

# All that is fixed is the struggle itself

By Tom Rigby

**D**ONALD Sassoon's argument against revolutionary socialism has one great merit. He states openly, explicitly and candidly what other social democrats would not say except in private.

His short speech at Worker's Liberty '97 was a chemically pure sample of reformist self-justification parading as "objective" history. His key idea is this: "reformism fought for the minimum programme, the minimum programme has been established, while the revolutionary tradition produced Stalinism, therefore reformism was right and anti-Stalinist revolutionary Marxism is the tradition that never did anything."

Implicit in what he says, but never stated, is the liberal belief that socialism, understood as a different system based on workers' self-rule, is impossible and all that we can hope for is a regulated capitalism. It seems that Sassoon has written a huge book, brim-full of historical detail only to confirm what every ignorant yuppie, journalist and spin-doctor already knows: socialism is dead. Sassoon's uncritical worship of the accomplished fact is seen most clearly in his declaration that "Capitalism as it is constituted now doesn't need socialism." As if capitalism ever needed socialism! Capitalism doesn't need socialism, it creates it, or more precisely, it creates the working class whose struggles against the inhumanity of capitalism can create socialism. But note here: Sassoon, this great historian of the socialist movement, ends up reducing socialism to a mechanism for capitalist self-regulation, rather than what it is even in its most primitive forms; an assertion of humanity over the dictates of capital.

Sassoon's history is a mutilated history. He tears out of the historical picture that which makes it history, as opposed to chronology. Sassoon's is a history without choice, potential, evolution, development, accident or alternatives. In short, history without human beings. Despite what Sassoon may argue, human history is not a succession of events following each other with mechanical regularity and revealing an eternal fixed truth, if so history really would be the preserve of the conservative. No, history is a story of titanic class conflict and struggle rooted in the conditions of the production of the social surplus. It has no pre-determined outcome. All that is fixed is the struggle itself. As Marx put it; "Human beings make their own history, but not in conditions of their own making."

Sassoon's dehumanisation of history is to be seen at its clearest in the way he deals with the defeats suffered by the revolutionary socialist tradition, and therefore by the working class and the whole of humanity in the twentieth century. At Workers' Liberty '97 he felt no need to even engage with the idea that things could have been different, and that there might have been a different outcome to, for instance, the post World War I revolutionary crisis, the struggle against fascism between the wars, or the fight against Stalinism in Russia.

What Sassoon found even more ridiculous to contemplate was the idea that if different political forces had won the leadership of these struggles then, perhaps, things might have worked out differently. Old Stalinist prejudice underpins his neo-liberal justification of Social Democracy. The actual historical record puts the argument under extreme strain. Instead of dealing with the facts of the class struggle in the twentieth century he evades the implications of the struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism with the assertion the "You can't play the game that the bad guys were in the right place at the right time." Well, as a matter of fact, yes they were and, unfortunately, the good guys were weak and disorganised.



Trotsky was very much a "practical politician". He built the Red Army, for instance.

Trotsky, whose contribution to the tradition that in Sassoon's view has never done anything practical included organising the October revolution, building the Red Army and leading the left opposition to Stalin, knew just how history turned on human action and consciousness. This is how he explained the isolation of the Russian revolution in the immediate post-World War I period.

"...the year 1919... Everywhere soviets were being organised... The bourgeoisie was at its wits' end... what were the premises for the proletarian revolution? The productive forces were fully mature, so were the class relations; the objective social role of the proletariat rendered the latter fully possible of conquering power and providing the necessary leadership. What was lacking? Lacking was the political premise: cognisance of the situation by the proletariat. Lacking was an organisation at the head of the proletariat, capable of utilising the situation for nothing else but the direct organisational and technical preparation of an uprising, of the overturn, the seizure of power and so forth — that is what was lacking."

(Leon Trotsky *The First Five Years of the Communist International* Vol II)

This is a proper historical explanation. It looks at struggle, potential and human powers and the conditions that may stop a potential being realised. It takes human consciousness itself as an objective factor that acts back on social being.

Trotsky's is also an explanation by reference to a defect, weakness or incapacity on the part of a class, a failure of self-understanding on the part of an historical actor which prevents that actor achieving what was possible. Sassoon's method is the exact opposite, it is uncritical in the extreme. It takes what is given for granted. It does not question it, it merely seeks to reveal the rationality of the status quo. All that is real is rational and all that is rational is real, as conservatives have said. Yet, despite the worshipping of the rationality and necessity of what is, the status quo is nevertheless repeatedly ruptured and superseded, revolutionised and overthrown. The difference between the two approaches was summed up by Marx long ago in his theses on Feuerbach; "The philosophers have interpreted the world, the point, however is to change it."