

An exchange on socialism and the environment

1 June 2002

Below we post a reader's question and a reply by WSWS correspondent Joseph Kay.

Hello,

I enjoy reading your articles on the site very much. I have one question concerning a passage in the April 2002 edition of *Harper's Magazine*. One article in specific. It was the article by Tom Bissel, titled "Eternal Winter." It was about the Aral Sea disaster. In it he discusses the impact of the Soviet Union's destructive policies towards the environment and how these policies affected the current Aral Sea problem. These problems involve the former thriving sea coast of the autonomous state of Karakalpakistan, which was adjoined to the Aral. He goes on to discuss the Stalinists' anti-nature stance and then adds a quote by Trotsky, which caught me by surprise. Then he adds that Lenin was a nature lover.

Here is the passage from pages 45-46:

"For decades the Soviet Union was the world's leading producer of oil and steel, held a quarter of the planet's forest resources and freshwater, and was in careless possession of what was probably the most beautiful and varied assortment of landscapes of any nation on the planet. 'We cannot expect charity from nature,' the Stalinists used to say. 'We must tear it from her.' Trotsky was more explicit: 'The present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests and seashores, cannot be considered final.' (Lenin, a nature lover whose brother was a biologist, was a notable exception to this line of sentiment.) By the time of the empire's demise, three fourths of the Soviet Union's surface water was hopelessly polluted."

I am curious about out of what context this Trotsky quote was taken and what drove this rather nasty sentiment. The Stalin quote is unsurprising and I was happy to learn of Lenin's pro-nature sensibilities, but the Trotsky quote just hit me wrong.

Please clarify, as to the reason Trotsky said this. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Thank you.

C

Dear C,

Thank you for your letter and your appreciation for the work of the WSWS. In response to your inquiry, let me first of all quote for you the context in which Trotsky's statement can be found:

"The present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests, and of seashores, cannot be considered final. Man has already made changes in the map of nature that are not few nor insignificant. But they are mere pupils' practice in comparison with what is coming. Faith merely promises to move mountains; but technology, which takes nothing "on faith," is actually able to cut down mountains and move them. Up to now this was done for industrial purposes (mines) or for railways (tunnels); in the future this will be done on an immeasurably larger scale, according to a general industrial and artistic plan. Man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers, and will earnestly and repeatedly make improvements in nature. In the end, he will have rebuilt the earth, if not in his own image, at least according to his own taste. We have not the slightest fear that this taste will be bad...

"The poetry of the earth is not eternal, but changeable, and man began to sing articulate songs only after he had placed between himself and the earth implements and instruments which were the first simple machines.... Through the machine, man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety, with its grouse and its sturgeons. He will point out places for mountains and for passes. He will change the course of the rivers, and he will lay down rules for the oceans.... Of course this does not mean that the entire globe will be marked off into boxes, that the forests will be turned into parks and gardens. Most likely, thickets and forests and grouse and tigers will remain, but only where man commands them to remain. And man will do it so well that the tiger won't even notice the machine, or feel the change, but will live as he lived in primeval times. The machine is not in opposition to the earth. The machine is the instrument of modern man in every field of life."

The passage is from the final chapter of "Literature and

Revolution,” a work written by Trotsky in 1924. The last chapter is in part an attempt by Trotsky to envision the future, to sketch an outline of the possibilities of a genuinely communist society. It is an extraordinary work, having nothing in common with the stupidities of Stalin. I recommend that you take a look at the last chapter, if not the whole book.

What is Trotsky talking of here? He is foreseeing a world in which man’s relationship to nature is no longer irrational, driven by the necessities of profit, but which is rather planned according to man’s needs and taste. This has nothing to do with the careless and frantic industrialization of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Indeed Trotsky wrote often to critique this process.

Let me quote from you a passage from a response I wrote to another reader, because it addresses many of the issues raised in a consideration of Trotsky’s quote. The full response can be found at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jan2001/corr-j10.shtml>.

“The development of the productive forces throughout human history—and, specifically, under capitalism—has led to an extraordinary growth in the ability of mankind to master the natural environment and use its resources to fulfill human needs. This ability has allowed us to develop medicines, improve the efficiency and dependability of food production, escape from the immediate impact of fluctuations in the natural environment, and, in general, raise the cultural and technological level of human existence. This process, however, is not a one-sided appropriation of resources by humans of a static natural world. Rather it is a dynamic interaction, in which the natural environment is transformed by human activity, which itself forms part of this natural world. As we have expanded over the face of the globe and have increased our productive capacity, we have likewise increased the extent to which our activity alters the rest of the environment.

“The development of the productive forces, however, takes place within the framework of changing social—i.e., class—relations, which place constraints on the use and further development of these achievements. For example, the introduction of the assembly line made possible the mass production of the automobile, a development of a fundamentally progressive character, vastly increasing the means and facility of transportation, which in turn led to improved living standards, the breaking down of parochial barriers and raising of human culture. This increase in productive ability, however, occurred within the social relations of capitalism, in which the effects of automobile use on the environment (global warming, smog, etc.) cannot be seriously addressed.

“The most rapid development of human productive

capacity hitherto has occurred over the last several centuries, that is, since the triumph of capitalist relations over a backward and stagnant feudal structure. At the same time, capitalism is completely unable to rationally control the forces that it has called into being, and this has profound effects on environmental degradation. The solution, however, is not to turn back the clock to a more primitive mode of existence, but rather to liberate the productive capacities developed by capitalism from the social relations in which they are constrained.”

The Marxist response to the damaging effects of capitalist production on the environment is to transform society such that man can rationally control his interaction with nature, can subject this interaction to an overall plan, to mold nature according to man’s needs. This implies an interaction that is sustainable, that does not destroy nature, that preserves nature’s diversity and complexity. To destroy nature is, of course, not at all in the interests of the human race, for we are also part of nature and live only in interaction with it. Trotsky, no less than Lenin, understood the crucial importance of environmental health. But he saw in nature, as indeed in humanity itself, a malleability, an enormous possibility, if only man could seize control of the forces of production.

This is the meaning of Trotsky’s statement that the form that nature takes “cannot be considered final.” Indeed, if we insisted that it must be final, we would have to do away with everything that makes modern society possible and go back to gathering fruits in the forest.

To imply, as the writer of the article does, that Trotsky would have approved of the destruction of the environment is incredibly dishonest. He purposefully distorts Trotsky’s writing in order to present it unfavorably in relation even to Stalin. This is of a piece with almost all references to Trotsky in the bourgeois press—when he is mentioned at all it is in a false and misleading manner. Trotsky fought consistently and relentlessly for the perspective of socialism, for the potential of human progress, for a world better than the poverty, war and oppression characteristic of capitalist society. Those who defend the status quo, therefore, are not capable of dealing within him honestly.

I hope that this answers your letter. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Joseph Kay, for the WSWs



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact