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Welcome to Socialisme ou Barbarie

Gauche Communiste de France
1949

Written by Marc Chirik for Internationalisme. Reproduced in English, with a detailed introduction, by the International Communist Current in International Review 161. From <https://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201711/14445/communism-agenda-history-castoriadis-munis-and-problem-breaking-tr>.

The first issue of a new revolutionary review called *Socialisme ou Barbarie* has just appeared in France.

In the sombre situation in which the workers' movement in France and the rest of the world finds itself today, a situation marked by a course towards war, in which the rare revolutionary groups – expressions of the life and state of consciousness of the proletarian class – who still survive thanks to a determined desire to act and a constant ideological effort, are becoming a little weaker each day; in a situation where the revolutionary press is reduced to a few small duplicated bulletins, the appearance of a new printed review, an “organ of criticism and revolutionary orientation” is an important event which every militant can only welcome and encourage.

Whatever the breadth of our disagreements with the positions of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and whatever the future evolution of this review, on the basis of the fundamental positions and general orientation expressed in this first issue, we must consider this group as undeniably proletarian and revolutionary. That is to say, we welcome its existence, and will follow with sympathy and interest its future activity and efforts. Since revolutionary sympathy is above all based on paying attention to political positions, we intend to examine the ideas put forward by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* without prejudice and with the greatest of care, to analyse them as they evolve, criticising what seems erroneous in them and in such cases countering them with our own views. We see this not with the aim of carrying out a vain polemic based on denigration – something which has become only too common among groups and which deeply repels us – but, however lively the discussion might be, as being exclusively geared towards the confrontation and clarification of positions.

Socialisme ou Barbarie is the organ of a tendency which has just broken with the Trotskyist party, the Chaulieu-Montal tendency. It is a political tendency known among the milieu of militants in France and we have spoken about it on several occasions, and again quite recently,¹ not in exactly tender terms. This perhaps demands a supplementary explanation on our part.

Examining the Trotskyist movement in France and noting that it once again, for the umpteenth time, finds itself in a state of crisis, we posed the question whether this crisis had a positive significance from the point of view of revolutionary

¹ *Internationalisme* 41, January 1949, in the article ‘Where are we?’.

formation. We replied with a categorical No, and for the following reason. Trotskyism, which was one of the proletarian reactions within the Communist International during the first years of its degeneration, never went beyond this position of being an opposition, despite its formal constitution into an organically separate party. By remaining attached to the Communist Parties – which it still sees as workers' parties – even after the triumph of Stalinism, Trotskyism itself functions as an appendage to Stalinism. It is linked ideologically to Stalinism and follows it around like a shadow. All the activity of Trotskyism over the last 15 years proves this. From 1932-33 where it supported the possibility of the victory of the proletarian revolution in Germany under Stalinist leadership, to its participation in the 1939-45 war, in the Resistance and the Liberation, via the Popular Front, anti-fascism and participation in the war in Spain, Trotskyism has merely walked in the footsteps of Stalinism. In the wake of the latter, Trotskyism has also contributed powerfully to introducing into the workers' movement habits and methods of organisation and forms of activity (bluff, intrigue, burrowing from within, insults and manoeuvres of all kinds) which are so many active factors in the corruption and destruction of any revolutionary activity. This doesn't mean that revolutionary workers who only have a little political education have not been drawn into its ranks. On the contrary, as an organisation, as a political milieu, Trotskyism, far from favouring the development of revolutionary thought and of the organisms (fractions and tendencies) which express it, is an organised milieu for undermining it. This is a general rule valid for any political organisation alien to the proletariat, and experience has demonstrated that it applies to Stalinism and Trotskyism. We have known Trotskyism over 15 years of perpetual crisis, through splits and unifications, followed by further splits and crises, but we don't know examples which have given rise to real, viable revolutionary tendencies. Trotskyism does not secrete within itself a revolutionary ferment. On the contrary, it annihilates it. The condition for the existence and development of a revolutionary ferment is to be outside the organisational and ideological framework of Trotskyism.

The constitution of the Chaulieu-Montal tendency within the Trotskyist organisation, and precisely after the latter had sunk itself up to its neck in the second imperialist war, the Resistance and national liberation, did not, with good reason, inspire much confidence towards it on our part. This tendency was formed on the basis of the theory of bureaucratic collectivism in the USSR and consequently rejected any defence of the latter. But what value could this position of non-defence of the USSR have when your practice is to co-habit in an organisation whose activity clearly and concretely resides in the defence of Russian state capitalism and participation in imperialist war? Not only did the Chaulieu-Montal tendency find its cohabitation in the organisation possible, it participated actively, and at all levels, in the activism typical of Trotskyism, based on bluff and mystification, in all its electoral, trade union and other campaigns. Furthermore, we could hardly avoid being unfavourably impressed by the behaviour of this tendency, made up of manoeuvres, combinations, dubious compromises, aimed more at seizing control of the leadership of the party than at developing the consciousness of its militants. The prolonged hesitations of the members of the tendency to leave the organisation – at the last congress, in summer 1948, they were still accepting being elected to the central committee – denotes both their political incoherence, their illusion in the possibility of re-dressing the Trotskyist organisation, and finally their total incomprehension of the political and organisational conditions indispensable to the elaboration of revolutionary thought and orientation.

The overall judgment we made of this tendency in recent issues of *Internationale*, however severe it might have been, was absolutely well-founded. We must however make a correction concerning its definitive character. The Chaulieu

tendency was not liquidated, as we presented it, but found the strength, albeit after a very long delay, to break with the Trotskyist organisation and form itself into an autonomous group. Despite the heavy weight of this heritage on the group, this fact represents a new element that opens the possibility of its later evolution. The future alone will tell us to what extent it constitutes a gain in the formation of a new revolutionary movement. But right now we must say to them that they won't be able to carry out this task unless they rid themselves completely and as quickly as possible of the scars they have inherited from Trotskyism and which can still be felt in the first issue of their review.

It's not our intention here to make a deep and detailed analysis of the positions of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. We will come back to this another time. Today we will limit ourselves to observing that, after reading their first issue, this is a group in evolution, and that its positions are anything but fixed. This should not be seen as a reproach, far from it. This group rather seems to be moving away from its fixed position about a third class, the bureaucracy, and from the idea of a dual historical antithesis to capitalism; either socialism or bureaucratic collectivism. This position, which was previously the only reason for its existence as a tendency, was a dead-end both at the level of theoretical research and of practical revolutionary activity. It's because it seems today to be abandoning, if only partially, this conception of a historical opposition between statism and capitalism, in favour of seeing statification as a tendency inherent in capitalism in the present period, that this group is managing to get a more correct appreciation of the present trade union movement and its necessary integration into the state apparatus.

We want to draw attention to a very interesting study by A. Carrier on the cartel of autonomous unions, in which through his pen the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* for the first time expresses "our position on the historically obsolete nature of trade unionism as a proletarian weapon against exploitation".

However, we are a bit surprised to learn, after such a clear declaration on the historically obsolete character of trade unionism, that this position does not lead *Socialisme ou Barbarie* to refuse to take part in any trade union life. The reason for this practical attitude, which is in contradiction with the whole analysis made of the trade union movement, is formulated thus: "we go where the workers are, not just because they are there, so to speak, physically, but because that's where they struggle, with more or less effectiveness, against all forms of exploitation". What's more, participation in the unions is justified by saying: "We are not uninterested in the question of demands. We are convinced that in all circumstances there are correct demand slogans which, without resolving the problem of exploitation, assure the defence of the elementary material interests of the class, a defence which has to be organised on a daily basis faced with the daily attacks of capitalism". And this after having, with the support of figures, demonstrated that "capitalism has reached the point where it can no longer give anything, where it can only take back what it has given. Not only is any reform impossible, but even the present level of poverty can't be maintained". From this point, the significance of the immediate programme has changed.

This whole study on "The cartel of united trade union action" is extremely interesting, but while it provides a valid analysis of trade unionism in the present period, it is also a very striking manifestation of the contradictory state of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. The objective analysis of the evolution of modern capitalism towards statification, both of the economy and of the economic organisations of the workers (an analysis which is that of the groups of the ultra-left, to which we belong) is in competition with the old traditional subjective attitude of participation and activity

in the trade union organisation, an attitude inherited from Trotskyism from which they have not fully disengaged.

A good part of this number of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is devoted to polemics with the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste. This is very understandable. Leaving a political organisation, where you have a whole past of militancy and conviction, doesn't take place without a kind of emotional crisis, and often involves personal recriminations, which is quite natural. But here we are dealing with a polemic and a polemical tone which is well out of proportion.

We are thinking of the article by Chaulieu "Useless Mouths", which is aimed at clearing a member of the group, Lefort, of the accusations made against him by *La Vérité*. We can well understand the strong indignation that can be provoked by this kind of accusation, full of hypocritical insinuations and malicious allusions. But Chaulieu doesn't manage to keep things at a certain level, and in his reply he indulges in a regrettable grossness and vulgarity. Wordplay around the name of Pierre Frank is really worthy of a naughty schoolboy and doesn't really have a place in a revolutionary publication. Once again we are in the presence of the decomposition which has been infecting the workers' movement for years. The precondition for the reconstitution of a new revolutionary movement is to free itself of this venomous tradition imported by Stalinism, and maintained, among others, by Trotskyism. We can never insist too much on this "moral" aspect, which is one of the foundation-stones of revolutionary work in the immediate and in the future. This is why we were so disagreeably impressed to find this malodorous polemic in the columns of the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. We should also point out that, caught up in the fires of polemic, Chaulieu and his friends have forgotten to reply to one of the key questions which gave rise to this polemic, i.e. whether or not it's possible to carry out research into problems of the revolutionary movement through any publication that offers you its columns.

In *Internationalisme* we have already looked at this question, and the conclusion we arrived at is in the negative. Today there is an anguishing problem of a lack of means of expression for revolutionary thought. Every thinking revolutionary militant has had this feeling of being stifled and feels the need to break out of the silence which has been imposed on them. But beyond the subjective aspect of the problem there is a political problem linked to the present situation. We can't find relief by depositing our thoughts anywhere: we have to make our thought an effective weapon of the proletarian class struggle. Have Lefort, Chaulieu and their friends asked themselves what is the result of collaborating with a literary and philosophical review like Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*?

This kind of collaboration will not only produce little more than 'revolutionary' verbiage, but it will also give credibility among militants to a review, an ideological current towards which the greatest political and ideological reserve is necessary. In this way, instead of clarifying things by distinguishing between different currents, you only end up increasing confusion. It shows a real lack of understanding of the conditions for revolutionary research to turn Sartre and his review – for whom the political application of his philosophy means support for the RDR² – into a place, a milieu, for discussion about the role played by Trotsky and Trotskyism in the degeneration of the Communist International. Revolutionary theoretical research can never be the topic of conversation in a salon, or provide a theory for left-leaning literary types. However pitiful the means of expression available to the revolutionary

² ICC note: Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire: a short-lived party formed by Sartre in 1947 along with various left social democrats and Trotskyists.

proletariat, it's only in this framework that you can work towards the elaboration of the theory of the class. Working on, improving, developing these means of expression is the only way for militants to make their thought and action effective. Trying to use means of expression that don't belong to the organisms of the class always denotes an intellectualist and petty bourgeois tendency. The fact that this problem is completely neglected in the polemic written by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* proves that it has not even grasped, let alone solved, the problem. We think that this too is very significant.

Before engaging in a critical examination of the positions defended by the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, we think that it's necessary to pause a moment at another point, which is also highly characteristic: the manner in which this group presents itself. It would be wrong to consider that this is something without any importance. The idea one has of oneself, and the appreciation one has of other groups, is intimately linked to the general conceptions one professes. It is often this aspect which is most revealing about the nature of a group. In every case it is an indispensable element which makes it immediately possible to grasp the underlying conceptions of a group.

Here are two extracts from the leading article of the first issue of the review, an article which is in some ways the credo or political platform of the group.

Talking about the present-day workers' movement, and having noted the complete alienation of the masses in anti-working class ideologies, the review writes:

“The only ones that seem to be keeping afloat in this universal deluge are weak organisations like the ‘4th International’, the anarchist federations, and a few so-called ‘ultra-left’ groups (Bordigists, Spartacists, council communists). Organisations which are weak, not because of their meagre numbers – which in itself means nothing, and is not a criterion – but above all because of their lack of ideological and political content. Linked much more to the past than to the anticipation of the future, these organisations already find themselves absolutely incapable of understanding the social development of the 20th century, and even less of orienting themselves positively in response to it”

And, having enumerated the weaknesses of Trotskyism and anarchism, the article continues a few lines later:

“Finally, the ‘ultra-left’ grouplets either passionately cultivate their sectarian deformations, like the Bordigists, sometimes going so far as to making the proletariat responsible for their own incapacity, or, like the council communists, content themselves with drawing up, on the basis of past experience, recipes for the ‘socialist’ kitchens of the future.... Despite their delirious pretensions, both the ‘4th International’ and the anarchists and the ultra-lefts are in truth nothing but historical memories, tiny scabs on the wounds of the class, doomed to disappear with the rise of the new skin being prepared in the underlying tissues” (p. 9).

So much for the other existing tendencies and groups. It thus becomes understandable that, after such a severe judgment, a condemnation without appeal of the others, you present yourself in these terms:

“By presenting ourselves today, through the means of this review, to the vanguard of manual and intellectual workers, we are the only ones

responding in a systematic way to the fundamental problems of the contemporary revolutionary movement; we think that we are the only ones taking up and continuing the marxist analysis of the modern economy, posing on a scientific basis the problem of the historical development of the workers' movement and its meaning, defining Stalinism and the 'workers' bureaucracy in general, and finally, posing the revolutionary perspective by taking into account the original elements created by our epoch ... We think that we represent the living continuation of marxism in the framework of contemporary society. In this sense we have no fear of being confused with all the editors of 'marxist' publications seeking 'clarification', all the men of good will, all the chatterers and gossips. If *we* pose problems, it's because *we* think that *we can resolve them*" (our underlining).

This is a language in which pretension and limitless self-flattery is only equalled by the ignorance shown about the revolutionary movement, its groups and tendencies, its work and its theoretical struggles over the last 30 years. Ignorance explains a lot, but it is not a justification and still less does it entitle you to claim a glorious medal for yourself. What medal authorises the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group to speak so dismissively of the recent past of the revolutionary movement, its internal struggles, and its groups, whose only fault is to have posed some ten or twenty years in advance the problems which *SouB* in its ignorance claims to have discovered today?

The fact of having come into political life very recently during the course of the war, and even more the fact that it has come from the politically corrupted organisation of Trotskyism, in whose swamp it was floundering up till 1949, should not be invoked as a certificate of honour, as a guarantee of political maturity. The arrogant tone here bears witness to the evident ignorance of this group, which has not yet sufficiently freed itself from ways of thinking and discussing that derive from Trotskyism. If it looked at things in a different way, it would be seen quite easily that the ideas it announces today, and which it considers to be its original work, are for the most part a more or less happy reproduction of the ideas put forward by the left currents of the Third International (the Russian Workers' Opposition, the Spartacists in Germany, the Council Communists in Holland, the Communist Left of Italy) over the course of the past 25 years.

If, instead of contenting itself with a few bits of knowledge and even of hearsay, the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group had taken the trouble to make a deeper study of the many, though hard-to-find, documents of these left currents, it might perhaps have lost its pretensions to originality, but it would assuredly have gained in depth.