

An intellectual pygmy denounces Trotsky

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In periods of political reaction, innumerable forms of social backwardness, ignorance and stupidity come into their own. All the official organs of public opinion exude an unpleasant smell. Enjoying the protection of the powers that be, reassured by the debased state of intellectual life, and reasonably confident that no one will have the opportunity to protest as they pass wind in public, contemporary “opinion makers” feel no shame about what they say or write.

One product of this foul climate is a vituperative denunciation of Leon Trotsky that appears unexpectedly in the midst of a review by Theodore Dalrymple of a new book by Christopher Hitchens. Published in the weekend edition of the *Financial Times*, Dalrymple’s review objects bitterly to a chapter in Hitchens’ book that offers a somewhat admiring portrait of Leon Trotsky.

Dalrymple, who regularly contributes columns to the right-wing *Spectator* magazine in Britain, cannot abide Hitchens’ acknowledgement that Trotsky was, at the very least, a great writer. Despite the fact that Hitchens has broken with his radical past and repackaged himself as a supporter of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, Dalrymple is angered by what he sees as Hitchens’ lingering ambivalence toward the leader of the Russian Revolution.

“Trotsky was a moral monster,” thunders Dalrymple. To make favorable references to the literary skills of such a man, he proclaims, “is roughly the equivalent to making Hitler out to have been principally, and most memorably, a lover of animals, as indicated by his affection for his Alsatian, Blondi, or a lover of nature because he once posed for photographs in the open air dressed in lederhosen.”

Dalrymple continues: “The fact that Trotsky was a talented phrasemaker or literary stylist is rather beside the point. He was a mass murderer who wanted to enslave the world all at once and forever, instead of steadily, bit by bit, as Stalin did. All this is ignored, in the name of a completely inadequate and fundamentally primitive theory.”

An attack of this sort assumes that the reader knows absolutely nothing about the subject being dealt with. The comparison of Trotsky to Hitler is not only disgusting, it exhibits an abysmal ignorance of basic historical facts. No one perceived more clearly the dangers of fascism or did more to rally the German and international working class against this threat than Leon Trotsky. When no small number of British bourgeois politicians were coquettling with Hitler, looking upon him as a potential ally against the Soviet Union, Trotsky summed up the significance of Nazism:

Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics.... Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested

barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism.[1]

Thirty or 40 years ago, not to mention in his own lifetime, a description of Trotsky as a “talented phrasemaker” would have been read by a politically educated public as a rather crass understatement—something like describing Matisse, Picasso or Rivera as gifted doodlers. Except among the politically pathological haters of Trotsky—the Stalinists and the fascist anti-Semites—it was commonly accepted that Leon Trotsky ranked among the greatest literary figures of the twentieth century. This was, by the way, the opinion of some of Trotsky’s most brilliant contemporaries. We find, for example, the following entry for June 3, 1931 in the diary of Walter Benjamin:

The previous evening, a conversation with [Bertholt] Brecht, [Bernhard von] Brentano, and [Hermann] Hesse in the Café du Centre. The conversation turned to Trotsky; Brecht maintained that there were good reasons for thinking that Trotsky was the greatest living European writer. We exchanged episodes from his books.[2]

Brecht, Benjamin, Brentano and Hesse understood what Dalrymple clearly doesn’t: that there is a vast difference between being a “talented phrasemaker” and “the greatest living European writer.” The former can help Madison Avenue sell products, or even satisfy the limited intellectual needs of an ill-informed consumer of newspaper columns. The latter exercises immense cultural and moral influence on humanity.

Trotsky’s greatness as a writer expressed his stature as a thinker, a man whose ideas commanded the attention and respect of a worldwide audience long after he had lost all the overt trappings of political power.

One has only to read Dalrymple’s clumsy reference to “a completely inadequate and fundamentally primitive theory” to recognize at once that he knows nothing of Trotsky’s writings, and that he has not the slightest inkling of the issues at stake in Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism. Which of Trotsky’s books has Dalrymple read? Of the scores of volumes attributed to Trotsky, one doubts that Dalrymple has read even one.

Let us compare Dalrymple’s banal and imbecilic reference to Trotsky’s “inadequate and fundamentally primitive theory” to a description of the latter’s work in a book about Trotsky published 32 years ago by Prentice-Hall, which was then a leading supplier of text books used in an academic environment. Trotsky was included in its “Great Lives Observed” series. Describing Trotsky as “one of the giants of the first half of the twentieth century,” the introduction to

this volume offers this assessment of his theoretical work:

His analysis of social forces in Imperial Russia and his development of the idea of “permanent revolution” suggest that as a Marxist thinker he could, on the power of his own creativity, go beyond the formulations of Marx and Engels. In that sense his theoretical contributions rank him with that old but brilliant coterie of Marxist theorists such as Plekhanov, Kautsky, Luxemburg, and for that matter Lenin himself.[3]

As for Dalrymple’s characterization of Trotsky as a “moral monster,” one must wonder what criteria he employs in arriving at this judgment. Trotsky was a revolutionist. He viewed class struggle not as one of many means that might be employed in the pursuit of political ends, but as an ontological reality of human society. Within this framework, he adhered to the sternest of moral codes: one in which the actions of the individual are judged in relation to the objective interests of the working class and its struggle against exploitation and all forms of oppression and injustice.

Trotsky—who sacrificed everything in defense of the revolutionary principles he proclaimed, who gave his own life in the fight against the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution—left behind a statement of his moral creed:

A means can be justified only by its end. But the end in its turn needs to be justified. From the Marxist point of view, which expresses the historical interests of the proletariat, the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of the power of man over man.

“We are to understand then that in achieving this end anything is permissible?” sarcastically demands the Philistine, demonstrating that he understood nothing. That is permissible, we answer, which really leads to the liberation of mankind. Since this end can be achieved only through revolution, the liberating morality of the proletariat of necessity is endowed with a revolutionary character. It irreconcilably counteracts not only religious dogma but every kind of idealistic fetish, these philosophic gendarmes of the ruling class. It deduces a rule for conduct from the laws of the development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, this law of all laws.

“Just the same,” the moralist continues to insist, “does it mean that in the class struggle against capitalists all means are permissible: lying, frame-up, betrayal, murder, and so on?” Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means, we answer, which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation, or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, replacing it by worship for

the “leaders.” Primarily and irreconcilably, revolutionary morality rejects servility in relation to the bourgeoisie and haughtiness in relation to the toilers, that is, those characteristics in which petty-bourgeois pedants and moralists are thoroughly steeped.[4]

It is, of course, possible to oppose on philosophical grounds Trotsky’s rejection of Kant’s categorical imperative as the basis for evaluating the legitimacy of one or another political action. Among Trotsky’s most determined opponents was the American philosopher John Dewey. But it would have never occurred to Dewey, a man of the greatest intellectual integrity, to describe Trotsky as a “moral monster.”

It would have been pointless and ethically impossible to serve as the chairman of a commission established to investigate the charges made by the Stalinist regime against Trotsky if the latter was, by the very nature of his political life, a moral criminal. Though he disagreed with the Marxian world view, Dewey understood all too well that issues of great principle were at stake in defending Trotsky’s reputation, his “revolutionary honor,” against false and baseless charges. Such moral subtlety, not to mention personal integrity, is far beyond the intellectual horizon of Mr. Dalrymple.

Finally, the columnist fails to tell us who among the political leaders of the bourgeoisie, past and present, he counts among the paragons of morality. Perhaps Winston Churchill, who sent tens of thousands of youth to senseless deaths during World War I and sanctioned the use of poison gas against insurgent Iraqis in the 1920s? Or President Harry Truman, who issued the final orders for the dropping of two atomic bombs 60 years ago on the defenseless cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing nearly 200,000 human beings? Or, in a contemporary setting, Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, on the basis of out-and-out lies, took his country into a war that has cost tens of thousands of lives?

We wait, though not all too eagerly, for Mr. Dalrymple’s answer.

Notes:

1. *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder, 2004), p. 468.
2. *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 477.
3. *Great Lives Observed: Trotsky* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 1.
4. *Their Morals and Ours*, accessible at www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1938/1938-mor.htm.



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