

The left and Max Shachtman, part 2

Post-Trotsky Trotskyism

Two distinct currents emerged after 1940 from the Trotskyism of Trotsky. One was the "official", "orthodox" Trotskyism of James Cannon, Ernest Mandel, Michel Pablo, Gerry Healy, Ted Grant, etc. The other was mainly associated with the name of Max Shachtman. (The British SWP is a hybrid, owing more to the former than the latter). The Shachtman current mutated into a number of tendencies — Shachtman himself ended his days as a sort of American Fabian — but its history remains a matter of great importance for those engaged in the work of renewing Trotskyism in the post-Stalinist world. This is the second part of Ernest Haberkern's examination of *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the 'American Century'* by Peter Drucker. (Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1994 £14.95).



Shachtman and his comrades were outspoken opponents of the Korean War

James P Cannon as theoretician of bureaucratic collectivism

WITHOUT doubt, the politically critical issue for Drucker, the issue around which the book is organised, is Shachtman's treatment of the Stalinist movement outside Russia. The last chapter of the first part, titled "The Third Camp", and the whole of the second part constitute a debate between Drucker and Shachtman over the question. Drucker never quite states in so many words his belief that it was Shachtman's mistake on this matter that provided the ideological bridge to a pro-west position. He lets the story tell itself — by carefully editing it.

In these sections of the book, Drucker's tendency to describe as Shachtman's original contribution what was in reality first proposed by others (in this case again beginning with Joseph Carter) and initially opposed by Shachtman, leads him outside the boundaries of historical truth. It is not that he fails to mention the facts which contradict his portrait. He mentions (although sometimes only in reference

notes) the debates and articles in which Carter, Draper and Geltman criticised Shachtman when he treated the Stalinist parties in France, Yugoslavia, China and Indochina as if they were basically reformist working-class parties or national liberation movements. It is just that in his extensive commentary and analysis, Drucker ignores this evidence and consistently describes Shachtman as generating the basic politics of the Third Camp unaided out of his own head.

To anticipate the concluding section of this review, the only explanation is that Drucker agrees with Shachtman's original analysis. Shachtman's capitulation to the "theoreticians of bureaucratic collectivism" is his fall from grace. But how do you square that hypothesis with the fact that the real originators of the Third Camp view did not follow Shachtman into the abyss? Joseph Carter simply dropped out of politics for personal reasons (nothing mysterious, no gossip, he just pooped out); Emanuel Geltman, although he left the Trotskyist movement before Shachtman did, devolved like the rest of the *Dissent* editorial board into a garden variety, semi-socialist, left-liberal who, of course, opposed the Vietnam War (and the Bay of Pigs invasion); Hal Draper, who in the late '40s and early '50s wrote most of the theoretical articles for the Independent Socialist League, the major body of work on bureaucratic collectivism and the Third Camp, was Shachtman's major adversary up until the time when Shachtman's views were no longer of any interest to anyone on the left. If Third Camp politics tended to lead one to support American imperialist democracy against Stalinist totalitarianism then it should have been

Draper, not Shachtman, who fell. The facts just don't fit the script Drucker wants to write.

What was the fight all about? Drucker at one point accuses Shachtman of fearing "a Stalinist victory in the United States and the consequent destruction of working-class organisations, freedoms and living standards." Again, there is no reference given and I know of no place where Shachtman or anyone else made such a claim. This is a straw man. The position Shachtman was argued into by Carter, Draper and Geltman was that the Stalinist parties represented an anti-working class, anti-democratic movement which was also anti-capitalist. It was the politics of the Stalinist parties, not their prospects in any given country, that made it necessary to treat them as political opponents rather than as somewhat unreliable comrades in the struggle for human freedom.

What really disturbed the opponents of the Third Camp, and disturbs Peter Drucker today, was the practical conclusion they drew from their theory. Inside the labour movement political collaboration with the Communist Party or its sympathisers was impossible. Unlike even the most conservative or bureaucratic union leader they were not fundamentally loyal to the movement.

The "Shachtmanites", however, were not the first to make this point inside the Trotskyist movement. One of the clearest expositions of this basic conclusion from the "theory of bureaucratic collectivism" was given in 1940 by James P Cannon. Drucker reports the incident but not in connection with his exposition of the "Shachtmanites" union politics.¹

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In 1940, Trotsky urged his American followers organised as the Socialist Workers' Party to propose an alliance with the Stalinists on the basis of their common opposition to "imperialism." This was a serious question. The SWP in 1940 had significant support in the Teamsters (they ran its most important section), in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and elsewhere; they were not an isolated sect whose views were of no interest to anyone but themselves.

The difficulty was that the Communist Party's "anti-imperialist" rhetoric in 1940-41 was an all too transparent cover for its pro-war position. If Lenin had been confused about his "defeat" slogan in 1914 and Shachtman was unravelling politically when he picked it up in 1951, the Communists in 1940 were clear about what they were doing. They had no problem with fomenting strikes in crucial industries, such as aircraft, because in 1940 they were actively supporting the other side just as Lenin had been for supporting Japan in 1904.

And the best trade unionists were horrified. They instinctively supported Roosevelt's tentative steps towards war and his aid to beleaguered Britain. To explain to the good people in the unions that civil liberties and trade union gains could not be sacrificed to the "war effort", that neither British nor American imperialism were fighting for anything but their own imperial ends, was an uphill battle. It required skill, tact, and above all honesty. It would be suicide to ally yourself in any way with people who were using "anti-imperialist" rhetoric demagogically in aid of the despised Berlin-Moscow axis.

Cannon defended his refusal to support Trotsky's foolish proposal with essentially the same arguments Carter, Draper, Geltman and, eventually, Shachtman were to use in the Cold War. He argued that "even the conservative labor fakers" were to be supported against the Stalinists. Why? Because they, from self-interest, were loyal to the unions. Cannon was not questioning the personal loyalty of the CPers — any more than the "Shachtmanites" did later. Their self-sacrifice and devotion were well known. The question was "to what were they loyal, in what cause were they sacrificing themselves?"

Trotsky backed down. He shifted his ground and criticised the American Trotskyists for their failure to confront the prejudices of the pro-New Deal unionists. It was, of course, these left-leaning activists and officials that really concerned SWPers in the union movement, not the "conservative fakers." The discussion then turned to a practical discussion of how to accomplish the difficult task of explaining anti-war and anti-Roosevelt politics to left and liberal unionists.

Exaggerations about "conservative labor fakers" aside, Cannon had come to the same conclusion as the "theoreticians of bureaucratic collectivism" not by theorising but by following the instincts of a serious, honest, loyal trade unionist of long standing. Those instincts served him, in this instance,

better than Trotsky's theorising.

To the right?

IN his penultimate chapter, which he titles "To the Right", Drucker paints a portrait of Max Shachtman in the 1950s as a man demoralised, used up, and drifting to the right. He implies, although he does not say openly, that Shachtman's acceptance of the proposition that the Stalinist parties represented a social and political force at once reactionary and anti-capitalist was responsible for his political and personal collapse. And Shachtman, given Drucker's organisational views, was the ISL. Drucker, therefore, simply ignores the ISL in this period. The history is reduced to a silly tale of how Shachtman won over a new generation of young civil rights activists by his personal charm. Politics had nothing to do with it.

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But Shachtman was not the ISL. And its activities in this period were not confined to the civil rights movement whose activists did have a special relationship with Shachtman — for political not personal reasons.² The ISL and its youth affiliates were also the most influential political tendency in the civil rights and peace movements at this time as well.

Drucker acknowledges that in World War II the WP filled a political vacuum. He fails to recognise that the same was true in the Cold War period too. And for the same reason. Their politics addressed issues that others could only hope to avoid. In the trade unions and in liberal political circles, the ISL provided the only significant opposition to McCarthyism, the arms race, and, especially, the Korean War.

Of course, the Communist Party and its supporters also protested the politics of the Cold War. And, at least up until 1956, they were the largest tendency on the left by far. But they were also obviously partisans of the other side. Given what they were apologising for they suffered the same degree of isolation among honest trade unionists and left-liberals as they had during the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact. And for the same good reasons. People who could have been expected to leap to their

defence held back not only out of fear of persecution but out of an inability to defend their politics. By opposing American imperialism while remaining silent on the crimes of the other side the Stalinists and the Fourth Internationalists who trailed along after them simply took themselves out of the game. I suspect that Peter Drucker, as a member of the Fourth International, finds this fact hard to face up to. But as an historian he cannot avoid dealing with it.

The ISLers, and the pacifists and left socialists who increasingly looked to them for political ideas, became the centre around which radicals gathered. It was because they filled this political vacuum that a new generation of radical activists in the civil rights movements and the peace and civil liberties movements were attracted to them.

In the early 1950s, the entire youth movement of the Socialist Party (regularly called by itself and others the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas) joined the ISL. They joined because it alone on the anti-Stalinist left stood up against the Korean War. Today that sounds easy. After the fiasco in Indochina, cold-war liberalism went into decline. In the 1950s, however, the best elements in the trade union movement and in American liberalism supported the war even as they denounced the "excesses" of McCarthyism.

And Max Shachtman was one of the most prominent spokesmen of the ISL in this period. Whatever political doubts he may have entertained, however confused his theoretical position may have become, neither prevented him from touring the country, speaking to unionists, civil libertarians, liberals, and students as an articulate and passionate defender of civil liberties and opponent of American imperialism. The shock which, as Drucker reports, greeted Shachtman's open break with his past, his support of the Bay of Pigs invasion, would not be understandable if he had not been up until then one of the most indefatigable and brilliant expounders of Third Camp politics.

Drucker implies that Shachtman adopted his new line on the nature of the Communist Parties in 1949 because he wished to accommodate himself to the McCarthyite purge of the Communists in the CIO. In particular, Drucker implies that Shachtman did this because he feared defence of the Communists' rights would jeopardise the ISL activists in the UAW who supported the Reuther Caucus. But he does not mention that those ISLers who did not want to support Reuther shared the same view of the Communist Party and its role. And, in fact, the ISL newspaper, which was widely circulated among UAW members, continued to denounce the witch-hunt in the unions and Reuther's part in it. Just because the ISL thought that the Reuther caucus was the better choice on trade union issues and the Communists disloyal to the working class and the unions did not mean that its members concealed their views. In fact, they argued that the expulsion of the Communists from the union and their removal



Max Shachtman

from office by bureaucratic means would weaken the union and the Reuther caucus itself.

Drucker does not quite come out and say that Shachtman and the ISL after 1949 changed their line and supported the expulsion of Communists. He does not say that because as Richard Nixon once said "that would be a lie." But he does suppress the whole history of the ISL's leading role in the fight against McCarthyism long after they adopted their 1949 position on the nature of the Stalinist movement.

Reactionary anti-capitalism

THE examples I have given here could be multiplied. Without going into detail (which would take a book twice as long as the one being reviewed) I can only mention a few more. Drucker's treatment of the "Shachtmanites" on "Leninism", for example, which raises an extremely important question of contemporary relevance, is also largely unsubstantiated. He has Shachtman and "other Independent Socialist leaders" abandoning the Leninist touchstone "that revolution was necessary even in post-war capitalist democracies like the United States."³ The "other leaders" are unnamed and no reference is given. This comes pretty close to slander.

Lenin himself has grounds for legal action. At one point, Drucker repeats the standard bourgeois academic caricature of "Leninism" as the doctrine that socialism has to be brought to the workers by an elite "vanguard" of intellectuals.⁴ Lenin denounced this tendentious distortion of his use of a quote by Karl Kautsky almost as soon as it was made. It's true that this particular canard is so ingrained in the popular consciousness that it will take a major intellectual campaign involving several hundred volumes of research by socialists to eradicate it. But do socialists have to reinforce this kind of disinformation?

The basic problem with this political biography, however, is more fundamental. What the Trotskyist movement in the '40s and '50s faced was the rise of a mass, popular, anti-capitalist movement that was also reactionary. A movement hostile to democ-

cracy, the legacy of the bourgeois revolution and bourgeois liberalism, and, above all, hostile to the organised working class. Stalinism forced the Trotskyist movement, and finally everybody else, to face this phenomenon. But Stalinism was only one manifestation of the phenomenon and its collapse, or partial collapse, does not eliminate the phenomenon itself.

In 1968, Hal Draper published a pamphlet, *The Two Souls of Socialism*, that looked at the origins of the socialist movement from this perspective. Far from being unique or unusual or peculiar to Stalinism, the concept of socialism as an autocratic utopia brought from above to a more or less grateful people was the dominant concept in the movement. From this point of view Stalinism, especially in its Asian varieties, has turned out to be the greatest utopian experiment in history.

Marx and Engels were peculiar in their notion of socialism as a movement by the people organised to win freedom for themselves. They were the ones who were out of step. That their socialism was widely, if superficially, adopted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a tribute to the inherent attractiveness of the idea and the growing self-confidence of the organised working class.

The widespread repudiation of Marxism either openly or through reinterpretation is, in turn, a function of the demoralisation and disorganisation of the working class brought about by two world wars and the economic, political and social disasters that accompanied and followed them. It is this relative weakness of the working class combined with the continuing hatred of the overwhelming majority of the world's people for capitalism that has given a new lease on life to the reactionary anti-capitalism that permeates the history of the socialist movement.

It was just this spectre of a reactionary anti-capitalist movement that haunted Shachtman, as it haunted Trotsky, and continues, apparently, to haunt Drucker. For all three the fear is that the existence of such a social alternative means that the working class has no political future. Whatever the logic behind such a view, it is clear that the fear is accentuated when the working class is weakened or temporarily defeated. The choice then seems to be: support "democracy" even in its attenuated form under modern capitalism or throw in your lot with the bureaucracy in the hopes that the "progressive" dynamic behind collectivised property will eventually transform the system.

In both cases the great danger is that the working class, which you have now decided is not capable of a really independent politics, will in its blind struggle for "more" weaken the side which you have determined is the only hope. And you will be the one who has to oppose the people fighting the system you have chosen as the lesser evil.

The history of the Trotskyist movement since 1940 is the history of people who have tried first one of these choices and

then the other.

Trotsky, and Shachtman for a long time, tried to avoid this dilemma by insisting that Stalinism was a peculiarly Russian system. It was an historical accident. It would have to disappear.

Drucker would like to persuade himself that they were right. That is why he defends the Shachtman of 1940 and tries to fix the blame for Shachtman's lamentable end on his opponents who did not end up as apologists for imperialism. It isn't logical, it doesn't fit the facts and that's why the book ultimately fails. But frightened people aren't logical. They grasp at straws.

The left today would like to forget about Stalinism. It was a bad dream. Or, as we Americans say, "that's history!" Why waste your breath arguing with the surprisingly large number of people who see hope in the Red-Brown coalition in Russia, or Fidel's Cuba, or even the "hard-liners" in China who resist the spread of wage-slavery by defending slavery without unnecessary modifiers? Stalinism, for good or ill, has been defeated by triumphant capitalism. Let's concentrate on the real enemy.

For a very short period after the collapse of the Soviet Union such arguments had some force. But the predictions of a stable, prosperous, liberal, eternal, capitalist, New World Order have proved as reliable as the economic projections of Stalinist central planners. The social forces that created Stalinism and fascism haven't stopped operating even if neither Stalinism nor fascism are likely to return in the same form. The left cannot pretend that the world has reverted to 1900.

As Trotsky and Shachtman at their best realised and argued, so long as the working class does not provide an independent political choice we face a bleak future. That can be taken either as a counsel of despair or a call to action. ■

Notes

1. It is interesting to note here that Drucker completely passes over a very important episode in this development; Shachtman's advocacy of American military intervention in Hungary in 1956. It was an important turning point in the debate. It is another instance of Drucker's curious "softness" when it comes to Shachtman's renegacy. But is there also a political problem?

It is easy enough to decry Shachtman's support of American imperialism when it intervened on the side of the bad guys. As it did in Vietnam or Cuba. But how do you deal with the problem when American imperialism has the opportunity to intervene on behalf of the good guys?

I suspect Drucker isn't sure himself how to answer that question.

2. MSAHL, p.272

3. The political relationship was based on Shachtman's belief that the Democratic Party could be re-aligned through the Civil Rights movement. The idea was attractive to civil rights activists but not to people in the peace movement. In my opinion as a participant in the Socialist Party in the early '60s, this was the bridge to the right not simply for Shachtman but for a whole wing of the socialist and, more importantly, civil rights activists. The conflict over Vietnam threatened to split the Democratic Party not realign it. And that prospect frightened civil rights activists who had never heard of Trotsky or the "theory of bureaucratic collectivism." To pursue this question further would lead to a book-length digression of "What happened to the Civil Rights movement and the New Left?"

4. *Ibid.*, p.118.