

Debray's REVOLUTION IN THE REVOLUTION? - A Review

The tragic defeats suffered by the world proletariat over a long period of years doomed the official organization to yet greater conservatism and simultaneously sent disillusioned petty-bourgeois 'revolutionists' in pursuit of 'new ways'. As always during epochs of reaction and decay, quacks and charlatans appear on all sides, desirous of revising the whole course of revolutionary thought. Instead of learning from the past, they 'reject' it. Some discover the 'inconsistency' of Marxism, others announce the downfall of Bolshevism. There are those who put responsibility upon revolutionary doctrine for the mistakes and crimes of those who betray it; others who curse the medicine because it does not guarantee an instantaneous and miraculous cure. The more daring discover a panacea and, in anticipation, recommend the halting of the class struggle....The majority of these apostles have succeeded in becoming themselves moral invalids before arriving on the field of battle. Thus, under the aspect of 'new ways', old recipes, long since buried in the archives of pre-Marxian Socialism, are offered to the proletariat.

The above quotation is excerpted from the 'Transitional Program' of the Fourth International, the Marxist-Leninist International founded by L.D. Trotsky; it was written in 1938. Not only is this passage an assessment of some of the 'trends' in 'left-wing' thinking at that time (outside the Stalinist Parties), but is also an amazingly accurate anticipation of many modes of thought in the left and self-styled 'new-left'--especially in the United States--in the 1960's.

It is within this framework--as revisionism, as an 'old recipe' and not, as its admirers would have it, a startling new and original conception--that Debray's contribution to revolutionary thought in the subdeveloped world can best be analysed.

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Debray's thinking in Revolution In The Revolution?, it is immediately apparent, is hardly a discussion of revolutionary theory conceived sui generis or in any abstract sense. On the contrary: the book was written to order, under the personal guidance of the present political leadership of the Cuban state. This point is explicitly acknowledged in the forward to the book by Debray's U.S. publisher, the editors of Monthly Review. They state for the benefit of the uninitiated: "It is not to depreciate Debray's contribution to say that we have here for the first time a comprehensive and authoritative presentation of the revolutionary thought of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara." This is undoubtedly true, with the qualification only that various nuances in the matter of the formulation of problems, along with the exceptionally odd method of presentation are Debray's, rather than Castro's. It is nevertheless unquestionable that such revisions and 'reworkings'--not to say root-and-branch destruction of the central thesis of Marxist-Leninist theory, the warp and woof of the socialist revolutionary movement since the turn of the century--were undertaken on Debray's individual initiative.

The major differences appear to be that the international perspective and general outlook are Castro's, while the acute formalism and the ultra-militarism exhibited here can be laid at the feet of Debray.

This is a not unimportant point, for Revolution In The Revolution? is not merely another crackpot contribution to the swelling tide of phony Marxism which enjoys a day in the sun before it is catalogued, filed and mercifully forgotten in dusty archives; what it has to say goes far beyond its present impact upon those potential U.S. radicals who look upon Cuba as the revolutionary beachhead in this hemisphere. It will in particular have a lasting effect also upon those to whom it is directly aimed: the petty-bourgeois radicals who at present constitute the self-appointed 'vanguard' of the 'revolutionary' movement in Latin America. This is a central danger, for should the general line Debray's book sets forth ever become the predominant one--a likely prospect, since it has the authority of the Cuban government behind it--it will have as a direct result not a wave of socialist revolutions throughout the Americas but the exposure and slaughter, on an unprecedentedly enormous scale, of the very best of those revolutionaries on whom the socialist movement must for the present rely.

This is far from a forecast or a projection in a "purist" critic's over-active imagination: one can already point to hundreds, if not thousands of guerrillas and peasants killed as a result of attempting to put to work a "guerrilla warfare" line in Latin America. The Peruvian M.I.R., the Guatemalan MR-13 and F.A.R., the Colombian F.L.N. and the Venezuelan F.A.L.N. have all been suppressed more or less definitely; more recently and most notably the guerrilla movement in Bolivia under the personal military direction of Major Guevara, has been decimated and its leadership murdered or in exile. With this record of failures to point to, it is obvious that the program--and the theory which produced that program--must be evaluated. It is a point of principled duty in such an assessment to go to the programmatic roots of these failures. It is necessary here to deal with the framework which produced this program.

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Debray's book may most fruitfully be seen as a document of political turmoil within the Cuban leadership and the world Stalinist movement. It cannot be understood in any other way, especially in terms of its polemicizing. For in the course of the past two years, and especially during the period of the January 1966 Tricontinental Congress to the Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS) conference which was concluded in Cuba in August of 1967, what had originally appeared only as a temporary rift between pro-Soviet and Castroite tendencies both in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America have congealed very nearly into a definitive political split. And in a very real sense Debray's book, together with many recent speeches by Castro himself, must primarily be viewed as a veritable manifesto praising that split, drawing the necessary implications and setting down the political line for the foreseeable next period. Its fundamental purpose lies in its intent to destroy the pro-Soviet line both ideologically and organizationally--precisely as Castro's concluding 'Trotskyist'-baiting speech at the earlier Tricontinental was aimed at destroying both organizationally and theoretically the 'heretic' leadership of the Guatemalan guerrilla movement M.I.R. led by Yon Sosa--and to replace it with the Fidelista weltanschauung within the peasants' and workers' movements.

It is for this reason that Debray develops his ideological arguments in the context of an ongoing polemic against the reformist, really pro-capitalist, policies of the old pro-Soviet Latin American Stalinist parties. It is a shrewd tactic on his part, for it allows him to capitalize on the disgust many younger radicals exhibit for the betrayals of the working class and peasantry of which these parties are manifestly guilty. Yet still it is absurd to feel that simply because the major target of Debray's polemic is indeed treacherous, corrupt and revisionist, that any given criticism at all of them is thereby correct and revolutionary. The viewpoint expressed in Revolution In The Revolution? is equally revisionist and removed from the method and content of consistent Marxism-Leninism, although it appears to take a diametrically opposite form. 'Left-wing', Narodniki-like adventurism, strongly and bitterly fought by Lenin when it appeared in its earlier, Russian manifestation, again takes its place upon the historical stage, produced by the same exasperated frenzy of petty-bourgeois frustration as conceived all the earlier forms. And it is equally as revisionist, equally as much a petty-bourgeois deviation from Marxism-Leninism (although more infrequent) as is the right-opportunism, the class collaborationism long the veritable hallmark of the Soviet-leaning Stalinists. Lenin long ago drew attention to and severely scored that contempt for the workers which underlay this 'higher' class stratum's fascination for 'spontaneity', opportunism, terrorism and all the other forms of adventurism; Debray's thinking is not qualitatively different, sixty-five years later, than those corruptions of Marxism which drew such savage fire in What Is To Be Done?.

In those sections of his book where he condemns the actions and practices of the Latin American CPs, Debray sees quite correctly that, far from working for social revolution, they function consistently as the reformist covers for the nationalist sector of the bourgeoisie in their countries. He is of course hardly original in these observations. But far from understanding the sources and dynamics of their behavior, he then goes on to condemn Marxism-Leninism in their name! Far from a deformation, Debray writes as though in fact they are still the legitimate heirs of the October Revolution and the Leninist Third International. What Debray and other 'left' revisionists of this general type cannot see--more accurately, refuse to see--is that Stalinism, not Leninism, works in this manner and is operative here, and it is that which has rendered the Latin American working classes impotent organizationally by binding them to bourgeois nationalist 'anti-imperialism' by means of popular front tactics and various other forms of class collaboration. But Debray and his ilk will have none of this analysis, because it is inconvenient for them and serves their purpose to confuse issues, to muddy waters, to 'prove' the 'irrelevance' of Leninism by the shabby trick of pointing to a corrupt, bureaucratic perversion of it. In this way they proceed to look for 'new ways', other class levers of social revolution; in the name of 'revolution' they betray the fundamental programmatic task of revolutionaries: the task of welding together the long-betrayed and defeated proletariat in preparation for future struggle.

The issue of Stalinism in all its various workings is assiduously avoided by Debray and his adulators, probably because they sense the fact that the present leadership of the Cuban government could only suffer from any thorough examination of the subject. Yet it is the only analysis which is capable of explaining the problem of socialist revolution in this hemisphere. For it is abundantly clear that the political issue which motivates Revolution In The Revolution?, the split which was clearly apparent to all observers at the

1967 OLAS conference (and was furthermore publicized by the Cuban leadership itself) was qualitatively similar to the one in the early 1960s between China and the U.S.S.R., and with later overtones among and between the countries of Eastern Europe--that is, one more split between the various wings of Stalinism. It is the Cuban position which now argues for guerrilla warfare in Latin America at certain times and under certain conditions--to be sure, always monitored by and under Cuban political control, and only in those countries with which Cuba does not have "friendly relations"--and which are largely attempts to take economic and political pressure off Cuba; the pro-Soviet Stalinists apparently oppose any manner of political action outside the framework of popular fronts and parliamentary actions. There are of course any number of instances when these two strategies will find themselves at loggerheads, and the OLAS split merely formalized and codified what was long inevitable and implicit.

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There are massive confusions involved in any discussion of the Cuban position and the role of Debray's formulations within the overall framework. This is due to the fact that most of the supporters of the "Cuban line" in the U.S. either do not know or choose deliberately to ignore the implications of this line. No discussion can get down to fundamentals on this issue until all the aspects of the Castroite viewpoint are clearly set out and understood.

This confusion usually stems from a distortion of the actual meaning of the OLAS split. Unable to face politically the specifics of the Castro-Debray thesis, their apologists dodge the question by pretending the lines confronting each other at the Conference were drawn along a somewhat different design than in fact they were. Specifically, they have chosen to pretend that the differences posed at the OLAS were between reform and revolution, or 'armed struggle' versus 'parliamentary struggle' only. Were this in fact the case, we would no doubt derive certain conclusions about the nature of these groups and strategies other than those we have.

But the point does not rest there. Unmindful of the needs and desires of his supporters, Castro himself posed the question quite specifically: he stated that the real differences were between "those who believe that revolutionary ideas must be accepted by the masses before starting revolutionary action and those who believe revolutionary action is the most efficient way to achieve acceptance by the masses." The Castro-Debray line, clearly, is the latter.

And what does Castro mean when he says "revolutionary action"? There can be no ambiguity here: the Conference many times stated its opinion that the only revolutionary action now possible in Latin America is armed struggle. One need only substitute the phrase "armed struggle" for the term "revolutionary action" (they are supposed to be the same thing) in the above quotation and one will see quite clearly something very different from the supposed division of "reform" or "revolution". There are a few other qualifications to the Castro-Debray thesis, qualifications curiously not mentioned by the "Fidelistas".

Seen as it was presented at the OLAS, it is quite clear to those who do

not refuse to see that this is a precise formula for a putsch, an armed uprising deliberately undertaken without any preparation of the masses whatsoever. What a tremendous new contribution to the science of Marxism-Leninism!

There are of course certain other points of division, other qualifications which should not be ignored. For both Castro and Debray are quite specific as to where this "armed struggle" would have to be conducted. Still speaking before the OLAS, Castro reiterated: "We have come to the conclusion that in most of the countries of the (South American) continent, it is in the countryside where the struggle can best be developed and where it is possible to develop the most important class struggle." Since, statistically speaking, Latin America taken as a whole is nearly 60 per cent urban; since the peasantry is undergoing rapid erosion and disintegration as a class (a class which, defined by its mode of production, is petty-bourgeois); since the peasantry's isolation in subdeveloped countries from urban centers sharply increases in it an ideology of reactionary prejudices, superstition, obscurantism and what Marx scathingly referred to as 'rural idiocy': it appears unlikely that this is the patent formula for success its authors feel it to be. (Anyone familiar with Russian revolutionary thought at the turn of the present century or familiar--again--with Lenin's treatise against the Narodnik movement, What Is To Be Done?, ought to be feeling acute symptoms of deja vu just about now!) Yet this of course is the whole general conception behind Revolution In The Revolution?

But we are still not yet finished. There is another qualification to be mentioned. Castro insisted at the OLAS--and this is one of the central tenets of Revolution In The Revolution?--that in countries where there exist both guerrilla movements in the countryside and ostensible revolutionary parties in the urban centers, the political leadership of the "revolutionary" movement lies with the guerrillas, and the urban parties are to be secondary and subservient to the former. What this can only mean is that the urban parties are to function mainly as supply conduits and propaganda agents for the guerrillas, and that their usefulness will be largely financial and literary. For Leninists, there are fundamental and programmatic differences involved here. Whereas for the Castroites, military issues take precedence over all other forms of struggle: for us, on the other hand, all such military questions are secondary and subordinate to the question of building the political leadership, of assisting in the preparedness of the working classes.

It is clear that this is not the simple division of "peaceful struggle" vs. "armed struggle" that Castro's admirers in the U.S.--notably the editors of Monthly Review and the revisionists of the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party--pretend it is. Under these circumstances it is simply nonsense for Castro to say that the guerrilla struggle is to be "a revolutionary war guided by the ideology of the proletariat": this is only camouflage for the destruction of Marxism in the name of Marxism, and acquiescence in the charade by ostensible Leninists can only be branded as irresponsible and criminal. Such fatuous nonsense has nothing in common with revolutionary socialism in the era of Marxism-Leninism.

Despite the claims of their disciples and acolytes, neither Castro nor Debray have "brought Marxism up to date" as they so fatuously claim. On the contrary, they and those who have become their public relations agents have

repudiated the teachings of Marx and Lenin in the most fundamental and decisive way.

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The Castro-Debray-Guevara revision of Marxism is far from anything new and original; on the contrary, it is amazingly similar, if quite inferior, to petty-bourgeois tendencies and illusions which have existed simultaneously with--and even surfaced within--the Marxist movement nearly from its inception. These ideas were bitterly fought and repudiated by both Marx and Lenin, who felt it tremendously incumbent to point out the alien (bourgeois) class bases from which they originated. Certain theories identified with the name of Blanqui spring immediately to mind--the revolution considered largely as a conspiracy, the conception of "exciting" the proletariat into mass action by means of a sudden coup d'etat led by a small minority ("...those who believe revolutionary action is the most efficient way to achieve acceptance by the masses"--F. Castro) and so forth. Marx's collaborator and co-thinker Engels wrote in The Revolutionary Act:

The time has passed for revolutions carried through by small minorities at the head of unconscious masses. When it gets to be a matter of the complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must participate, must understand what is at stake, and why they act.

Nor should the similarity of the set of ideas propounded both by Castro in his recent utterances and by Debray in Revolution In The Revolution? to those of the Russian Narodniks be overlooked, especially in the light of the long, brilliantly annihilating series of polemics directed against them by Lenin himself. That Debray and the leaders of the Cuban state continue to refer to themselves as "Leninists" can only indicate either pious religiosity or, more likely, the need of a "left cover" in order to maintain the support of the Latin American masses.

Still, it is unfair to Blanqui--and the Narodniki, for that matter--to dwell overlong on their faults or the comparison with Castro-Debray, especially in the light of what use their contemporary, if unacknowledged, disciples have done with their ideas. To some extent they can be excused, for in a sense their errors were rooted in the historical process itself, in the lack of satisfactory models.

This excuse is not available for Debray and his co-thinkers. It has been one hundred and twenty years since the appearance of the Communist Manifesto, one hundred years since Marx published Capital, and a half-century since the October Revolution. A half-century ago, the workers for the first time, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, took state power into their own hands; now, after all the Stalinist and revisionist betrayals, with the burning question that of the crisis of leadership of the international working class movement, with thermonuclear weapons posing the stark alternatives socialism or barbarism--now, at this juncture, Debray wanders upon the scene, denouncing the proletariat and presenting as a "Marxist-Leninist" program a semi-coherent mishmash of theories long proven false, and against which both Marx and Lenin specifically fought! Might one appear ungrateful if he were to ask for just a little bit less?

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Something needs to be said about Debray's treatment of 'Trotskyism', especially since it is basic to the central theses in Revolution In The Revolution?. This is not an unimportant point, although one doubts that many of those who generally support Debray's (and Castro's) analysis of the present era are particularly happy with it; it does, after all, give the show away a bit too clearly. But to begin with, a few points must be established. First, it is clear that Debray wants very seriously to drive what he calls "Trotskyism" out of the Latin American revolutionary movement. The tone he employs is a dead giveaway--it is a denunciation, an attempt to outlaw the ideas. Secondly, it is impossible to conceive that Debray would have been so bold to mount such an attack on "Trotskyism" if he were not authorized to do so by those in authority in Cuba. Thirdly, this section is not an eccentricity, or a blemish unrelated to the central theses: it is in point of fact one of the most significant and important foundations of the Castroite line.

The immediate question arises: why is such an attack necessary? It is clear that the answer does not lie wholly within the book. For Debray's remarks on the subject are wholly unrealistic; he "proves" too much. For if "Trotskyism" were really what Debray claims it is, he would have no need to polemicize against it, for it would be its own worst enemy. Spectres are a hundred times more substantial than the "Trotskyism" excoriated and exposed by Debray. And because he needs to fight what he at the same time caricaturizes, one needs to look behind the phrasing to the reality.

A couple of examples of Debray's method would be useful here.

"At bottom Trotskyism is a metaphysic paved with good intentions. It is based on a belief in the natural goodness of the workers, which is always perverted by evil bureaucracies but never destroyed. There is a proletarian essence within peasants and workers alike which cannot be altered by circumstances. For them to become aware of themselves, it is only necessary that they be given the word, that objectives be set for them which they see without seeing and which they know without knowing. The result: socialism becomes a reality, all at once, without delay, neat and tidy."

This passage is interesting only in the sense that one rarely finds anything so infantile published in the 'left-wing' movement. If one were only to substitute the words "Marxism" and "evil capitalists" where Debray uses "Trotskyism" and "evil bureaucracies" one sees precisely what one is dealing with: it is the tone of the exasperated petty-bourgeois litterateur deriding socialism ala Henry Luce, which in a very real sense it is.

There is more:

"Because Trotskyism, in its final state of degeneration is a medieval metaphysic, it is subject to the monotonies of its function. In space--everywhere the same: the same analyses and perspectives serve equally well for Peru and Belgium. In time--immutable: Trotskyism has nothing to learn from history. It already has the key to it: the proletariat, essentially wholesome and unfailingly socialist--eternally at odds, in its union activity, with the perverse formalism of the Stalinist bureaucracies. Prometheus struggling ceaselessly against a Zeus of a thousand disguises in order to steal from him the fire of liberation and keep it burning. Has anyone ever seen a concrete analysis

of a concrete situation from the pen of a Trotskyist?"

It is perhaps difficult to keep in mind that despite the "literary" quality of this passage with its inept metaphor, its pseudo-philosophic jargon-- "medieval metaphysics", "monotonies of its function", indeed--Debray is launching a broadside here.

What fundamentally disturbs Debray here is that there is any kind of generalized strategy which lays claim to being correct for all but the most freakish of circumstances--this is why the word "metaphysic" occurs so frequently in his section about Trotskyism. He claims to be horrified by such things, since it obviously goes against the grain of his own self conception, which appears to be that of some kind of theoretician of the specialized circumstances, ("the Latin American revolutionary war possesses highly special and profoundly distinct conditions of development which can only be discovered through a particular experience.") which of course does not render him incapable of such sweeping generalities such as his remark that any political line which "is not susceptible to expression as a precise and consistent military line, cannot be considered revolutionary." Finding Debray hung up once more on the horns of his self-created contradictions is something with which the reader of his book is not unfamiliar.

What in the Trotskyists draws Debray's ire is that they have a strategy, a program and a model for world revolution. And, further, that it is the line which Lenin advocated. That they have a system is not what enrages Debray so much as it is that particular system; after all, even empiricists like Debray have systems, and his is that of the Castroite International. But since for reasons of piety and state--not to mention Castro's pose as the new Lenin--it is impossible to attack Leninism directly in Revolution In The Revolution? Debray must resort to caricature and ridicule. It is hardly a new method; it is indeed the very same method by which Stalin adopted the robes of Lenin. And the intended end result is the same, too.

Here is the crux of the matter. It is not at all difficult for Debray to show that the Stalinist parties are in reality an impediment to revolution. But he cannot confront Trotskyism politically, because its inheritors do have an internationalist perspective and program. And so he must engage himself boxing the ears of a strawman. For while Castroism may appear a revolutionary alternative to those coming to a socialist perspective who have no experience beyond the thinly-disguised Menshevism of the Stalinist parties, it could hardly hope to appear so to those familiar with the real ideas of Lenin. And so Debray must insert a prophylaxes to seal off genuine Marxism-Leninism: this is the function of the caricature of Trotskyism in his book.

Castro, the well-spring of all Debray's recent thought, is far blunter. Here is how he defined Trotskyism at the Tricontinental Congress in 1966: "For if Trotskyism represented at a certain stage an erroneous position, but a position within the field of political ideas, Trotskyism became in later years a vulgar instrument of imperialism and reaction." And there is absolutely no evidence to show that Castro has ever repudiated that formulation. Debray has not gone so far: the most extreme remark in Revolution In The Revolution? is where he calls it "a pure and simple provocation" in practice. The difference appears to be only a quantitative one. But the model is there and available, should it become necessary.

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