the revolutionary party is of crucial importance, but this leadership should be based on the realisation of the potential of the spontaneous unrest of the workers. Hence the important question that arises was the role of the Bolsheviks an expression of this dynamism, or instead was the discontent of the workers exploited in an elitist manner? This is ultimately possibly the most important issue that Trotsky has to address in his history of the Russian revolution. Lenin would consider that there is no dilemma because the Bolsheviks could only express the interests of the workers because of their revolutionary character. But the issue is complicated because the workers have created the Soviets as the expression of their class interests. Therefore, did the October revolution realise the democratic and emancipatory potential of the Soviets, or alternatively were these organisations reduced to becoming the expression of the elite interests of the party? The point is that Trotsky has outlined the importance of the dynamism of the workers, but what is the precise relation of the Bolsheviks to this aspect? Did they act to realise the potential of the spontaneous role of the workers, or instead did they exploit the aspirations of the workers for their own ends? This is an important question that Trotsky has to address if he is to establish the complete complexity of the character of the October revolution. Furthermore, to what extent does Lenin’s very determination possibly undermine the capacity of the workers to realise their class interests?

However, Trotsky outlines that the initial approach of Lenin was to connect his perspective of the potential for the realisation of the power of the Soviets to the moods of the working class. He was initially aware that a conscious majority in favour of the assumption of power was not expressed by the workers who instead expressed their increasing discontent with the role of the soviet in terms of increased membership of the Bolsheviks. But in this context the possibility for the assumption to power of a revolutionary government was not favourable. With this understanding the Bolsheviks accepted the importance of the balance of class forces, and the fact that the majority of the workers still supported the Soviet despite its increasing opportunist vacillations. The central problem was the limitations of the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary leadership of the Soviet which was increased opposed to the increasing revolutionary dynamics of the aspirations of the workers. In this context the approach of the Bolsheviks was based on the importance of this developing militancy of the workers. What was understood was that despite the political problems created by the leadership of the Soviets they could only be the expression of the possibility of the realisation of the revolutionary transformation of society: “The soviets, in spite of the quality of their leadership, were the fighting organisations of the oppressed classes, who had consciously or half-consciously united to transform the bases of the social structure.”(p382) Hence there could be no possibility that the Bolsheviks could act in a genuinely democratic manner without relating their perspective to the role of the Soviet. But the problem was that the increasing militancy of the working class seemed to reject the opportunist limitations created by the opportunist leadership of the Soviet. The spontaneous dynamism of the workers was based on a spontaneous rejection of the conservatism of the major parties that dominated the Soviet. If the Bolsheviks were to consciously express the aspirations of the vanguard elements of the class this would imply that the authority of the Soviet would be called into question. How could this contradiction be resolved? The obvious answer would be to call for new elections to the Soviets so that it expressed more accurately the increasing militancy of the workers. The very opportunist character of the actions of the leadership of the Soviets was being rejected by the workers, but they also still accepted the validity of the role of this organisation. Hence the contradiction could be resolved by the calling of elections which could result in the influence of the more revolutionary approach of the Bolsheviks. However, this policy does not seem to be adopted, and instead the Bolsheviks remained critics who knew what they were against in terms of opposing the policy of the leadership of the Soviets, but the actual content of their perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviet’ still seemed to be vague. The point being made is that the objective of the realisation of the ascendency of the Soviets to power depended on the creation of the connection of this organisation to the increasing aspirations of the workers via the holding of new elections for the composition of its executive committee. But instead of adopting this obvious stance, the Bolsheviks seemed to be content to remain militant critics of the opportunist policies of the Soviets. It was obvious what they were against, but it was not apparent what they were in favour of. This approach was actually an expression of accommodation to the very spontaneous limitations of the workers, who were also critics of the Soviet and yet did not question the authority of the role of its leadership. The result of this apparent indecisiveness was that the Bolsheviks upheld the illusory perspective of supporting the aim of ‘All Power to the Soviet’ under its existing leadership. But this was the very objective that the Soviet executive committee would not support. Instead they continued to accommodate to the role of the bourgeois government. Only the replacement of this leadership of the Soviet would create the conditions for the aim of its realisation of political power to become a possibility. This mean the ascendency of the Bolsheviks within the Soviets. Hence the immediate demand of the Bolsheviks should have been for new elections to the Soviets so that they could become more responsive in relation to the aspirations of the workers.

Trotsky also outlines the importance of the increasing militancy of the peasantry. They were taking actions to redistribute the land in a more equal manner. This development indicated the possibility that the character of the revolutionary process could be connected to the alliance of the workers and peasants. But the point that is not indicated by Trotsky is that this development was based on the importance of the distribution of land in terms of the continuation of the principles of private property. This meant that the peasants were not in any manner in favour of the objective of the collective development of agriculture. However the relation of the countryside to the role of industry was still being upheld in terms of the fact that the peasants produced the goods that were needed by the workers of the cities, and they in turn also potentially created the industrial products that would be required in order to realise the objective of the increasing production of the cities. But the Bolsheviks lacked a coherent approach towards the peasantry, who considered that their interests were being expressed by the role of the Social Revolutionaries. Therefore, despite the apparent economic development of the possible unity of interests of the workers and peasants, there was a political tension because of the increasing support of the workers for the Bolsheviks. However, the upheaval in the countryside had led to a decrease in production which meant less food for the cities. The Bolsheviks should have called for the formal recognition by the government of the effective development of land reform. But instead of this perspective they seemed to have ignored the importance of events in the countryside in relation to the interests of the cities. Instead they seemed to have emphasised the aspirations of the workers and so neglected the importance of developing definite policies that would advance the aim of the realisation of a genuine worker and peasant alliance. But Trotsky does not make this point, and instead outlines the importance of events in the countryside without elaborating on the importance of the development of a worker-peasant alliance.

Trotsky also contends that the situation between April and June was one of flux in which the political influence of the Social Revolutionaries was increasing in the ascendency. But it could be argued that this development was partially because of the indecision of the role of the Bolsheviks. How could they realise the objective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’? This objective was not explained in terms of the elaboration of a precise perspective. Instead it could be argued that to some extent this very approach was based on the propagation of the illusion that the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary leadership of the Soviets should assume dominant political power. But this was the very development that would not be realised because of the opportunist character of these organisations. Hence the demand for new elections to the Soviets should have been the constant objective of the Bolsheviks. Instead of this the approach of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ was outlined in vague terms, but the point was that this approach was being confirmed in increasing popular forms. The factory committees of Petrograd adopted a resolution in early June in favour of this demand of the assumption to power of the Soviets. The point was that the Bolsheviks could have acquired a majority in the Soviet if they connected this aim to the approach of calling for new elections to the Soviets. This point is also justified in terms of the fact that the first congress of the Soviets that met in June 1917 gave its support to the renewal of the offensive of the army in the first world war. This was an indication of the social chauvinist and opportunist character of the Soviet. Under its present leadership it would only act to uphold the continuation of a reactionary alliance with the bourgeois government. Such a situation could only be changed by the development of a Bolshevik majority in the Soviet. Yet instead of calling for new elections to the Soviets because of this expression of opportunism, the Bolsheviks seemed to have accepted their role as critics as a result of a minority position in the Soviet. The problem was that they did not have any other means by which to express their discontent with the opportunism of the leaders of the Soviet then by carrying out a demonstration. Hence a demonstration was called for June in order to make the demand for ‘All Power to the Soviets’. But it was necessary to call of the demonstration because of the pressure of the Soviet executive committee. This development was not merely a set-back but also was an indication of the possible crisis of the strategy of the Bolsheviks who had apparently failed because of the continued importance of the political influence of the leadership of the Soviet. But this apparent failure was overcome by the miscalculation of the Soviet executive committee which called for a demonstration on the basis of its official authority and official slogans. But this attempt to uphold the leadership of the Soviet was a failure because the demonstrators adopted the slogans of the Bolsheviks including ‘All Power to the Soviets’. But the most important slogan that was not adopted was that which would have called for new elections to the executive committee of the Soviet. Instead the result of the apparent limitations of the leadership of the Bolsheviks was that they presented themselves in the form of critics of the role of the Soviet executive committee but the question as to how the realisation of Soviet power could be achieved was not being adequately addressed. Hence the Bolsheviks adapted to the discontent of the workers but did not provide sufficient leadership in this period. This problem was to have adverse consequences in the July days. Trotsky makes the point that the Bolsheviks had a considerable victory in relation to the general aspirations of the workers which were expressed on the June demonstration. This development is outlined by Trotsky in the following manner: “While sanctioning the offensive, recognising the coalition, and condemning the Bolsheviks, the soviet congress had called the masses on its own initiative onto the streets. They came with the announcement: We don’t want either offensive of coalition; we are for Bolshevism. Such was the political meaning of the demonstration.” (p463) But this very development was an indication that the working class was increasingly opposed to the policies of the Soviet executive committee. This situation should have resulted in the formation of a perspective by the Bolsheviks that called for new elections to the Soviets in order to create a new executive committee that more accurately expressed the aims of the workers. But instead the approach that seemed to have been adopted was to accommodate the Bolsheviks to the possible transforming potential of new demonstrations. But this very perspective was to result in the indecision and confusion caused by the spontaneous militancy of the July days. The problem was that demonstrations could not in themselves result in the realisation of the success of a genuine revolutionary process of change. Instead demonstrations had to be transformed into an actual process of insurrection that was based on the influence of definite objectives of the necessity for social change. Instead between June and July the Bolsheviks actually adopted a stance of indecision that adapted to the apparent possibilities expressed by the dynamism of mass demonstrations. This form of activism was actually not able to articulate a definite perspective for the possibility of genuine revolutionary change. Therefore, in this period the Bolsheviks actually adapted to the confusion caused by the spontaneous militancy of the workers in relation to the various militant demonstrations. But such illusions were to be challenged in relation to the situation of confusion caused by the July days. In this context the very capacity of the Bolsheviks to exercise genuine revolutionary leadership was called into question. But did the apparent failures of the July days result in a wrong lesson that led to the justification of the conception of a party revolution? This is the issue that has to be addressed and understood. The point being made is that the very spontaneous dynamism of the role of the workers caused challenges for the Bolsheviks that possible led to the influence of an elitist conception of the character of proletarian revolution. Therefore, in making the study of Trotsky’s understanding of the history of the Russian revolution we have to establish whether his approach is able to sufficiently address the apparent importance of these types of tensions and contradictions. Were the Bolsheviks able to make a consistent response to the importance of the manifestation of the spontaneous dynamism of the role of the workers in what was a consistent process of revolutionary change during 1917. Trotsky obviously will answer this question in the affirmative, but we have to try and be more serious critics given that we have the apparent wisdom of greater hindsight and are not justifying the participation of someone that was actually involved in the revolutionary process.

Trotsky’s description of the events of the July days outlines essentially how the militant demonstrations of the workers lacked any effective leadership by the Bolsheviks. There were no slogans or policies that could advise the workers about their objectives, and so as a result the mobilisation of the workers could only become ineffective. Trotsky suggests that the major problem was the lack of support by the Soviet executive committee for the objectives of the workers: “The July demonstrators wanted to turn over the power for the soviets, but for this the soviets had to agree to take it. Even in the capital, however where the majority of the workers and the active elements of the garrison were already for the Bolsheviks, a majority in the Soviet – owing to the law of inertia which applies to every representative system – still belonged to those petty bourgeois parties who regarded an attempt against the power of the bourgeoise as an attempt against themselves. The workers and soldiers felt clearly enough the contrast between their moods and the policy of the Soviet – that is between their today and their yesterday. In coming out for a government of the soviets, they by no means gave their confidence to the compromisist majority in those soviets. But they did not know how to settle with the majority. To overthrow it by violence would have meant to dissolve the soviets instead of giving them the power. Before they could find a path to a change of the personal composition of the soviets, the workers and soldiers tried to subject the will of the soviet to their will by the method of direct action.”(p575-576) This view seems to be valid, but it also seems to ignore the lack of leadership by the Bolsheviks in relation to these events. Trotsky suggests the Bolsheviks were right to reject the possibility of the seizure of power by the workers, but what exactly was their role in this situation? In relation to this issue Trotsky does not seem to provide an answer. Instead he effectively accepts that the Bolsheviks were disorientated and therefore lacked an effective strategy. They were confused by events, and Lenin did not provide any adequate leadership in this situation. Trotsky contends that the level of consciousness in the July events was not equal to the task of the seizure of power by the workers. This is probably true, but it did not mean that the Bolsheviks were still making an error by not leading the demonstrations of the workers, which as a result degenerated into a situation of chaos. The Bolsheviks failed the workers in the July days because of their indecision and inability to provide perspectives for the demonstrations. However instead of making this conclusion, Trotsky implies that the party was adequately involved in the actions of the workers and provided them with leadership: “The Petrograd workers and soldiers had to test the situation with their own experience. And their armed demonstration was such a test. But the test might, against the will of the masses, have turned into a general battle and by the same token into a decisive defeat. In such a situation the party dared not stand aside. To wash one’s hands in the water of strategical morals would have meant simply to betray the workers and soldiers to their enemies. The party of the masses was compelled to stand on the same ground on which the masses stood, in order, while not in the least sharing their illusions, to help them make the necessary inferences with the least possible loss.”(p588) But this view is an effective justification of the actual disorientation of the Bolsheviks during this time. Instead it could be argued that a possibility for the transformation of the balance of power within the Soviets was not realised. The political slogans of the demonstrations could have been based on the perspective of a call for new elections to the Soviet executive committee in order to create the possibility of this organ becoming more representative of the will of the people. In this manner the militancy of the workers could have acquired greater focus and sense of purpose. But instead of this approach the Bolsheviks were basically bewildered by the events of July and failed to provide any strategic guidance to the workers. Trotsky is right to suggest that the situation had not yet matured in favour of the seizure of powers by the workers, but this assessment does not justify the apparent lack of leadership by the Bolsheviks in relation to the mass discontent of the workers. Instead the Bolsheviks became nothing more than part of the spontaneous demonstrations of the workers. They had been disorientated by the very militant determination of the workers, and so as a result were mere passive supporters in relation to the expression of the spontaneous activity of the proletariat. In actuality the Bolsheviks effectively admitted their mistakes in regard to these events. But Trotsky tries to gloss over these errors of judgement by the Bolsheviks in his analysis.

However the serious defeat that could have resulted in the undermining of the ability of the workers to challenge the authority of the bourgeois government was changed by the victory of the mass mobilisation of the people against the possibility of a coup by General Kornilov, and by September the Bolsheviks had been elected in a majority to the Soviet executive committee. This meant that the Soviet could genuinely become the expression of the aspiration of the revolutionary process. Trotsky suggests that there was a genuine relationship between the Bolsheviks and the people based on the expression of common interests: “What distinguished Bolshevism was that it subordinated the subjective goal, the defence of the interests of the popular masses, to the laws of the revolution as an objectively conditioned process. The scientific discovery of these laws, and first of all those that govern the movement of the popular masses, constituted the basis of the Bolshevik strategy. The toilers are guided in their struggle not only by their demands, not only by their needs, but by their life experiences. Bolshevism had absolutely no taint of any aristocratic scorn for the independent experience of the masses. On the contrary, the Bolsheviks took this for their point of departure and built upon it. That was one of their great points of superiority.” (p809-810) But this does not explain the actual complicated relationship of party and class. It was quite possible that the spontaneous unrest of the workers could contradict the role of the more patient strategy of the Bolsheviks. The workers were increasing impatient about the continuation of the domination of the bourgeois government and wanted to overthrow it in immediate terms, but the Bolsheviks recognised the necessity of the importance of organisation and the obtaining of a majority in the Soviet. The elections to the Soviet led to a majority for the Bolsheviks and so in that manner the tensions between party and class could begin to be resolved. But then the question became would the role of the parry in the Soviet executive committee correspond to the realisation of the dynamic and mass mobilisation of the workers in favour of revolutionary change, or instead would the process of the overthrow of the bourgeois government be essentially a coup by the Bolsheviks? Trotsky is emphatic that there is no contradiction between the interests of the party and the aspirations of the workers. But in a sense an aspect of tension must be an actuality because the party and class are not identical. In this context the role of the party should be to encourage the realisation of the spontaneous dynamism of the class. Ironically Martov of the Menshevik Internationalists summarises the principled character of the objectives of the aspiration for change in terms of the attainment of the realisation of revolutionary democracy. This imply a unity of purpose between class and party. In this manner the role of the party should be to act as the instrument of the aspirations of the class, and this objective implies that the class should be an active agency of change and the basis of the character of the revolutionary regime. But did the approach of the Bolsheviks express this principled relationship? Trotsky seems to uphold the conception of a party based revolution via the domination of the Soviets when he comments: “The party was launched on the road of armed insurrection through the soviets and in the name of the soviets.”(p823) But what did this mean about the role of the working class? Were they to become merely the instrument of the role of the party and its domination of the Soviets? Or were the party and class united as the expression of a single common purpose? Trotsky does not consider that this situation expressed a contradiction because to him the Soviet with a revolutionary leadership was the basis of the realisation of the aspirations of the workers. But for this to be a credible view the Soviets would have to be responsive to the views of the workers and in that sense the issue was problematical because already under the leadership of the Mensheviks there had been a contradictory relationship between the Soviets and the workers. This problem could be potentially continued in relation to the domination of the Bolsheviks and the generation of a contradiction between the aspirations of the class and the new executive committee of the Soviets.

It could be argued that it was difficult to establish the character of the spontaneous dynamic of the aspirations of the workers and in that manner, it was necessary to establish the precise character of attitudes via the role of a principled socialist party. Indeed, it is difficult to define the views of the workers without this being defined by the importance of the programme of Marxist type parties. In this context the workers had become increasingly receptive to the approach of the Bolsheviks because the perspective of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ expressed their aspirations and increasing support for the aim of the overthrow of the bourgeois government. But how would this aim be realised? Would it be based on a genuine expression of the spontaneous dynamics of the role of the workers, or by the party effectively organising the workers to achieve this objective? Or, could there be a genuine unity of the role of party and class? The ultimate problem was that the class is not able to articulate its aspirations without the role of political organisations. In that manner there is not alternative than to mediate the aims of the workers without the role of the party. But obviously the problem that can arise is that the party becomes an elite group that is able to dominate the class because of its development of a situation of superior political power. Hence there has to be the development of a situation of the accountability of the party to the class in terms of the functioning of democracy. In this context as long as Soviet democracy is able to function in an effective manner this principled type of relationship can be expressed. But the problem is that the party may become to aspire to establish a dominating and unaccountable relation to the role of the class. This is the problem that Trotsky is apparently not aware of. Instead his emphasis is on the importance of the increasing discontent of the workers and how this is expressed by the politics and role of the Bolsheviks. The result of this situation is increasing support for the Bolsheviks and its aims. Trotsky is adamant that without the mass ferment of the workers the revolution could not have been successful: “But incomparably more effective in that las period before the insurrection was the molecular agitation carried on by nameless workers, sailors, soldiers, winning converts one by one, breaking down the last doubts, overcoming the last hesitations.”(p926) Hence it was the ferment of the people which created the possibility of the realisation of a successful process of revolutionary transformation. This situation was also expressed in the political character of the factory committees and trade unions. Hence there was the development of the effective mass political and economic power of the workers, and this led to the increasing support of the Bolsheviks. There was a genuine process of interaction between the aspirations of the working class and the political perspectives of the Bolsheviks. This situation meant that Trotsky seemed to be credible when he maintained: “No, the government of the soviets was not a chimera, an arbitrary construction, an invention of party theoreticians. It grew up irresistibly from below, from the breakdown of industry, the impotence of the possessors, the needs of the masses. The soviets had in actual fact become a government. For the workers, soldiers and peasants there remained no other road. No time left to argue and speculate about a Soviet government: it had to be realised.”(p930) But given this popular adherence to the aim of a Soviet based administration to what extent would the character of the process of revolutionary transformation correspond to the realisation of this objective? Or, alternatively could the dominant political importance of the Bolsheviks in some manner undermine the realisation of these popular aspirations? This was ultimately the question that had to be addressed because the possibility of the overthrow of the declining bourgeois regime was increasingly realistic, but how would this objective be realised? Would it be based on a genuine unity of the role of the party and class, or would the party be dominant and so in some manner undermine the creation of a genuine revolutionary regime. This aspect was the ultimate challenge for the Bolsheviks. To a large extent it seemed that this issue had been resolved with the formation of the military revolutionary committee of the Soviet in order to facilitate the organisation of the revolutionary transformation of society. But to what extent did this committee express the genuine interests and participation of the workers in the revolutionary process?

Trotsky outlines how the issue of the seizure of power was exclusively discussed in secret in the central committee of the Bolsheviks. Lenin was in favour of the party acting to overthrow the provisional government without any reference to the role of the Soviet. Thus it is not surprising that Trotsky describes the actual revolution as the act of the Bolsheviks: “If the Bolsheviks had not seized power in October and November, in all probability they would not seized it at all.”(p1004-1005) But what does this open admission that the revolutionary process was effectively an exclusive act of the role of the party imply about the activity of the working class in this process. Was the revolution essentially a type of coup in terms of change made by the role of the party elite, with merely supporting actions of groups of workers? Trotsky almost individually acted to ensure that the military revolutionary committee of the Soviet was closely involved in the organisation of the insurrection. He comments: “However, the soviets by themselves do not settle the question. They may serve different goals according to the programme and leadership. The soviets receive their programme from the party. Whereas the soviets in revolutionary conditions – and apart from the revolution they are impossible compromise the whole class with the exception of its altogether backward, inert or demoralised strata, the revolutionary party represents the brains of the class. The problem of conquering power can be solved only by a definite combination of party with soviets – or with other mass organisations more or less equivalent to soviets.”(p1021) In terms of this relationship the effective leadership of the party had a democratic expression in terms of its relation to the mass organisation of the workers, which was the soviet. The revolutionary party had become the dominant political organisation in the soviet and in that manner had acquired the democratic credibility to organise the prospect of revolutionary change via the organising role of the military revolutionary committee. Lenin’s conception of a party revolution would have undermined this realisation of the democratic and proletarian character of the process of the overthrow of the bourgeois regime. Trotsky is quite adamant that the revolution was effectively organised by the Bolshevik party, but the important point is that this aspect was mediated by the relationship to the democratic organisation of the workers in terms of the role of the soviet. Trotsky understood, unlike Lenin on occasion, that a party revolution that lacked an organisational and political relationship to the soviet, would be nothing more than a coup led by an elite. This is why Trotsky contends that the role of the party is an expression of the vanguard of the class. It is the most conscious aspect of the revolutionary character of the class, but this means that the party has to be accountable to the class in terms of definite democratic organisations such as that of the soviet. Without the important role of the soviet in the revolutionary process what would occurred would have been a coup and not a genuine act of popular insurrection. This interaction of party and class is explained in the following manner: “Thanks to a favourable combination of historic conditions both domestic and international, the Russian proletariat was headed by a party of extraordinary political clarity and exampled revolutionary temper. Only this permitted that small and young class to carry out a historic task of unprecedented proportions.”(p1024) But the point that is also being made is that the confidence of the class in the role and leadership of the party was the most important aspect of this relationship. Without the support of the class the party could not have acted in a principled revolutionary manner. In this context the Red Guard that carried out the revolution was composed of workers under the direction of the military revolutionary committee of the Soviet. Hence whilst the process of the act of insurrection had the aspect of being a type of organised conspiracy it was based on the effective involvement of the most class-conscious workers. In this manner the act of revolution was carried out in the name of the soviets to which the workers had their ultimate loyalty. This meant Trotsky outlined the relation of the party and soviet in the act of revolutionary transformation in the following terms: “It would have been an obvious mistake to identify the strength of the Bolshevik party with the strength of the soviets led by it. The latter was much greater than the former. However, without the former it would have been mere impotence.”(p1127) But this relationship obviously had a potential tension in that there would be an inherent tendency for the party to assume absolute power in the very name of the authority of the soviet. Such a possibility could only be undermined by the continued expression of the role of dynamic and accountable form of Soviet authority which could ensure that the dominant importance of the Bolsheviks continued to be based on the acceptance of the defining role of the working class. This was the vey aspect that become undermined after the successful realisation of the revolutionary process in October.

However despite these regressive developments after the success of the October revolution Trotsky is right to contend that the actual events were not a party coup and instead involved the effective and democratic participation and mobilisation of the working class under the auspices of the role of the military revolutionary committee of the Soviet. But the cause of the problem is not merely because of a tendency towards authoritarianism within the Bolsheviks. Instead the major basis of the tendency towards a one-party regime is caused by Martov’s opposition to the possibility of the formation of a genuine government of the Soviets based on the role of the principles of multi-party democracy. The result of this antagonism is the creation of a narrow Bolshevik-left Social Revolutionary administration. Hence the vey actions of the adversaries of the Bolsheviks led to the creation of what ultimately became a one-party regime. But there was also a problem with the character of soviet democracy in that it did not ensure the genuine participation of the people in the organisation of the role of government. As a result, the character of the administration quickly became the expression of the domination of the hegemonic Communist party. Hence the character of democracy in a post-revolutionary society is an outstanding issue that has to be resolved in relation to the possibility of the formation of a potential socialist type of society. It has been shown by historical events that a one- party regime is not conducive to the effective involvement of working people in the organisation of the potential socialist society. Instead the role of soviets will have to be based on the importance of genuine political competition between rival parties. However despite the ultimate betrayal of the October revolution under the Stalinist regimes we can still suggest that the October revolution was a genuine proletarian revolution which indicated progressive possibilities for humanity.