UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS OF BRITISH TROTSKYISM

The various parties of British Trotskyism have not been able to develop popular support or become the expression of an effective form of radical Marxism. Instead, it would seem that there attempt to establish a radical alternative to the opportunism and reformism of the Labour party and the Communist party has proved to be a historic failure. Does this mean that the very attempt to create a new type of socialist organisation has been futile? However, in order to address this question, we would suggest that there was a historic necessity to create a radical socialist party given the apparent opportunist limitations of these other organisations. In other words, the most important parties with socialist credentials proved to have a problematical character because of a basic acceptance of the continued domination of the role of capitalism. Therefore, the opportunist limitations of these organisations indicated the necessity to develop socialist parties that had a radical perspective of change. With the demise of the Independent Labour party in the 1930’s this meant the only alternative expression of a perspective of genuine change was expressed by the role of the Trotskyist groups. However, could it be suggested that these organisations expressed important political problems that undermined the possibility for them to become the expression of a radical objective of socialist change. In order to analyse this issue, we will have to attempt to establish the credibility of the various programmes for change that were being advocated by these groups. Furthermore, we have to make an evaluation of the various organisational regimes in order to understand whether they were able to reject the influence of a standpoint of bureaucratic elitism and conservatism. This type of analysis will enable us to provide conclusions about whether there was the development of a possible credible revolutionary party, or that on the contrary they were undermined by the influence of the aspect of conservatism and dogmatism. In order to address these issues, we have to begin with the empirical fact that the situation for the development of revolutionary Marxism in the UK seems to have been inherently unfavourable given the influence of the Labour party or popular conservatism. Hence there is apparently not a favourable political climate that would enable the development of the role of a revolutionary Marxist alternative. Furthermore, the various Trotskyist groups have often been engaged in a process of sectarian opposition that seems to suggest they are more interested in group rivalry rather than attempting to develop popular influence within the people. Indeed, this unfavourable situation seems to explain the situation since the very development of Trotskyism. In order to analyse these views, we will utilise the most important book on the history of this movement which is by John Kelly: “Contemporary Trotskyism.” (Routledge, London 2017) We have to establish whether his criticisms of the apparent limitations of British Trotskyism are genuinely objective or represent a biased scepticism about the possibility to develop an effective form of revolutionary Marxism. In other words, the problem is not the elaboration of criticism but whether this is fair and a credible elaboration of the limitations of a type of politics that is not able to create a credible conception of socialism that is able to realise popular support. However, our starting point is that the development of the bureaucratic and opportunist limitations of the various Stalinist parties meant it was necessary to create a radical socialist alternative. But was the political role of Trotskyism undermined by its development of forms of bureaucratic elitism or could it have ultimately realised a popular expression of what was genuine democratic socialism? Thus, was it the organisational limitations of the practical expression of Trotskyism which undermined the realisation of what could have been a genuine possibility to achieve an alternative to the reformism of the Labour party or the Stalinism of the Communist party? These are the issues that have to be addressed in terms of an analysis of the work of Kelly. However, we have to initially praise him for developing what seems to be what is essentially one of the few major academic works about the role of British Trotskyism. Hence any criticism will concern the political conclusions of his work rather than any attempt to criticise his intellectual integrity. Instead, our evaluation has to be based on an acceptance of the intellectual merits of his work.

But before we attempt to outline an evaluation of this work, we have to establish our understanding of the problems of the development of British Trotskyism. We have to establish that the development of a revolutionary alternative to the role of the various communist parties was made necessary by the bureaucratic and opportunist degeneration of these organisations. In other words, there approach was no longer based on the importance of the role of international class struggle but was instead dictated by the development of the interests of the Soviet bureaucratic elite. However, it could be suggested that the marginalisation of the forces of Trotskyism created immense problems in relation to the task of trying to develop an effective and popular revolutionary party. This situation was made more problematical by the aspect of splits and fragmentations that meant it was not possible to create a unified and effective single organisation that would be able to establish a common programme of opposition to the role of Stalinism and Social Democracy. Indeed, this problematical issue has never been resolved in a constructive manner and there has always been the problem of disunity between small and marginal groups. Hence it would seem that the possibility to create an effective and united organisation has always been undermined by the sectarianism of the forces of Trotskyism. Furthermore, they have had important political problems concerning their relationship to the Labour party. Some of the groups have favoured the approach of total entry whilst the others have rejected this standpoint in terms of an emphasis on creating new independent revolutionary parties. But neither approach has been able to overcome the situation of marginalisation. Only the anti-Poll tax struggle of the late 1980’s led to the possibility to create genuinely popular political organisations of the workers. However, the overall success of the offensive of capital which was expressed by the policies of the various Conservative governments undermined the realisation of these possibilities. Since this period the continuation of the approach of austerity has only contributed to the consolidation of austerity and the enhancement of the domination of capital over labour. In this context the very aim of socialism seemed to become inherently problematical and so the role of revolutionary Marxism seemed to have become superfluous. The point is that the Trotskyist groups were based on a programme for the consistent success of the role of class struggle and the creation of a situation in which radical change would become possible. But instead, it seemed that the aspect of the domination of capital had become stabilised. In this situation the very aim of socialism was called into question, and it seemed that the role of the Marxist groups had become superfluous. Therefore, we have to evaluate how Kelly is able to indicate the importance of Trotskyism in this unfavourable situation. In other words, we have to try and establish the credibility of a revolutionary socialist approach in the context of the apparent stabilisation of the domination of capitalism. Therefore, is Kelly able to suggest that despite the marginalisation of the forces of Trotskyism since its development is the possibility to resolve this problem in an effective manner feasible? How can the continual decline since the late 1980’s be overcome? Indeed, how can the domination of capital be challenged in terms of the development of the role of a revolutionary Marxist alternative? It could be suggested that Kelly is not primarily interested in these issues because he is merely concerned to establish the importance of an empirical history and so he takes the aspect of marginalisation to be an inherent aspect of the history of British Trotskyism. But we have to explain the importance of this situation and whether it means the end of the significance of this political tendency. In this context is there an inherent limitation to Trotskyism which has led to this development of marginalisation. Is this problem the result of the role of the limitations of programme or organisation, or because of the influence of the aspect of sectarianism? In other words, was the advance of Trotskyism a feasible possibility in the British situation or was it not likely to occur because of unfavourable political circumstances? If we are able to establish the latter conclusion then we will be able to suggest in a credible manner that the failure of British Trotskyism was not because of any inherent limitations but was instead the result of a protracted unfavourable political situation that it was not able to influence or transform in a constructive manner.

Kelly begins his work with a useful definition of contemporary British Trotskyism: “In the first place many Trotskyist organisations can also be analysed as sects, groups of people who strongly adhere to a worldview or doctrine based around certain core texts and which they seek to defend against heterodox rivals. There is an additional layer of complexity to be considered because Trotskyist organizations also seek to mobilize people in civil society campaigns and protests around specific issues….Some of their social movement activity has involved the creation of new organisations, such as the Anti-Nazi League, but Trotskyist organisations have also operated inside existing social movements such as trade unions.”(p6) The issue is therefore does the aspect of apparently being a sect undermine the possibility to become a genuinely popular organisation with influence within society? In other words, can it be considered that a sect is able to transform itself into a credible party that is able to develop mass support? Or could it instead be suggested that the sect is inherently limited by its unfavourable political circumstances and so is unable to develop effective popular support? The point is that it could be implied that the various Trotskyist groups have been able to develop limited levels of political support, but this is undermined by the apparent fact that they can also be defined as what Kelly defines as the role of a sect, or a collection of small groups that are divided by the issue of ideology. However, these limitations have been contrasted to the ability of the various Trotskyist organisations to be able to function politically and so establish a durable role as a form of social movement: “Social movements are distinct from political parties because they do not contest elections or seek government office and because their agenda is typically focused around a discrete set of issues rather than covering the full range of social, economic and political concerns. They are also distinct from interest groups because they are typically less integrated into political decision making structures and tend to rely more on direct action than lobbying or negotiation.” (p13) But it has to be suggested that this development is not an explicit expression of the ideology of the various Trotskyist groups but is instead the pragmatic outcome of their involvement in forms of direct action. Hence Kelly concludes that: “The core argument of this book is that Trotskyist organisations are hybrid organisations, combing the attributes of political parties, sects and social movements with the balance between these elements varying from one group to another and from one time period to another.” (p14) But the point is that this aspect of flexibility is not a disadvantage and is instead a strength of the various groups. What is a problem is the expression of sectarianism and disunity between what are rival organisations which means they cannot promote a united programme and approach in order to try and develop mass support. Indeed, it could be suggested that these differences result in the undermining of the possibility to become a popular revolutionary party that is consistently able to achieve influence within the working class in an effective manner. However, these limitations are contrasted with the effective ability to promote the role of protest movements that are able to oppose the introduction of various policies by establishment parties. For example, various groups have often developed effective movements to oppose the various foreign policy measures of pro capitalist governments. But this aspect has not led to durable and influential support for the role of revolutionary Marxism and its aims of trying to transform capitalism into socialism. Instead, the groups have remained marginalised. We have to establish whether Kelly outlines credible reasons for this situation.

Kelly supports the view that there are four major aspects of the character of Trotskyism. These are the theory of permanent revolution, transitional demands, the nature of Stalinism and the need for a revolutionary party. However, we would suggest that this standpoint is based on the justification of the general view that Marxist theory has to be principled and so cannot be pragmatically compromised in terms of an adaptation to the domination of capitalism nor accept the opportunism of Social Democracy or Stalinism. In other words, the standpoint of Trotskyism is based on the justification of the view that it represents the only credible and principled expression of the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. But it could be suggested that there are important reasons why this perspective became challenged in important terms. Firstly, the development of the importance of the domination of Stalinism meant that the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism was effectively undermined. It is questionable whether the small current of Trotskyism was able to uphold principled Marxism in an effective manner in these circumstances. In other words, Trotskyism was always a marginal force that was unable to develop a popular basis in order to promote the role of revolutionary Marxism in an effective manner. Instead, Social Democracy and Stalinism were always able to be dominant because the former upheld the standpoint of reformism in a credible manner and the latter because it was able to justify the view that it was the most effective expression of revolutionary socialism. In this context the approach of Trotskyism was marginalised and considered by most people to be irrelevant.

However, Kelly would suggest that it is the ideology of Trotskyism which makes it distinctive and relevant. This consisted of firstly, the perspective of permanent revolution, or the view that increasingly the capitalist class could not be the agency of democratic change and so the workers could be the leadership of the attempt to combine a bourgeois democratic revolution with the realisation of socialism. Kelly suggests that this approach has not been successful and also was unable to end the marginalisation of Trotskyism. However, it could be suggested that this approach has been confirmed in negative terms in that the domination of third world countries by a new bourgeois elite has not ended the supremacy of the interests of global capitalism and instead this very situation indicates the importance of revolutionary socialist type change if the domination of capitalism in its imperialist form is to be ended. Hence the marginalisation of revolutionary Marxism does not discredit this standpoint but instead indicates the necessity to develop its influence if the possibility to connect opposition to imperialism is to acquire a bourgeois form. However, Kelly seems right to suggest that in an important empirical manner the possibility of ending the domination of imperialism in terms of the success of political struggles under the leadership of a bourgeois elite or the role of Stalinism. But the point Is that these apparent developments have not been able to end the domination of global capitalism in national terms. It would seem that only the progress of the role of genuine mass struggles to realise a new situation can ensure the possibility of undermining the influence of imperialism, as occurred in relation to the events of the Cuban revolution. In most situations the ascendency of the national bourgeoisie in opposition to imperialism only resulted in new forms of acceptance of the domination of capitalism. The only manner in which this situation could be changed was by the realisation of the hegemony of the workers and peasants, and this was the very point being made by Trotsky. In other words, the lack of success of the approach of permanent revolution actually indicated its relevance and importance. Indeed, it can be indicated that the success of the Cuban revolution in establishing aspects of the importance of a popular regime based on land reform and the nationalisation of industry is an empirical confirmation of the possibilities that can be expressed by the approach of permanent revolution. However, the general consolidation of the domination of the relationship between the forces of imperialism and the national bourgeoisie of the various third world countries was also an expression of the fact that the only alternative to this situation was the promotion of the success of a popular revolution against the domination of capitalism and imperialism. Therefore, the fact that Stalinism only supported this approach in an inconsistent manner seemed to indicate the credibility of the Trotskyist standpoint. But the problem was that Trotskyism was a marginal force and seemed unable to promote the approach of permanent revolution in a convincing manner. Hence the problem was not the principled character of this objective but instead the marginalisation of Trotskyism which meant that this objective of permanent revolution could not be advocated in an effective manner.

But possibly the major problem in the advocacy of revolutionary politics by Trotsky concerned the position to be taken with regards to the second world war. Trotsky advocated the perspective of not taking sides between the fascist and bourgeois democratic powers. In other words, all the various capitalist societies were considered to be essentially the same. Hence the problem of fascist imperialist expansion was not considered as being necessary to oppose in a critical manner. Hence it was not recognised that the fascist powers represented a standpoint of imperialist aggression and expansion that had to be opposed in a critical manner. In other word supporting bourgeois democratic powers was not necessarily a policy of accommodation to class collaboration and acceptance of the aims of imperialism but was instead a necessity created by the necessity to oppose fascism in the context of the development of the second world war. Hence it was possible to uphold a critical stance of support for bourgeois democracy without also upholding the opportunist approach of class collaboration. Hence the stance of support for the various bourgeois democracies in alliance with the Soviet Union could be supported against the fascist states of Germany and Italy. But instead of this standpoint the Trotskyist organisations internationally under the influence of Trotsky adopted a standpoint of revolutionary defeatism in an unconvincing manner which meant that they became isolated from the majority of the international working class who recognised the importance of attempting to defeat fascist Germany. The point is that this approach did not necessarily represent class collaboration and opportunism but was instead an expression of the importance of the necessity to defeat fascist Germany if the international interests of the working class were to be upheld. In other words, it was in the interests of the workers of Europe and internationally to promote the possibility to be able to facilitate a situation in which the forces of fascist counterrevolution were defeated. The restoration of bourgeois democracy in Germany would represent an advance for the workers of Germany and internationally. But instead of this perspective the various Trotskyist groups acting in accordance with the ambiguous standpoint of Trotsky adopted a stance of revolutionary defeatism which few people understood, and which had no support. The result was the marginalisation of the various Trotskyist groups, and they were only able to obtain limited support by promoting the development of the realisation of the collective industrial aims of the workers. But in general, the standpoint of the Trotskyists during world-war two led to their marginalisation and the various communist parties consolidated their influence within the most advanced sections of the workers by the promotion of the role of a war against fascism. In contrast the Trotskyists could only achieve limited support by their advocacy of industrial militancy in order to defend the economic interests of the workers. But in general, political terms the initiative was with the various communist parties who enhanced their reputation by becoming the party that most principally represented opposition to fascism. Kelly suggests that Trotsky was opposed to what he would consider to be an expression of opportunism and he says: “For Trotsky the popular front meant the abandonment of revolutionary socialism in the interests of defending liberal democracy against fascism.” (p21) But it could be argued that this very perspective of upholding the role of bourgeois democracy was the very expression of principled strategic necessity under certain circumstances. The point was that in the context of the second world war it was a choice between the upholding of bourgeois democracy or the only alternative of the victory of fascist counterrevolution. Furthermore, the consolidation of bourgeois democracy in these circumstances would enable the development of the increased influence of the working class and so facilitate its ability to oppose capitalism. Hence this stance did not represent class collaboration but was instead a tactic that was pragmatically necessary under adverse circumstances when the working class was on the defensive. Hence the expression of victory against international fascism would enable the workers to increase their influence and to transform the balance of class forces in favour of the struggle for socialism. Indeed, this was what happened in countries like Britain and France where the election of reformist governments enabled the welfare state to be created. In contrast, Trotsky who had called for the defence of the USSR as a degenerated workers state in the second world war introduced a bureaucratic dictatorship in eastern Europe and this development was more reactionary than the consolidation of bourgeois democracy in Western Europe.

Kelly outlines the apparent inconsistency of Trotsky who shifted from critical support for social democracy and Stalinism during the 1930’s to a stance that seemed to ignore the importance of their limited progressive role during world-war two. Instead, he defined the situation in the over-generalised terms as being an inter-imperialist conflict and so ultimately glossed over the importance of the role of fascism as an expansionist imperialist power. In this context it was not opportunist or an expression of class collaborationist logic to defend bourgeois democracy against expansionist fascism. But because of the problems in the Trotskyist position, it was Stalinism which benefitted in Western Europe because of its support for the war against fascism. This apparent dogmatic limitation in the approach of Trotskyism meant that it could have been undermined seriously by this stance during world-war two. However, the Trotskyists were often able to benefit by an economistic emphasis on the interests of the industrial working class and by a related ignoring of the issues raised by the war. Furthermore, their stance of defence of the Soviet Union was able to achieve popular support. Therefore, despite possible limitations in the approach of the Trotskyists they were still able to make gains during the second world war. But what was indicated was the problems involved in effectively dismissing the popular attitudes of the workers as an expression of opportunism. It was not sufficiently recognised that the working class could develop progressive attitudes without the necessary role of a revolutionary party. Hence in a confused but principled manner the workers recognised the primary necessity to defeat fascism if their interests were to be developed during world-war two. Indeed, they considered that this type of victory would enable a bourgeois democratic system to create the political conditions for the election of social democratic parties that would act even in a limited manner in order to realise the interests of the European working class. In other words, fascism was the essence of a counterrevolutionary process that would enable the domination of capitalism to become consolidated. Hence the defence of bourgeois democracy in this context would enable reforms to be created that could increase the influence of the workers within capitalist society. This point was understood by the workers within Europe, and it was the reason that the domination of Eastern Europe by the Stalinists after 1945 led to the demise of the role of any form of popular democracy. Instead, authoritarian regimes became established that led to the end of all forms of the political independence of the workers. In this context the various bourgeois democratic regimes were more progressive because they allowed for the expression of the militant activity of the workers. However, the Trotskyists were often confused by the consideration of the development of Eastern Europe as the expansion of what were defined as bureaucratic workers states. In actuality the workers had no influence in these societies and the economic domination of what was a new ruling class became apparent in this situation of the expression of the exploitation of the workers within the relations of production. But unfortunately, the Trotskyists were confused by their adherence to the conception of deformed worker’s states and in an ambiguous manner they considered that this development had progressive implications. However, what had actually occurred was the consolidation of a new form of bureaucratic class domination over new modes of production. The workers had no influence in these types of society and so it seemed to be problematical to define them as deformed workers states. Instead, it would seem that the term bureaucratic collectivism was more accurate. But the dogmatic attempt to rigidly adhere to the views of Trotsky meant that the result was the justification of a type of orthodoxy. Differences about the class character of the Soviet Union was bound to develop and these contributed to the development of splits within the Fourth International. Indeed, it could be suggested that these theoretical problems had an important contribution concerning the difficulties involved in trying to develop a popular Fourth International.

But possibly the most problematical aspect of the development of the Fourth International was the rigid adherence to the approach of what was defined as the transitional programme. This is defined by Kelly in the following terms: “Trotsky promoted in the 1938 programme of the Fourth International the concept of a ‘transitional demand’: ‘stemming from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to a final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat’…These were counter-posed to minimum demands that were affordable and would not therefore undermine capitalism and ‘maximum’ or revolutionary demands that could only be realised under socialism…..In the course of struggling for such demands, and under the leadership of a revolutionary party, Trotsky believed that workers consciousness would be significantly enhanced.”(p22) However the important problem concerns how the influence of small and marginal socialist parties could become influential and able to generate the support of the workers for the attempt to realise these radical objectives. The very general marginalisation of the Trotskyist groups would mean that it was not possible to promote the role of this transitional programme in an influential and effective manner. Instead, the workers would be influenced by a reformist type ideology and so would limit their demands to what could be realised under the capitalist system. Furthermore, they would accept the dominating political role of the various reformist parties and in this context the influence of the revolutionary party would be marginal. Therefore, Trotsky did not address the issue of this marginalisation of the various left-wing organisations and instead he assumed that it could become possible to develop support for transitional demands as an almost automatic dynamic of the expression of the role of militant class struggle. But this development was usually not realised, and instead spontaneous militant struggles were limited to trying to achieve social progress within the limits of the present capitalist system. Therefore, Kelly seems to right to suggest that the standpoint of the transitional programme does not establish how the supposed dynamics of the process of the struggle for radical demands by the workers will end the political supremacy of the role of reformism. In other words Kelly seems right to suggest that: “Yet it remains wholly unclear precisely how and under what conditions workers would come to abandon support for social democracy, reformist trade unions and parliamentary democracy.”(p24) In other words Trotsky had the optimistic view that the dynamics of what would become militant class consciousness based on support for radical demands would result in the development of increased support for the revolutionary standpoint within the working class. But historical experience has indicated that the expression of militant class struggles need not result in this type of development. Instead, people are content to politically continue to support reformism whilst also engaging in militant class activity. In this context the role of the revolutionary party continues to be marginalised. Indeed, the workers may be content to engage in militant activity whilst also refusing to become supporters of the Marxist parties. Alternatively, they may remain supporters of Social Democracy or Stalinism but are reluctant to become adherents to the Trotskyist parties. In this context the development of militant struggles does not result in the overcoming of the marginalisation of the Trotskyist alternative. Hence it could be suggested that Trotsky did not address the issue of the importance of the insignificance of the Trotskyist alternative to the political supremacy of the role of Social Democracy and Stalinism. Instead, he suggested in an optimistic manner that the development of support for a programme of transitional demands would result in increased influence of the role of the genuinely socialist parties. But this development did not occur because of the importance of the marginalisation of the role of the Trotskyists. Hence it was necessary to address this issue but instead the role of the transitional programme was utilised in order to evade discussion of these questions concerning the lack of significance of the revolutionary alternative. It was not established how the role of the transitional demands would enable the promotion of the increased importance of the new Fourth International to be realised.

In other words, the very crucial issue of how to transform the role of small groups into popular revolutionary parties was not tackled convincingly by Trotsky. Trotsky did advocate in the 1930’s the building of a new Fourth International, but how could this small organisation be able to challenge what had become the dominant role of Social Democracy and Stalinism? Even if workers became discontented with their traditional political organisations, they would not automatically become supporters of the small Trotskyist alternative. Furthermore, Kelly suggests that Trotsky was a consistent adherent of the authoritarian elitist practice of the Bolsheviks and so was not able to advocate a democratic alternative to the role of Stalinism. Instead in an uncritical manner he considered that history would express the experience of the Bolsheviks and so the aim was to try and establish a repeat of the experience of the October revolution of 1917. But Kelly suggests in a convincing manner that the workers after the revolution became increasingly discontented with what they perceived to be the elitism of the Bolsheviks and so the very socialist credentials of the October revolution became called into question. Hence it was necessary for Trotsky to advocate a programme of radical socialism and it was doubtful whether he was able to develop this type of approach in a convincing manner. But despite these problems it could still be suggested that Trotsky represented the most genuine alternative to the opportunist and elitist limitations of both reformism and Stalinism in the 1930’s He outlined the opportunist limitations of these trends and instead upheld and promoted a programme for the transformation of militant class struggle into the expression of a perspective of revolutionary change. So, despite the problems in the approach of Trotsky in the 1930 he still represented the only credible alternative to the various opportunist and elitist limitations of Social Democracy and Stalinism. However, this radical challenge to the justification of an adaptation to the authoritarianism of Stalinism did not mean that it would become successful. The point is that Trotskyism was always a marginal force even in the UK. Indeed, even the small communist party of Britain was always more important than the smaller Trotskyist movement.

But Kelly points to the most adverse factor that there was an apparent tendency for the various small Trotskyist groups to fragment into smaller rival organisations. In the UK Kelly outlines the development of the importance of the rival groups of the Socialist Labour League, the International Socialists and what became the Militant tendency. But it could be suggested that none of these organisations had a democratic political structure and instead were based on the role of an elitist leader who supported a sectarian attitude towards rival groups. Indeed, it could be suggested that the rivalry between the contending organisations undermined the possibility to develop what would be considered to be a credible socialist party. It was often the aspect of sectarian opposition that undermined the possibility to create an effective organisation that would be able to challenge the political domination of the Labour party. However, despite these limitations, Kelly still considers the period of the 1950’s to mid-1980’s as the golden era of British Trotskyism in which membership of the major organisations significantly increased: “The 20-year period from the mid 1960’s to the mid 1980’s represented the golden age of British Trotskyism: total membership rose from less than 2,000 to approximately 20,000, overtaking the British communist party, now in long term decline. Many groups broke out of their student milieux and began to sink roots in the trade union movement, building rank and file organisations and challenging the hegemony of the communist and Labour parties.” (p55) However Kelly also acknowledges that the various groups were undermined by the importance of sectarian rivalry and this situation led to the increasing importance of various splits. In other words, it was the aspect of bureaucratic elitism that led to the problem of authoritarianism that generated discontent and so created the aspect of splits between the late 1950s until the 1980’s. But this development meant that the various groups because of an intolerance of internal political discussion and the expression of different views created their own decline in terms of the creation of an increasing collection of rival organisations. In this situation it was increasingly difficult for many people to take the various groups seriously. Indeed, this problem led to many of the groups joining the Labour party in order to achieve increased support and influence. It could be suggested that this development was at least partially successful with the developing influence of groups like Militant Labour in the 1970s and 1980s in the Labour party, and which led to their important role in Liverpool. But the Labour party acted to undermine this development by expelling supporters of Militant and so this led to the disarray of the group. Such a situation was an indication that the various Trotskyist groups could not cope effectively with defeat of their objectives and so were essentially demoralised by setbacks. The result of the reverse of the progress of Militant in the Labour party was to lead to a serious split in the group and it increasingly underwent a process of decline. Kelly defines this situation in the following critical terms: “Having jettisoned Labour party entryism, one of the hallmarks of institutional Trotskyism, the socialist party now occupies an uncertain and unstable position where it is difficult to discern its distinctive and defining features.” (p63) Indeed this development led to a split in the Socialist party with the effective marginalisation of its traditional leader of Ted Grant. But it could be suggested that with the onset of the domination of Tony Blair in the Labour party the era of what had been entryism, by the various Trotskyist groups had ended in defeat. This period had initially been an expression of the increased influence of Marxist groups like Militant and Socialist Organiser, but the apparent right-wing domination of Blair seemed to discredit this approach of trying to internally influence the Labour party in a radical manner. Furthermore, Kelly outlines how the success of protest movements like the Stop the War coalition concerning UK involvement in the invasion of Iraq did not result in ending the apparent continued decline of the forces of Trotskyism. Indeed, it could be suggested that by the early 21st century the Trotskyist movement seemed to have entered a process of irreversible decline and was based on the role of small and competing groups. But Kelly also indicates that the development of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour party would seem to indicate the undermining of the necessity of the role of the various Trotskyist groups which had tried to express a radical alternative.

But primarily the various Trotskyist groups had contributed to their own decline because: “The fragmentation of the Trotskyist movement clearly reflects differences but it is clear from the numerous organisational splits that other factors have also come into play: personality differences, disagreements over tactics and allegations of authoritarianism and abuse of organisational power have almost invariably featured in the most significant and organisational splits.”(p72) Hence it is concluded that: “Yet despite favourable context of economic recession, right wing governments and savage austerity politics, Trotskyist campaigning, electoral participation and social movement activity has failed to achieve the growth and influence anticipated by its leaders.”(p73) But the point is was this development an inevitability? Indeed, it could be suggested that at various periods it was possible to create a relatively popular expression of Trotskyism as with the role of Militant during the anti-poll tax campaign. Hence the ultimate problem was the aspect of the importance of the internal organisational regimes of the various groups. They were generally based on an expression of authoritarian elitism that undermined the development of popular democracy as the basis of the character of the various organisations. In other words, it was an accepted aspect that it was necessary to accept the policies dictated by the various leaders of the groups. In this context the aspect of authoritarian elitism became the expression of the role of the Trotskyist organisations, and this meant that it became difficult to respond to the challenges posed by the complex character of the changes in the political situation. Only in relation to the issue of the Poll tax was some of the forces of Trotskyism able to provide effective leadership and a popular strategy for opposing the implementation of this measure. But in general terms the various Trotskyist organisations seemed to have had a marginal role within British politics and indeed they have often undergone the problem of splits and divisions. For example, the Socialist Organiser group was split in half in relation to the development of a response to the Falklands war in 1982. Other organisations were also split, as was Militant in terms of the development of differences between the Grant and Taaffe leadership in the late 1980’s. But in prolonged terms it could be suggested that the various Trotskyist groups were unable to provide an effective and popular alternative to the role of the Stalinist Communist party. In this manner they could not become a credible opposition to the reformism of the Labour party. Instead, only for a temporary period did struggles like that against the Poll tax seem to imply that Trotskyism represented credible progressive politics.

However, in general terms the Trotskyist organisations could not uphold themselves without adherence to what Kelly describes as the role of doctrinal orthodoxy: “A strong a attachment to doctrinal orthodoxy will manifest itself in a variety of ways: positive references to the concept of orthodoxy; claims for historical continuity with Trotsky, the Fourth International and the transitional programme; claims that the analyses of one’s group alone have been vindicated by evidence and events; critiques framed through the language of deviations; hostility to other groups and individuals; and a bias towards classical Marxist and exegetical publications at the expense of original and contemporary social science.”(p79) This is the most problematical aspect of the history of British Trotskyism. It means that an emphasis on orthodoxy is upheld at the expense of any attempt to connect the role of Marxism to the progress made by social science and economics. It seems to be sufficient to define politics by dogmatic reference to the views of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and so any attempt to understand the present situation becomes an entirely secondary issue. This utilisation of dogma also becomes the justification to uphold the role of organisational centralism and elitism and an emphasis on the importance of theoretical creativity becomes of a secondary nature. Hence the role of theory becomes reduced to merely the latest expression of what has become the dogmas of Trotsky’s transitional programme. Thus, any attempt to develop a creative form of Marxism is rejected because of the problems it poses for this defence of rigid orthodoxy. However, Kelly suggests that there is a partial exception to this situation in terms of the role of the Alliance for Workers Liberty which is prepared to support views which do not correspond to the usual dogmatic approach of the majority of the Trotskyist groups. However even in regard to this organisation he still considers that they uphold their views in terms of an ‘underlying certitude about its positions and policies’(p90) But this implicit criticism of what is considered to be the justification of a dogmatic Marxism by the various groups could be considered to be unfair because it is surely logical that all these organisations defend policies in terms of a confident expression of their views. Hence what could be considered to be problematical is whether this justification of particular positions could be shown to be an expression of dogma rather than creative expression of theory. In other words, are the groups able to connect their perspectives about the political situation to a convincing explanation of the present situation. In this context it could be suggested that what the various groups are unable to explain is their own marginalisation within contemporary politics. They are unable to indicate why they will be able to end their apparent insignificance and instead become a popular expression of radical politics. Thus, it is not surprising that Kelly is able to elaborate how the sectarianism of the various Trotskyist groups only contributes to the expression of a process of marginalisation and insignificance. But the problem with this analysis is that he seems to suggest that this adverse situation cannot be changed. However, we would suggest that it is possible to advocate a programme for the development of united action between the various Trotskyist groups, and which could result in the creation of a unified revolutionary party.

We would suggest that this common programme is based on three major aspects. Firstly, the perspective of attempting to influence the Labour party to adopt a more radical programme based on the development of a nationalised economy based on the role of popular democracy. This approach would be connected to an international policy of the promotion of the objectives of peace and the advance of the struggle for the realisation of world socialism. The other major aspect would be support for ecological change and the achievement of green socialism. It would seem that all the left-wing parties could unite to realise this approach, and this development could end their decline which is based on the failure to overcome a situation of marginalisation that is based on the justification of various programmes of a dogmatic character. But instead of this possibility Kelly in a pessimistic manner considers that the various organisations are characterised by an authoritarian elitism and rigid politics: “Trotskyist leaders stand at the apex of a stable oligarchy that is regularly returned to office through the recommended list system of election and which in the name of democratic centralism exercises enormous influence in the strategic direction and politics of the organization. Such entrenched leaderships are not conducive to theoretical or ideological innovation and generally reproduce the doctrine that is the hallmark of their particular organization, a tendency apparent in the uncritical publications marking the centenary of the Russian revolution.”(p103) But the point is that this situation of bureaucratic organisational centralism is connected to the failure to discuss in democratic terms within the various Trotskyist groups the issue of the political positions that should be adopted. Instead, this task belongs exclusively to the various elitist leaderships. But this situation was not an inevitable development. Instead, the leaders created bureaucratic organisations that they could dominate and ensure that the policies that were adopted exclusively expressed their influence. But this lack of democracy only contributed to the influence of the view that the Labour party was more democratic than these revolutionary groups. Hence if people wanted to engage in genuine political discussion, they would be more inclined to support the Labour party. In other words, the Trotskyist groups generally failed to be an expression of genuine discussion about how to realise an alternative socialist society. If people wanted to discuss this issue, they would be better served by participating in the Labour party where there was a dynamic discussion between the left and right-wings about how to realise progress in British society. In other words, it was the authoritarian elitism of the various left-wing groups that ultimately undermined their credibility. Indeed, this situation of bureaucratic authoritarianism ultimately led to splits in the different revolutionary parties. Hence it proved virtually impossible to form a popular and influential left-wing group. Instead, the Marxist groups acquired an unwelcome reputation of being insignificant and it seemed that they could not do anything to try and change this situation. Indeed, it appeared that that the revolutionary groups had become accustomed to their marginalisation and the justification of various organisational regimes represented the expression of their narrow ambitions. Unfortunately, no genuinely democratic left- wing party seemed to emerge that would be able to challenge this situation. Hence all the groups seemed to have bureaucratic and elitist leaders who did not seem to be subject to a situation of democratic accountability to their members. Nor can it be suggested that there was any credible alternative to this development. Instead, it seemed that all the various left-wing parties were based on the practices of an unaccountable leaders. Hence there was a contradiction between theory and practice. In theory there was at least a formal commitment to the realisation of society based on the principles of democratic socialism but in practice there was the role of the ideology of authoritarian elitism. If any opposition did develop within the various groups, it was not based on attempting to address this issue. Instead, a rival elitist party might emerge in this situation.

It could be suggested that this development was the inheritance of the legacy of Leninism. But this would be an unfair criticism because the party of Lenin had a genuine democratic culture. It was possible to criticise the policies of Lenin within the Bolsheviks in a more effective and popular manner than was actually realised within the small Marxist groups of Britain. They generally had an organisation based on the principles of authoritarian elitism. If people wanted to express the principles of democracy, they would often have to form new and rival socialist groups. Hence there was a tendency for the perpetual development of new parties who claimed to be the genuine expression of authentic revolutionary politics. This meant the Trotskyist movement acquired a reputation for perpetual splits and which led to a cynical rejection of the credibility of these organisations. If people wanted to join a stable party it seemed that they had no alternative than to join the Labour party. Indeed, this became the objective of a number of Trotskyist groups. But ultimately this development could only result in the influence of the view that progressive change could only result by the creation of an effective left-wing viewpoint within the Labour party. It seemed that the very limited success of the entry tactic in the Labour party expressed an undermining of the role of revolutionary Marxism. Hence the primary goal became to achieve a left-wing Labour party rather than to develop the class struggle in a manner that could achieve a transformation to socialism. The credibility of this approach seemed to be confirmed by the general failure to achieve effective and popular revolutionary parties. Hence the Socialist Workers party was not justified by its relevance for the class struggle but instead its influential involvement in the anti-fascist movement and in actuality its importance generally seemed to decline when compared to the role of the MiIitant group which was involved in the Labour Party. But in general people did not have a definite conception of the role of revolutionary Marxism because the various groups often lacked a credible conception of the socialist transformation of society. Indeed, the emphasis of Militant was on the necessity to elect a left-wing Labour government committed to the implementation of socialist policies. Most of the other organisations merely advocated a vague interpretation of Trotsky’s transitional programme. In contrast Gramsci seemed to outline the most convincing strategy of change in terms of the development of opposition to the hegemonic ideology of the defenders of capitalism. But the complexity of this approach was not apparent in the various justifications of Trotsky’s transitional programme by the supporters of this standpoint. Instead, they merely repeated this perspective and so failed to connect it to the complexities of the situation in Britain. If anyone aspired to develop a credible programme of change, they would have to attempt to do so by becoming independent of the various Trotskyist organisations. This is why the most convincing advocates of a programme for socialism was done by various intellectuals who had no connection to the role of the Marxist groups. In contrast Militant advocated a vague programme for the nationalisation of the major monopolies by a Labour government, whilst the International Socialists vaguely asserted that the outcome of militant action could be radical change.

However, if someone was to develop a credible perspective for socialism they would have to begin with the problem of the ineffective influence of the various revolutionary groups. In this manner they would have to suggest how this situation could be transformed and the connected development of the left-wing parties could be created. But this was the very issue that was ignored by the Marxist organisations. Instead, they elaborated various programmes that seemed to have little relationship to the actual adverse balance of forces. In contrast it was only the Italian Marxist Gramsci who seemed to outline the complex difficulties involved in trying to realise the aim of socialism. In other words, the various Trotskyist groups advocated their own version of Trotsky’s transitional programme which was a programme for the development of mass struggle but ignored the issue of the ascendency of the capitalist system and the aspect of their own marginalisation. Therefore, the difficulties involved in trying to develop an effective revolutionary party were actually not tackled in relation to the elaboration of various confident programmes for the mobilisation of the workers against capitalism. In this context the issue of the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system was ignored and instead the emphasis was on the apparent inevitable mobilisation of the workers against the present society on the basis of support for the programme of transitional demands. But this dogmatic standpoint was not connected to an effective analysis of what Gramsci considered to be the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system which led to the marginalisation of the various forces of revolutionary Marxism. In other words, the actual problems involved in the attempt to develop popular support for a programme of radical change were not elaborated in a detailed and convincing manner. Instead, it was assumed that almost inevitably people would become supporters of the particular programme of a given revolutionary group.

However, in actuality the onset of the period of austerity and the effective offensive of the forces of capital against labour seemed to have undermined the confidence that was expressed about the possibility to realise a given revolutionary programme. Instead, the domination of capital was consolidated in this period, and it seemed that the workers no longer had an effective collective strength that was able to express their interests in an effective manner. But it could be suggested that the left-wing groups like the Socialist Workers party were able to maintain confidence because of the development of activism concerning opposition to the foreign policies of the major imperialist powers. This activism seemed to have replaced the role of the workers as the expression of the most important aspect of the possibility of progressive change. But an important problem was that whilst the activists had a definite understanding of what they were against, it was not apparent that they had any definite aims such as the aspiration to realise a socialist alternative. Hence when the various protests ended, they were generally not replaced by the development of a struggle for socialism. In this context the influence of the various revolutionary groups could not be sustained in a consistent manner. Instead, they became merely the expression of the role of the various mass movements and their socialist objectives were not promoted in this context of the emphasis on the importance of what were defensive struggles. Hence Militant became associated with the opposition to the poll tax, whilst the SWP was based on opposition to the foreign policy of Conservative governments. In other words, the groups were reduced to being based on the role of protest and activism and the issue of their socialist aims became of less importance. When the various struggles ended the limited influence of the particular groups also declined. In other words, none of the groups could connect the issue of the given struggles with the attempt to develop the possibility for the socialist transformation of society. Instead, the various mass protests remained a defensive opposition to the given policies of Conservative governments and the connection of this aspect to the aim of socialism was not effectively elaborated or justified. Indeed, the Marxist parties gained support by their connection to being the most militant expression of various popular mass struggles. In this manner activism became an end in itself and the influence of the objective of socialism did not develop in this situation because of this pragmatic emphasis on the role of activism as an end in itself. For example, Militant no longer emphasised the necessity to nationalise the major monopolies in order to realise socialism but instead the priority was the immediate success of struggles around issues like the Poll tax. Indeed, this pragmatism ultimately led to a split in Militant because the faction led by Ted Grant attempted to uphold what they considered to be a traditional approach as opposed to what had become the emphasis on activism.

In other words, the increasing problem of the various Marxist groups from the 1970’s was the theoretical difficult of relating the aim of socialism to an increased emphasis on the role of activism. It seemed that the practical importance of the aspect of mass action seemed to deny the connection of the various struggles to the ultimate aim of socialism. Instead, the forms of activism increasingly became an end in itself and so the connection of struggle to an ultimate objective seemed to have become obscured. Indeed, groups like the SWP increasingly became known as the expression of the role of protest and so it seemed that their ultimate objective was actually the role of mass activity rather than the perspective of socialist transformation. Paradoxically this situation could only confirm the importance of the Labour party because of its definite political objectives. The Labour party was known as an organisation that supported the attempt to improve society. In contrast the objectives of the various radical Marxist groups seemed to be obscure and instead they were known as the expression of the importance of protest. Indeed, it seemed that the development of the influence of these organisations was connected to the role of activism and the development of various mass movements. For example, the emphasis of Militant on the socialist transformation of society became subordinated to the apparent importance of the struggle against the Poll tax. The various rival organisations tried to assert their superiority by advocating what they considered to be more principled and credible programmes for the development of mass struggles with limited objectives. Hence the various Marxist groups attempted to assert their credibility in terms of their possible important role in providing leadership of protest movements. This led to a situation of sectarian competition as for example both the SWP and Militant attempted to provide what they considered to be more effective and principled leadership of the anti-poll tax movement.

Therefore, it could be suggested that this very emphasis on activism meant the importance of the ultimate aim of socialism became obscured and instead the various groups attempted to provide the most effective leadership of various movements that developed against aspects of the imposition by the Conservative government of the policy of austerity. Indeed, these groups became increasingly defined their participation in these forms of protest and the aspect of their ultimate socialist objectives became an issue of obscurity. But this activism did not resolve the problems created by the continuing importance of sectarianism. It was not possible to present a united alliance that was able to argue for a socialist alternative in a credible manner. Instead, each group tried to assert its superiority by presenting itself as the most effective group in terms of the role of the protest movements that arose in relation to opposing the policies of austerity of the Conservative government. But this activism could not resolve the continuing problems created by the sectarianism of the various groups and indeed this very emphasis on practical activity often undermined the attempt to facilitate the development of the importance of the ultimate socialist objectives of the various Marxist groups. Hence, they could acquire influence in relation to the various mass struggles of protest about aspects of the policies of the Conservative government, but they still remained in a marginalised situation of being unable to develop an effective popular influence. Instead, the reformist Labour party was still in the ascendency despite the important role of the revolutionary groups within the various protest movements. However, this situation of marginalisation could possible have been ended by the prospect of the formation of a united revolutionary party that would be able to advocate a common programme for the socialist transformation of society. But the various organisational interests of the leadership of the different groups undermined this development and instead the problem of sectarian rivalry could not be resolved in a constructive manner. Hence it could be suggested that the ultimate major problem concerning the difficulties involved in the development of a successful revolutionary party was created by the sectarianism of the competing and rival groups. They could not unite on the basis of support for what could have been a credible programme for socialist change. Hence the major objection to the validity of the aim of socialism was apparently provided by the negative role of the different groups who could not unite in support of what could have become under these more favourable circumstances a credible programme for the realisation of socialism. Instead, the issue of sectarianism meant that the groups imposed upon themselves a situation of marginalisation. In this manner it could be suggested that the organisational cohesion of the reformist Labour party still represented a superior organisational expression of the influence of the working class despite its important opportunist limitations. In other words, the sectarian disunity of the rival Marxist groups was actually the major objection to the justification of the credibility of the revolutionary alternative. Hence, they seemed to be the actual reason for their marginalisation and lack of political importance. In this context there would seem to be no alternative to continuing to support what was a more credible and generally united reformist party. In other words, the sectarianism of the various Marxist groups was the major reason for their political marginalisation. It could be suggested that they were the most important contributor to the development of a situation of a lack of political influence.

In other words, it could be suggested that the Marxist organisations have contributed to their inability to become popular and influential. There is not one credible party that is able to promote a common programme for the realisation of the aim of socialism. Instead in a confusing manner there is a collection of rival parties that are unable to support the aim of revolutionary change in terms of an expression of political unity. The result of this situation is that people are not able to decide which group represents the objective of socialism in the most credible manner. As a result of this confusing situation people are likely to become sceptical about the aim of revolutionary change and the attempt to realise a socialist alternative to capitalism. This means that the various radical political groups do not develop popular support and instead tend to remain small and lacking in credibility. Instead, it would seem that the most credible perspective of progressive change is expressed by the reformist and gradualist role of the Labour party. However, in specific situations the marginalisation of the socialist parties can be overcome as in relation to their influence at the time of the popular struggle against the poll tax. But in general terms the apparent irrelevance of the Marxist groups is not ended by the development of mass support and endorsement of their politics. Instead, it would seem that the situation of the consolidation of the role of reformist parties as the expression of progressive views is not being called into question. Indeed, there is a general decline in the influence and popularity of the role of the socialist parties. Kelly does not seem to discuss these issues in detailed terms. His emphasis is about the problem of bureaucratic elitism which seems to undermine the possibility to realise the credibility and influence of the left-wing groups. This aspect is indeed a problematical issue, but we could also suggest that people are genuinely not convinced by the credibility of a revolutionary perspective and instead still consider the approach of reformism to be more convincing. Indeed, in the recent period people have also become sceptical about reformism and have instead preferred to become uncritical supporters of the role of the capitalist system. In other words, there is a general political crisis for the adherents of the various forms of socialism and instead people have apparently accepted the domination of capitalism as the only pragmatic perspective. Indeed, the various socialist groups seem to be increasing marginalised and unpopular, and many people would consider that they are undergoing a process of irreversible decline. In this context it does not seem feasible to suggest what could reverse this apparent process of stagnation and therefore it seems that the very issue of a perspective of change has become something that seems to represent a problematical character that cannot be upheld in a convincing manner. However, the various left-wing groups generally do not seem to recognise the seriousness of this situation and instead in dogmatic terms continue to advocate the viability of a revolutionary programme that is not connected to addressing the problems of the durability of capitalism. Thus, it could be suggested that the left-wing groups are primarily undermined by their defence of strategic illusions, and they do not seem able to comprehend the importance of their own marginalisation. In this manner the ideological limitations of the left-wing parties represent the major problem concerning the difficulties of trying to make progress in the struggle for socialism. It could be suggested that none of the left-wing groups has a programme that is based on an accurate assessment of the economic and political situation. Hence it is the aspect of ideological limitations that represents the most problematical challenge for the radical parties. The continual failure to tackle these issues means that what becomes advocated are various programmes of change that have little relation to the complexities of contemporary politics. Hence it is the problematical character of the perspectives of the various groups which contribute most significantly to their decline. Only by addressing these illusions could it become possible to try and develop what could be a more credible approach concerning addressing the difficulties of trying to realise progressive change. However the influence of what are dogmatic politics undermines the possibility to realise this more credible perspective of progressive change.

It could be suggested that it is the very character of revolutionary politics which contributes to this justification of a dogmatic approach. In other words, the aim of revolutionary type change has become problematical in the advanced capitalist countries and so it is only possible to uphold this objective in terms of a rigid and increasingly unrealistic approach. But this criticism has the logical conclusion that only reform of the present system has become possible. Hence the most credible parties are those that are based on the aim of gradual change. If this perspective is correct, then it would mean that the standpoint of Trotskyism was no longer credible, and it would mean that the only feasible approach was that connected to the standpoint of reform. However, the prolonged period of austerity has indicated the continued importance of the aim of radical transformation of the system, and so it could be suggested that this possible process of change would have revolutionary type aspects. In this context it would seem to be credible to advocate a programme that is able to connect the unrest of the workers in the unions with the development of militant action that is able to facilitate the possibility of collective action in order to pose a challenge to the system. However, Kelly suggests that it is the aspect of the vey sectarian competition of the different Trotskyist groups that undermines the realisation of this approach: “Yet the trade union arena has also revealed the tensions that invariably arise between the social movement logic of unity and cooperation and the sectarian logic of competition. From time to time Trotskyist groups have cooperated in rank and file bodies in the trade unions…But far more often it is the sectarian logic of competition with Trotskyist rivals that has taken precedence…..Across the movement as a whole it is a similar picture where the presence of three anti-austerity organizations is a testimony to the superior weight of the competitive logic of sectarianism as against the rival logic of social movement unity and cooperation.”(p194) However this criticism does not tackle the problem of the possible limitations in the approach of the Trotskyists concerning the unions. In what would seem to be a vague perspective the Trotskyists often advocate the accountability of union organisations to the role of the rank and file. But what does this mean apart from the vague suggestion of popular militant action? The various problems with this approach ensure that the attempt of the union leaders to try and influence the various governments seems to be a more credible perspective. It could be suggested that in this manner the unions are able to achieve more power within society than could be achieved by the vague approach of the revolutionary perspective. In other words, it could be suggested that the Trotskyists do not outline in a convincing manner the importance of the perspective of trying to achieve workers management of the economy as the essence of the approach of the trade unions. In other words, the Trotskyists do not outline in an effective manner why the unions should attempt to achieve increasing influence within the economy that would result in the development of a situation in which the character of the economy was being transformed in a socialist manner. Instead, Kelly has outlined why the very aspect of rivalry between the Trotskyist groups is an important factor that undermines the possibility to achieve the development of an effective strategy for the promotion of the collective action of the workers against capitalism. But it could be suggested that the apparent success of the Trotskyists in organising the role of various protest movements is able to compensate for this failure in relation to the role of the trade unions. But what is apparent is the necessity to connect the potential of protest struggles with the aspirations of the unions. In this manner it could become possible to promote the expression of a strategy of credible change. But this type of development has not occurred and instead the protest movements have remained isolated from the role of the unions. This means that the various mass struggles have generally had a marginal and isolated role in society, whilst the unions have still been concerned with limited economic issues. In this context the Trotskyists have acquired some influence but have been unable to achieve the political transformation of the unions in terms of the support of radical objectives. However, it could be suggested that these limitations may have been overcome by the important role of the Trotskyists in various protest movements.

Kelly indicates that Trotskyists have had an important role in role in popular social movements such as the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the Anti-Nazi League, the Anti-Poll Tax Federation, the Stop the War Coalition and the People’s Assembly. But he suggests that the realisation of success of these organisations was because: ‘their main demands were clear, focused and achievable within capitalism; they were neither revolutionary or transitional in character’.(p205) Kelly suggests that the aspect of Trotskyist doctrine was not emphasised in order to achieve the development of the success of the various mass movements, and so the aspect of an empirical approach was considered to be more important than the role of ideology. But this does not mean that in some manner the ultimate aims of the Trotskyists were being rejected. Instead, the very success of these movements would facilitate the development of a balance of social forces that had become more favourable for the aims of achieving social change. For example, the effective success of the Anti-Poll tax movement meant the important undermining of the aims of the Conservative government and instead the development of the increased possibility to achieve a more favourable balance of social forces that could facilitate the possibility of progressive change. However, the problem was that these various struggles did not become explicitly connected to the aspiration to achieve progressive aims and instead were merely a defensive expression of the attempt to undermine the policies of reactionary governments. Hence the influence of the aim of socialism did not develop in a popular manner despite the success of these movements. Indeed, Kelly makes the point that membership of the various Trotskyist groups did not increase despite the limited success of the Anti-Nazi League, the Anti-Poll Tax Federation and the Stop the War Coalition. In other words, many of the supporters of the aims of these movements could not recognise the importance of joining the very Trotskyist organisations that provided the leadership of these movements. Hence the influence of Trotskyism did not develop despite the realisation of the success of some of these mass struggles. Kelly comments: “Paradoxically, social movement success has rarely translated into Trotskyist organisational success and indeed it is more common to find an inverse relationship between the two: during the heyday of the ANL and Anti-Poll Tax Federation their respective creators (The SWP and the Militant Tendency) both suffered significant erosion of membership. The reasons for this…. In the first place, organisations may lose members as they are drawn to the greater attractions of working in a vibrant and successful social movement compared to the heavy personal and financial demands of working in a small revolutionary group in non-revolutionary times. Second, the parent organisation will be devoting most of its resources to building the successful social movement and therefore diverting most of its resources from the usual routine of party recruitment, induction and member education. Finally, the downplaying of doctrine that has proved essential for social movement success obscures the relevance of Trotskyist ideas and the perceived necessity for a Trotskyist organisation.” (p214) But it could also be suggested that there is another reason for this contrast. In the protest movements they seem to express the principles of popular democracy more effectively than the various Marxist groups which are based on the justification of forms of authoritarian elitism. In this sense there is often a contrast between the aspect of popular involvement in the mass struggles when compared to the general and durable ability to create effective and influential parties. Indeed, it could be suggested that the political domination of Stalinism and Social Democracy has not been challenged by the role of Trotskyism and so it would seem to be a historic political failure.

However, this would be an unfair conclusion because it could be suggested that Trotskyism has had an important role in the continued justification of the approach of revolutionary Marxism. It has been able to promote, even if in a limited manner, the aims and views of the standpoint of an alternative to the reformism and opportunism justified by the role of Social Democracy and Stalinism. Indeed, this could be suggested to be the most important legacy of Trotskyism is that is has been able to promote, even if in a limited manner the aims of a revolutionary expression of the aim of socialism. But Kelly would suggest that this aspect is undermined by the importance of historic political failure: “Neither in Britain nor in any other country have Trotskyists been able to move beyond small groups of militants and build a stable, mass party wielding substantial political influence. Allied to this failing is the fact that almost 80 years after the foundation of the Fourth International no Trotskyist group has ever led a revolutionary struggle for power in any country of the world.” (p236) But it could be suggested that despite this importance of practical failure is the contrasting aspect of the important involvement of the Trotskyist groups in the development of mass struggles against capitalism. But possibly even more important they have contributed to possibility to maintain the influence of the revolutionary standpoint within the various capitalist societies. In other words, despite the important practical failure of Trotskyism to lead a successful struggle for the transformation of capitalism into socialism it has been able to uphold the importance of the conception of the revolutionary alternative to the present system in terms of a type of society based on the role of popular democracy. Hence its actual success cannot be defined in terms of an effective influence within society or an expression of the successful transformation of capitalism into socialism but instead it has been able to contribute to the possibility to retain the influence of a perspective of the possibility to provide a challenge to the present system and to represent in this manner the continued credibility of an alternative to the domination of the mode of production.

In other words, the enduring importance of Trotskyism has not been established by the aspect of practical success. The historic struggle of Trotsky against the domination of Stalin indicated that there was an alternative within revolutionary Marxism. The legacy of this heritage has been continued by the various Trotskyist groups and this has been the enduring importance of this standpoint. But it has to be suggested that serious questions are raised about the effectiveness of the Trotskyist organisations in the present period. Primarily they have to address the issue of the difficulties involved in the transition to socialism in a more profound and complex manner. Primarily they have to address the importance of their own marginalisation and why this seems to result in a situation in which they are not able to develop a form of revolutionary leadership that could develop an effective perspective of the attempt to realise socialism. However, it could be suggested that this issue could be tackled most effectively if initially the various Trotskyist groups attempt to achieve a situation of political unity. Hence, we will attempt to provide a collection of points that could contribute to the realisation of an agreed and principled programme. Firstly, the aim of international socialist revolution. Secondly this objective has to be achieved by the popular and mass struggle of the workers influenced by the role of a revolutionary party in order to achieve these objectives. The primary aim will be to establish a democratic socialist society based on the importance of the workers in the organisation of its development. On the basis of these general principles and objectives we would suggest that it is possible to create a principled form of unity that would enable an international revolutionary organisation to be developed. But even if this possibility is realised the practical tasks of achieving these objectives would still be of crucial importance. However, the problem of sectarianism which has been the major aspect undermining the development of a credible form of revolutionary Marxism would have begun to be tackled.

It could be suggested that Trotskyism has become an antiquated doctrine that no longer has any contemporary relevance. But we would suggest that it still retains contemporary significance because no alternative political approach has emerged that could lead the struggle for the socialist transformation of society in a convincing manner. However, the continuing credibility of Trotskyism does not mean that it can ensure the inevitable success of its aims. Instead, it has to address the issue of the problems involved in trying to realise change and it has to end the importance of the sectarianism that has led to it being divided into competing groups. We will present what we consider to be a programme for the unification of Trotskyism. Firstly, a commitment to the aim of international revolution. In this manner any success of a national based proletarian revolution has to be considered the basis of the development of the possibility of similar international developments. Secondly, the creation of programmes for the unification of the forces of Trotskyism. It could be suggested that some of the Trotskyist groups have become centrist or even reformist, but we consider that this problem could be overcome if the various organisations agreed to unite in terms of the acceptance of a principled international programme. This would be based on the necessity to develop the mass struggles of the workers in order to achieve their economic supremacy within the relations of production and on that basis generate the struggle for the transformation of society. We do not believe that the programme for mass action need be any more complicated than this aspect which would be based on the primary aim of international revolutionary change and the connected view that any national revolution would not be sufficient in order to achieve social emancipation. Obviously, the various programmes of the groups would be more complicated than these aspects, but we consider that what we have outlined could be the essence of a programme of change. We also believe that the diverse and complicated history of any of the groups should not undermine the possibility to realise this prospect of political unity. But without this unity the struggle for socialism will be more difficult.

It will be suggested that the above approach is unrealistic and cannot overcome the sectarianism that divides the different groups. Indeed, we accept that this situation of sectarianism will remain a problem until it is accepted that only unity can enhance the possibility to create a common revolutionary party. In other words, can the various groups overcome their sectarianism in terms of recognition of the primary importance of unity for the purpose of enhancing the success of the struggle for revolutionary change? Obviously, it will be suggested that even if this development occurs the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society does not become an inevitability. This point is valid. But at least the basis will have been created to achieve the development of a party that could lead the struggle for socialism in a more effective manner. Hence, we would suggest the following points of a programme of principled unity: Firstly, the promotion of the aim of socialism which would be the expression of the development of a popular democracy in which the people would be able to collectively organise in order to establish a type of economy that ended the domination of capital over labour. Secondly, the approach of developing the mass struggles of the workers in order to create the possibility to challenge the domination of capital in terms of the possibility of establishing the importance of the role of the aspect of collective mass action. Thirdly a commitment to the objective of international revolution and the importance of internationalism in the development of class consciousness. We would suggest that there is no necessity for any additional aspects of a programme of change and the promotion of the aim of socialism. Hence, we would suggest that it would be possible to unite the various competing left-wing groups in terms of support for this programme. Obviously, this development would not in some automatic manner create the increased influence of the forces of revolutionary socialism but at least a beginning would have been created in terms of this possibility. Ultimately only the development of a united socialist party would indicate whether the political situation had become favourable for the possibility to increase the influence and effectiveness of a socialist standpoint.

It will be suggested that the prospects of this development are not credible because of the continued importance of the situation of sectarian rivalry between the different left groups. This is an important and valid point and obviously what would have to occur would be a general recognition of the necessity to create a united socialist party if the advance of the objective of socialism is to be advanced. It could be suggested that the continuing importance of sectarian rivalry undermines the possibility to realise the credibility of this aim of the creation of a united and popular socialist party. However, the failure to develop this situation of a unified socialist organisation means that the situation of the marginalisation of revolutionary Marxism continues. Hence it could be suggested that the very sectarian role of the Marxist groups contributes to their marginalisation in important terms. But this situation could be connected to the decline of the influence of socialist ideology over the past forty years. Hence there has not been a favourable situation for the prospect of the increased influence and importance of the forces of principled socialism. But we can suggest that the creation of a unified socialist organisation with a democratic approach would at least begin to establish the conditions for the possibility to establish the popular influence of this party. Obviously even with this development the success of this party would not become an inevitability but at least the prospect of the creation of a more favourable situation would have been realised. However, commentators like Kelly would tend to suggest that this is an optimistic conclusion that denies the historic importance of the sectarian divisions between what have been rival Trotskyist groups. This is a valid point but if the present sectarianism continues to be important than the marginalisation of the Trotskyist organisations will be based on the continued importance of the differences between them.

What would represent a programme of unification? Firstly, the aim of international socialist revolution. It is not sufficient to achieve revolutionary change in any single country. Instead, the ultimate realisation of the aim of socialism requires the development of a successful process of international class struggle. Secondly, the creation of an international revolutionary party that could promote the possibility to realise this objective. Thirdly the programme of action would be about encouraging the development of a mass movement based on militant action in order to ultimately create a situation in which the workers had acquired primary importance in the development of the organisation of national and international economies. Fourthly the elaboration of a programme that would enable a challenge to be made to the parliamentary supremacy of the various established parties. Fifthly the support of the attempt to end all forms of exploitation and oppression. We would suggest that the expression of this aim involves the promotion of the mobilisation of the workers in order to achieve this objective, and this would involve the development of the possibility of the creation of democratic control of the workplaces by the workers. It would obviously be suggested that this programme is not realistic, but we would suggest that without the development of the influence of this type of approach it will not be possible for a left-wing party to be able to promote the realisation of the aim of socialism in a credible manner. But we would suggest that unity between what have historically been rival left wing parties could be created in terms of adherence to this minimal revolutionary programme. Obviously, this development would not mean that socialism had become an inevitability but at least the possibility to achieve this objective would have been improved. In other words, it has been the sectarian rivalry of the various groups which has contributed most importantly to their marginalisation. Hence, we would suggest that the promotion of unity around a simple but principled revolutionary programme would represent an immense advance in relation to the possibility to achieve international socialism. It is the continuation of sectarian rivalry which is the major contributor to the marginalisation and insignificance of the groups. If this aspect could be ended it would not mean that socialism had become inevitable but at least serious progress would have been made in the attempt to end the domination of capitalism. In other words, it is sectarianism which is an important aspect in the continued marginalisation of the left-wing groups. The creation of a democratic and unified socialist party would enable the struggle against the domination of capitalism to begin in a serious manner. This process has to occur in national and international terms in order to advance the realisation of the aim of world revolution.