

Thermidor Reversed: The Fourth International and the Bureaucratic Counterrevolution

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The Fourth International and the Revolutionary Legacy: Trotsky, Mandel, Bensaïd and the Continuation of Revolutionary Anti-Bureaucratic Marxism

The ideological counterrevolution represented by Stalinism did not go unopposed. As the bureaucratic caste consolidated its control over the Soviet Union and its satellites, a minority of revolutionaries remained faithful to the

emancipatory core of Marxism and the democratic aspirations of the October Revolution. Chief among them was Leon Trotsky, who founded the Fourth International in 1938 as a continuation of revolutionary Marxism against both Stalinist degeneration and capitalist restoration.

The Fourth International emerged not from doctrinal purism but from historical necessity. Trotsky's analysis of the USSR as a "degenerated workers' state" was grounded in his understanding that while the foundations of a post-capitalist economy remained—nationalized industry, a planned economy—the political superstructure had become antithetical to socialism. "The USSR embodies terrific contradictions," Trotsky wrote. "But it still remains a degenerated workers' state. And precisely for this reason we defend it." (*In Defense of Marxism*). However, this defense was not unconditional; it was the defense of social property against imperialist destruction and simultaneously a call for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucratic caste.

The founding of the Fourth International was an act of internationalist defiance. Trotsky understood that the Stalinist Comintern had become a counter-revolutionary force, sabotaging working-class uprisings across Europe and the colonial world. From the betrayal of the German proletariat during the rise of Nazism to the strangling of the Spanish Revolution, the Stalinist line—"socialism in one country," Popular Frontism, and subordination to bourgeois allies—had proven disastrous. Trotsky's programmatic response was the *Transitional Program*, written in 1938, which sought to bridge the gap between the immediate struggles of the working class and the strategic goal of socialist revolution.

Trotsky emphasized, “The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.” The Fourth International was intended to be that leadership, grounded not in bureaucratic command but in democratic centralism, theoretical clarity, and revolutionary internationalism. Its cadres were persecuted, exiled, and often martyred. Yet, they carried forward the red thread of Marxism in some of the darkest times of the 20th century.

After Trotsky’s assassination in 1940, the task of defending and renewing this tradition fell to others. Among the most significant of these was Ernest Mandel, a Belgian Marxist economist and theorist who helped lead the Fourth International in the post-war period. Mandel’s work was crucial in adapting Marxism to the changing realities of global capitalism, decolonization, and the new social movements.

Mandel argued that Stalinism was not a necessary outcome of Marxism, but the product of specific historical conditions—a revolution isolated in a backward country. “Bureaucratic degeneration is not the law of socialist revolutions,” Mandel wrote. “It is the result of defeat and isolation.” (*Power and Money*). For Mandel, the task of Marxists was to prepare for the renewal of revolution under more favorable conditions. He participated actively in the struggles of May 1968 in France and offered a rigorous economic critique of late capitalism, emphasizing its contradictions and long-term unsustainability.

In *Late Capitalism* and *The Second Slump*, Mandel revived the Marxist method of long-term analysis, showing that capitalism, far from entering a harmonious era of post-war prosperity, remained subject to cyclical crisis, class struggle, and imperial domination. He also played a key role in articulating a vision of socialism that was both democratic and pluralistic, rooted in mass self-

activity.

Mandel’s commitment to revolutionary democracy was echoed and deepened by Daniel Bensaïd, a French philosopher and activist who brought a new vitality and philosophical depth to the Fourth International’s political project. Bensaïd was shaped by the events of 1968 but remained grounded in the long memory of Marxist politics. For him, Marxism was not a closed system but a “strategic hypothesis,” a wager on the possibility of emancipation.

In his reflections on Lenin and strategy, Bensaïd rejected both the dogmatism of sectarian orthodoxy and the liquidationism of reformist adaptation. “Revolutionary politics is not a blueprint,” he wrote, “but a confrontation with time, an articulation of historicity and decision.” (*Strategies of Resistance*). He saw the task of Marxists not as proclaiming certainties, but as constructing paths of resistance, creating “forks in the road” within the flow of historical time.

Bensaïd was particularly critical of the false dichotomy between revolution and democracy. He argued that socialism must be both radically democratic and strategically militant. “Democracy is not an accessory ornament for socialism, it is its very substance,” he affirmed. Against both bureaucratic socialism and liberal parliamentarianism, Bensaïd defended a politics of rupture: strategic interventions, alliances from below, and fidelity to emancipatory horizons.

Under the guidance of Mandel and Bensaïd, the Fourth International became a space for critical renewal, engaging with anti-colonial struggles, feminist movements, ecological resistance, and new labor insurgencies. Rather than

treating Marxist theory as a fixed dogma, they opened it to dialogue with real movements. The International played vital roles in supporting anti-imperialist movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, while also fostering revolutionary organizations in Europe and North America.

The organizational model of the Fourth International rejected the authoritarian verticalism of Stalinist parties. It emphasized internal democracy, open debate, and collective leadership. This allowed it to weather the storms of the Cold War, adapt to post-1968 social realities, and contribute to the contemporary resurgence of socialist politics.

The continuing relevance of this tradition can be seen in the current conjuncture. As global capitalism confronts ecological catastrophe, authoritarian backlash, and deepening inequality, the need for a revolutionary alternative becomes more urgent. Yet, that alternative cannot be built on the ruins of Stalinism. It requires a rediscovery of the living Marxist tradition represented by Trotsky, Mandel, and Bensaïd—a tradition that remains committed to internationalism, democracy, and human liberation.

The Fourth International today is not a mass party, but a strategic pole of clarity in an increasingly complex world. Its documents, debates, and cadres continue to inspire new generations of revolutionaries from Chile to South Africa, from the Philippines to France. As Mandel once put it, “Revolutionaries must act as though the revolution is near, even if it is far, and prepare as though it is far, even if it is near.”

In sum, the Fourth International stands as a vital link in the historical chain of revolutionary continuity. It opposed Stalinist betrayal not from the outside,

but from within the socialist tradition. It defended the possibility of socialism based on workers' democracy, not bureaucratic control. And it kept alive the radical hope that another world is possible—not a utopia decreed from above, but a collective achievement of the oppressed themselves.

As Marx once wrote, "The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself." This principle animated Trotsky's fight against Stalinism, Mandel's economic analyses, and Bensaïd's strategic insights. And it remains the compass by which revolutionary Marxists chart the course toward human emancipation today.

The Fourth International: A Critical Appraisal of its Constraints and Limitations

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 as a principled response to the bureaucrat degeneration in the Soviet Union of the period, and to the abandonment of the founding idea of internationalism by the Communist International, or the Comintern, under Stalin's leadership. However, despite this original intention, its own historical development has been marked by radical limitations and problems. Although the Fourth International might be said to have a theoretical sophistication and a lasting commitment to the ideals of revolutionary democracy, it never did manage to become a mass movement capable of mobilizing the international working class successfully. Although the record it left is intellectually rich and substantial, it is politically confined, a cautionary example within the overall history of anti-Stalinist Marxism.

Most importantly, it must be noted that the Fourth International was largely

an activist movement, not a mass movement of a broad scale. Trotsky and his generation correctly recognized the political degeneration of the Soviet Union as a profound counter-revolutionary treachery, but their assessment of the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s was perhaps too optimistic. Trotsky anticipated that World War II would be a stimulus to revolutionary rebellions of a like nature to 1917, with the Fourth International at the forefront of the international proletariat in the struggle. This vision in particular did not fully provide for the tremendous pressure of Stalinism, social democracy, and imperialism, which could potentially reassert their hold on politics. In actuality, the Fourth International was a peripheral force, restricted to small circles of dedicated activists and ultimately unable to become a leading force capable of drawing in the wider working masses.

In addition, the International was plagued by grave problems emanating from profound factionalism and recurring splits, particularly in the wake of the tragic murder of Trotsky in 1940. Lacking the leadership of its founder, which had been a compelling integrative force within the organization up till then, and in the presence of the now radically changed geopolitical environment of the day, the Fourth International eventually fell victim to the sheer force of bitter internal conflicts. These problems centered around a series of political matters, among which were varying views regarding the real nature of the Soviet Union, the nuances of the Chinese Revolution, guerrilla warfare strategy, and decolonization policy. The splits inside the organization were not matters of tactics; they were signs of a deeper and more disquieting political disorientation. Instead of rallying behind a consistent political line and unmistakable strategic course, the International dissolved into fragmentation, breaking into rival sects. Each of these splinter factions intended to be upholding Trotsky’s legacy, but they drifted further and further from the

original goal of international unity.

One of the largest and most severe weaknesses of the movement can be determined in its failure to adequately form mass-scale revolutionary parties in any country. Sure, individual fractions did win great and significant achievements—like the role that the French fraction had in the May 1968 movement or the early success seen by the Sri Lankan LSSP—none of which were ultimately able to put together a mass-based revolutionary organization that could successfully challenge and oppose the overwhelming hegemony that was exercised by the ruling class. The tendency towards propagandist strategy, coupled with protracted internal debates and the strong desire to keep theoretical purity, far too often prevailed over the much more difficult and arduous task of protracted mass mobilization. There was also a failure to emphasize the need to build trade unions and the need to seed the party deep in the everyday struggle of the working class. The theory of the Leninist vanguard party, rightfully defended against Stalinist distortions and perversions, far too often found itself oversimplified and reduced to a model centered on an efficient small cadre. The result ultimately ended up being a disconnect from the grassroots popular movements necessary for genuine change. In brief review, it can be said that while the Fourth International did maintain the revolutionary Marxist tradition through some of the most demanding and challenging years of the 20th century, political leadership in the organization was characterized by gross deficiencies and shortcomings. The failure of the organization to exist as an international mass organization, and the debasement of the organization through a series of internal splits and a failure to successfully build mass parties, has led to its current function as an icon of moral authority rather than hard material power in world politics. In the future, a future revolutionary international can certainly learn valuable

lessons from these historical limitations—not by discarding in its entirety the critical commitment to workers' democracy and internationalism, but by actively engaging in building new strategies specifically geared towards avoiding the well-documented errors of sectarianism, isolation, and political dogmatism.

Conclusion : Reclaiming the Essential Nature of Democracy: Creating a Clear Strategic Direction for Navigating the Complexity of the 21st Century

In an effort to be constantly and sufficiently in touch with the continued pertinence of the communist project to contemporary life, it is absolutely crucial to stress and bring to the forefront of attention one most salient consideration: democracy is not an addendum or an external appendix to socialism, but is its very substance and inner essence. Daniel Bensaïd's fervent insistence that "democracy is not an accessory ornament for socialism, it is its very substance" must be the guiding principle of approach to the task to reshape and reform revolutionary politics in our own time. If we are to recover and reclaim communism at all from the degradations of Stalinist deformation and the blanket rejection by liberal ideologies, this necessary maxim must be said and reiterated at every critical moment of historical and theoretical turning.

In the wider context of the collapse of bureaucracy which has been described in the sections above, it should be noted that the most basic act of treason did not simply involve substituting the ideals of Soviet democracy with those of a centralized autocratic state. Rather, it involved the unfortunate hijacking of the working class's inherent potential for self-emancipation, a basic

element of their development. The declaration made by Marx that “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself” cannot be dismissed or seen as an ornamented slogan; it is the underlying basis which drives revolutionary theory. In any given context in which this basis has been abandoned—whether in the panicked pursuit of emergency measures of centralization or appeals to ideological uniformity—there has been a marked increase in bureaucratic rule taking hold and asserting itself. As a consequence, in each and every case which has been the subject of consideration in the sections above, there must be the need for the erosion of democratic ideals to be placed at the center of the critique, for it is the determining measure of the legitimacy of revolutionary activity itself.

Historicizing “Socialism in One Country”: The Betrayal of Internationalism

The Stalinist ideology, which was based on the concept of “socialism in one country,” was not an academic hypothesis or theoretical aside, but a genuine and earnest betrayal of the internationalist character which is so inherently inherent within the tenets of Marxism. One of the most brilliant and glaring examples that illustrate such betrayal can be seen in the strategic passivity as well as the actual hindrance exhibited during the 1923 German Revolution. Despite the fact that the Communist Party of Germany had a broad popular base as well as immense revolutionary potential, it was sadly left to fend for itself, bound to the prudence and caution which was employed by Moscow during the time. Similarly, during the years of chaos surrounding the Spanish Civil War, Stalinist agents actively subordinated the entire revolutionary process to the selfish and narrow interests of Soviet foreign policy, resulting in the crushing defeat of anarchist soldiers and POUM soldiers, ultimately

serving to strangulate and suppress the revolutionary process in Catalonia in 1937. It is crucial to mention that such betrayals were not exceptions to the rule, but were, in fact, symptomatic of the deep-seated fears of a bureaucratic regime against the prevalence of genuine revolutionary processes that were genuinely emanating from the masses themselves.

This treachery was on an international scale. In the United States, the CPUSA completely reversed its positions to conform to Soviet foreign policy—embraced Roosevelt's New Deal when the USSR needed allies, opposed it during the Hitler-Stalin Pact, only to reverse again in support when Hitler invaded the USSR. These reversals had nothing to do with socialist theory or class struggle, but with Soviet state interests. This kind of opportunism undermined the legitimacy of communist parties and estranged them from working-class constituencies.

In-depth Examination of Concrete Analysis: Understanding Bureaucracy as a Tangible and Structural Apparatus

Moshe Lewin's academic work offers an important and comprehensive empirical analysis of the genesis of Soviet bureaucracy, revealing its complex origins. As chronicled in his book, The Making of the Soviet System, it is clear that by the early 1930s, the workforce of state employees had expanded to the millions, pointing to a dramatic growth. These bureaucrats, whose salaries were determined largely by their unshakeable fidelity rather than their natural aptitude or talent, held jobs within the rapidly expanding administrative system. Rather than serving as an instrument of proletarian domination of the economy, this massive bureaucratic machinery ultimately proved itself an obstacle to inventive work, a powerful enemy of openness, and a huge barrier

to popular dissent. It is this massive and complex machinery—more than an individual like Stalin—that largely stifled the revolutionary impulse.

Define the Concept: The Degenerated Workers' State

Trotsky's theory of the "degenerated workers' state," as it was fully elaborated in his classic work The Revolution Betrayed, cannot be seen merely as an apologia for the prevailing conditions in the Soviet Union of its day. On the contrary, it is a dialectical analysis of a left-wing kind that seeks to analyze and explain away the necessarily contradictory character of the situation. This basis, one can observe that the USSR had, on the one hand, successfully eliminated capitalist relations of ownership that had long dominated society, and in their stead established a system of nationalized, planned production. These were wonderful gains that had to be defended resolutely against any attempt at capitalist restoration that threatened the gains achieved. On the other hand, one must acknowledge that the working class itself had been politically dispossessed; this was a consequence of the emergence of a bureaucracy that claimed to rule in the name of the workers but acted against their real interests.

This specific position was—and remains, up to the current day—clearly other than that of those who acknowledged the USSR as a new class society, as did James Burnham and Max Shachtman. or even simply labeled it state capitalism, as did Tony Cliff. Against such an understanding, the Fourth International had a twofold responsibility: on one side, it tried to defend the social gains gained through the October Revolution against the inroads of imperialism, and on the other side, it actively struggled for a political revolution to reestablish true workers' democracy. This dialectical approach

allowed revolutionaries to counter both the legitimations of Stalinist ideologies as well as the celebratory discourses of capitalist triumphalism.

Preparing for and Countering Criticisms

The critique presented in the article also has to consider and fully address any potential criticisms that can be raised:

1. The Stalinist interpretation holds that the employment of repression and centralization were considered necessary for defense and industrialization. Yet, a closer examination of the evidence discloses that forced collectivization and mass purges inflicted a catastrophic blow to Soviet agriculture, demoralized and dispirited the working class, and caused a long economic stagnation that took years to rectify. Foremost of all, it is important to realize that the authentic successes and advancements of the USSR were attained not due to the repressive bureaucratic terror, but despite it.
2. And the Eurocommunists: They accuse revolutionaries of being romanticists who obstinately cling to outdated models of politics by class. But efforts of Eurocommunism to integrate itself within the capitalist parliamentary framework have, at best, resulted in nothing more than temporary reforms which do not lead to lasting change—and worse, led to outright surrender to neoliberal conformism, as in the case of the Italian PCI.
3. In the case of orthodox Communist Parties, it is to be noted that they tend to put Trotskyists in the category of being anti-Soviet in orientation. But a close examination of the historical record of the Fourth International

> leaves no doubt: this movement consciously supported the material development of the USSR and consciously demanded their political renovation and reform. This position should not be regarded as an act of treason, but as an expression of fidelity to the basic democratic principles of socialism itself.

Relevance Now: The Strategic Significance and Relevance to the Current Era

The modern left is faced with some fundamental challenges that follow from its own natural bureaucratic inclinations. The NGO-ization that has occurred in most movements, combined with the hierarchical inclinations inherent in populist political parties, is a persistent and real threat of replacement or substitution of authentic grassroots activism. The lessons learned positively from the Fourth International are still relevant in the politics of today, since they are no less relevant today than they were in the past:

The environmental crisis requires a carefully thought-out shift away from fossil fuels, but it has to be democratic planning, not technocratic planning.

Authoritarianism has been seen spreading all over the globe where it normally functions in the name of nationalism. The only means of resistance to this disturbing trend is through popular movements that advocate internationalist socialism.

Inequality is increasing in a way that can be characterized as only more grotesque and frightening. As a reply to this frightening trend, socialism has to move forward and reassert the original principle of common ownership and

participatory control, since these are needed to effectively challenge the all-pervading hegemony of oligarchic capitalism.

A Reflective and Integrated Strategic Compass for Tomorrow

The Fourth International cannot be seen as some musty fossil or an anachronism; instead, it is a living, vibrant pole of knowledge in our modern world. Its uncompromising adherence to the ideals of workers' democracy, revolutionary internationalism, and theoretical eclecticism provides a firm basis that is vital to the rehabilitation and revitalization of communist practice in the modern world. As we see the different crises besetting capitalism widening and deepening—ranging from ecocide to imperialist wars, and in general mass destitution—the necessity for a revolutionary alternative has never been higher, and it is more necessary than ever.

When we return to the piercing vision offered by Bensaïd, we must ensure that communism is articulated as a strategic hypothesis, a wager of calculation on the potential for the real emancipation of all of humanity. This thesis of foundation must firmly reject any type of bureaucratic authoritarianism that attacks the freedoms and rights of individuals, while also recognizing the fundamental role of democratic self-organization in the empowerment of the masses. Furthermore, we must reaffirm a firm international solidarity of all those who are struggling for a better world. The historical heritage of Stalinism cannot serve as an argument for abandoning the principles of socialism; it must serve instead as a strong argument to defend socialism itself. Our task is to rescue socialism from the ruinous flames of betrayal, cleanse it of any treachery that has tarnished its image, and reconstruct it as the most rational and viable solution to the numerous crimes

that unfortunately define capitalist barbarism.

As the great Rosa Luxemburg once put it, “The future belongs to socialism—or barbarism.” This haunting quote represents a fundamental choice that humanity is confronted with. The question that we are grappling with here is not if Stalinism’s actions and policies were a betrayal of socialism’s essential ideals; that has already been resolved in dispute and debate. Rather, the essential and pressing question that we need to grapple with now is whether we will have the will and the courage to reclaim socialism for ourselves and for the future.

About the Author



Sankha Subhra Biswas

Author

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