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Alasdair MacIntyre and Trotskyism

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Alasdair MacIntyre began his literary career in 1953 with *Marxism: An Interpretation.* According to his own account, in that book he attempted to be faithful to both his Christian and his Marxist beliefs (MacIntyre 1995d). Over the course of the 1960s he abandoned both (MacIntyre 2008k, 180). In 1971 he introduced a collection of his essays by rejecting these and, indeed, all other attempts to illuminate the human condition (MacIntyre 1971b, viii). Since then, MacIntyre has of course re-embraced Christianity, although that of the Catholic Church rather than the Anglicanism to which he originally adhered. It seems unlikely, at this stage, that he will undertake a similar reconciliation with Marxism.

Nevertheless, as MacIntyre has frequently reminded his readers, most recently in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue* (2007), his rejection of Marxism as a whole does not entail a rejection of every insight that it has to offer. MacIntyre's current audience tends to be uninterested in his Marxism and consequently remains in ignorance not only of his early Marxist work but also of the context in which it was written. MacIntyre not only wrote from a Marxist perspective but also belonged to a number of Marxist organisations, which, to differing degrees, made political demands on their members from which intellectu-

als were not excluded. Even the most insightful of MacIntyre's admirers tend to treat the subject of these political affiliations as an occasion for mild amusement (Knight 1998, 2). By contrast with this dismissive perspective, during the period from 1953 to 1968 he seems to have treated membership of some party or group as a necessary expression of his political beliefs, no matter how inadequate the organisations in question may ultimately have been. An introductory note to an early piece in *International Socialism,* evidently written by MacIntyre himself, cheerfully recounts his 'experience of the Communist Party, the Socialist Labour League, the New Left and the Labour Party' and reports his (unfortunately over-optimistic) belief 'that if none of these can disillusion one with socialism, then nothing can' (Blackledge and Davidson 2008, xxxv). In other words, his was not the type of academic Marxism that became depressingly familiar after 1968, in which theoretical postures were adopted, according to the dictates of intellectual fashion, by scholars without the means or often even the desire to intervene in the world. On the contrary, at some level MacIntyre embraced what a classic Marxist cliché calls 'the unity of theory and practice', particularly in the Socialist Labour League (SLL) and International Socialism (IS).

These were Trotskyist organisations; and readers of *After Virtue* will recall that Trotsky first features there as one of MacIntyre's 'exemplars of the virtues', along with fellow-Marxists Frederick Engels and Eleanor Marx, but also with St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Teresa (MacIntyre 1985a, 199). When MacIntyre reintroduces him in the final chapter, it is to use Trotsky's intellectual integrity to illustrate the inability of Marxism to help achieve human liberation. MacIntyre clearly still admires Trotsky as an individual for his moral qualities and literary abilities, but to what extent was he ever a 'Trotskyist'? During the 1930s, after all, an entire generation of leading intellectuals and artists in the United States strongly identified with Trotsky without, in most cases, ever fully understanding his politics (Wald 1987, 91–97; N. Davidson 2004, 110–11). One possible interpretation of this phase in MacIntyre's career, therefore, is that it was a late recurrence, under British conditions, of this type of attitude. This was certainly the conclusion drawn by some of his erstwhile comrades in the SLL (Baker 1962, 68). I will argue, however, that it would be wrong to see MacIntyre simply as the British equivalent of

James Burnham (who incidentally began his literary career as a neo-Thomist), albeit one with a rather more intellectually reputable post-Marxist output. I want to suggest instead that MacIntyre's attempt to critically engage with Trotsky and Trotskyism, if ultimately a failure, was nevertheless a productive failure from which there is still much to be learned by those who continue to stand in that tradition.

MacIntyre's Early Marxism

One characteristic of *Marxism: An Interpretation* is the way it accepts the dominant view of the Marxist tradition, in which there is an unbroken succession from Marx and Engels to Lenin and from Lenin to Stalin. This was almost universally accepted, not only by both sides of the Cold War (although liberals and Stalinists ascribed different and opposing values to the lineage), but also by any surviving anarchists who took neither side. Only Trotskyists continued to insist on the existence of what Trotsky himself had called 'a whole river of blood' separating Lenin and the Bolsheviks from Stalinism (Trotsky 1978, 423). Insofar as there was a commonly held alternative to the continuity thesis on the political left, it placed a break after Marx, so that Lenin and the Bolsheviks bore sole responsibility for initiating the descent into totalitarianism. Ironically, Trotsky's earlier writings, together with those of Rosa Luxemburg, were frequently quoted, in a necessarily decontextualised manner, as prophetic warnings about the likely outcome of Lenin's organisational innovations (Trotsky n.d., 77; Luxemburg 1970, 114–22). According to this tradition, the former succumbed to the Leninist virus and the latter heroically, if tragically, maintained her faith in the democratic role of the working class until the end (see, e.g., Borkenau 1962, 12–13, 39–56, 87–89). And, sure enough, the sole reference to Trotsky in *Marxism: An Interpretation* invokes the passage from *Our Political Tasks* in which he allegedly foresees the emergent dictatorship of the party over the class (MacIntyre 1953, 103).

Nonetheless, in most other respects MacIntyre's work is not a conventional account. Where he differed from most contemporaries on either side of the Cold War was his view that both the positive and the negative aspects of Marxism arose from within Marx's own work. In

particular, as befits his own Christian orientation at this time, he saw
the problem as arising in the Marx's shift from prophecy to theory, or
more precisely, from prophesy to theoretical prediction. In this respect
MacIntyre takes up entirely the opposite position to that later developed
by Louis Althusser, in whose work an 'epistemological break' around
1845 marks the passage from mere ideology to science (Althusser 2005,
31–38). For MacIntyre the problem is precisely that Marx after 1845 is
attempting to fuse science with a fundamentally religious attribute, with
the result that both are diminished: 'Thus in Marx's later thinking, and in
Marxism, economic theory is treated prophetically; and that theory can-
not be treated prophetically without becoming bad theory is something
that Marxism can teach us at the point where it passes from prophecy
to science' (MacIntyre 1953, 91).

MacIntyre was prepared to praise Marx as an individual thinker
(MacIntyre 1956, 266). But as late as 1956 he was still dismissing all con-
temporary Marxist theory as largely 'fossilised' (MacIntyre 2008a, 25).
What did MacIntyre consider 'Marxism' to be at this point? Although he
was clearly aware of several key debates within the Marxist tradition—
the debates between Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky on socialist mo-
rality and those between Georgi Plekhanov and Lenin on the nature of
the revolutionary party are both mentioned—he did not distinguish
between any tendencies or traditions, still less claim that one of these
might be more authentically Marxist than another. There was nothing
unusual in his lack of engagement with Trotsky. The fact that Trotskyism
later became the dominant tendency on the British far left has tended
to obscure the fact that, before 1956, most people in the labour move-
ment had never read anything by Trotsky or personally encountered
any of his followers (N. Davidson 2004, 109–10). Indeed, even today it
is not unknown for prominent left-wing intellectuals to admit to igno-
rance of his work (Hardt 2003, 135). Only a few years later, MacIntyre
himself acidly suggested in an open letter to a Gaitskellite that 'you are
perhaps slightly disappointed to find that those who denounced Trot-
skyism among your friends had never actually read Trotsky' (MacIntyre
2008m, 215).

The events of 1956 meant that the encounter with Trotsky's thought
could no longer be averted. MacIntyre did not respond immediately to
Khrushchev's revelations, the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution,

or the thwarted reforms in Poland, but as someone involved in the emer-
gent New Left he would have quickly have become aware that Trotsky-
ists offered an explanation for the realities of Stalinism which did not
simply rely on abstract moral categories. MacIntyre made his first refer-
ence to Trotsky or Trotskyism in 1958, in one of his first articles for the
socialist press, but it was not complementary. In a review of Raya Duna-
yevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* for the journal *Universities and Left
Review,* he wrote of the author, 'She has been repelled by the arid, semi-
nary text-book Marxism of the Stalinists and the Trotskyists (who share
all the dogmatism of the Stalinists without any of their achievements)'
(MacIntyre 2008b, 43). Yet, less than a year later, MacIntyre had joined
one group of Trotskyist 'dogmatists', the newly formed SLL. And, as one
member recalls, 'He was at first full of enthusiasm; he spoke at meetings,
sold papers, wrote articles and pamphlets' (Baker 1962, 65, 68). Why had
he taken this apparently unexpected step?

MacIntyre as an Orthodox Trotskyist

MacIntyre began his career as a Trotskyist by adhering to the most 'or-
thodox' position then available. His initial move was assisted by his po-
sition on the nature of the USSR and the other Stalinist regimes, namely,
that they represented more advanced forms of society than those of the
capitalist West — not yet socialist, of course, but at least in the process
of transition to socialism. He had criticised Dunayevskaya's belief that
society had entered 'the age of state capitalism, a form of economy com-
mon to both U.S.A. and U.S.S.R', because it involved 'a fantastic under-
valuation of socialist achievement in the Soviet Union' (MacIntyre 2008b,
43). In a sense, then, his initial organisational affiliation to the SLL was
unsurprising, since this was precisely the position they also held, albeit
in the special terminology of the Trotskyist movement (the USSR was a
'degenerated worker's state', the later Stalinist countries were 'deformed
worker's states'). His first published work after joining the organisation
was a review of Herbert Marcuse, in which he praised the author for re-
jecting alternative interpretations, such as state capitalism (MacIntyre
2008c, 78).

However, there were other reasons why the SLL might have seemed attractive to a young militant seeking an organisational framework. Given the sectarian dementia for which the SLL (and its later incarnation as the Worker's Revolutionary Party) became infamous on the British left, it is important to understand that it initially presented itself as an open organisation, keen to encourage debate and facilitate the exchange of views in SLL publications such as the weekly *Newsletter* and the monthly *Labour Review,* both of which were launched in 1957 (Hallas 1969, 30; Ratner 1994, 207). This stance obviously held attractions for those who had found the regime in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) intolerable. Furthermore, the SLL was able to provide an explanation for the degeneration of the CPGB, which—unlike the explanations on offer from the New Left—did not see the problem as lying with the Original Sin of democratic centralism.

Much of what MacIntyre wrote for the SLL was focused on the question of revolutionary organisation. In a talk delivered—incredible as it now seems—on the BBC Third Programme and later reproduced in *The Listener,* he identified the key factors behind the decline of the CPGB as the 'rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union' and 'the defeat of the British working-class in the General Strike' (MacIntyre 2008f, 116–17). This is possibly the most 'orthodox' statement of his career, although there is little in it with which members of any other Trotskyist grouping would disagree. But, moving from historical analysis to the contemporary scene, it is clear that MacIntyre was conscious of the need to balance the ability to reach out to the existing audience for socialist politics— whether or not they possessed the correct proletarian credentials—with the need for a revolutionary organisation. In his discussion of the New Left, for example, he objected to the dismissive tone adopted by SLL theoretician Cliff Slaughter, but MacIntyre saw his more positive approach as a way of winning activists in the New Left to a more fully revolutionary politics and party commitment, not perpetuating its amorphous approach to organisation (MacIntyre 2008e).

The internal SLL debate over the nature of revolutionary organisation reached its highest level in an essay by MacIntyre, 'Freedom and Revolution', published the following year. In part, this seems to have been an attempt to defend the theory of the revolutionary party embodied in

the SLL against those who — in response to its increasingly undemoc-
ratic practice — had either left or been expelled from it. But it was also
an attempt to think through his own perspective, which was beginning
to diverge markedly from that of his comrades. MacIntyre argues from
first principles, starting with the position of people in capitalist society,
not with quotations from Lenin and Trotsky (although the discussion of
ideology in 'What Is to Be Done?' forms a ghostly backdrop throughout).
Indeed, the only thinkers he mentions are Hegel and Marx. He begins his
case for a revolutionary party with the apparently paradoxical notion
that such a party is essential for the realisation of human freedom — not
the usual starting point in Leninist or Trotskyist discussions: 'To assert
oneself at the expense of the organisation in order to be free is to miss
the fact that only within some organisational form can human freedom
be embodied' (2008g, 129). But the role of the vanguard party is not it-
self to achieve freedom, 'but to moving the working class to build it'. In
order to 'withstand all the pressures of other classes and to act effectively
against the ruling class', it has to have two characteristics (2008g, 132).

The first, the need for constant self-education, is relatively unconten-
tious. But the second, which returns to the paradox of vanguardism and
freedom, is more interesting. MacIntyre begins conventionally enough,
noting that 'one can only preserve oneself from alien class pressures in a
vanguard party by maintaining discipline. Those who do not act closely
together, who have no overall strategy for changing society, will have nei-
ther need for nor understanding of discipline' (2008g, 133). Appeals for
'discipline' by themselves were unlikely to win over members of the New
Left, who were only too conscious of how this strategy had been used by
Stalinist parties to suppress discussion, but their alternative tended to
emphasise personal choice. MacIntyre was able to show that there was an
organisational alternative to both bureaucratic centralism and liberal
individualism:

> Party discipline is essentially not something negative, but some-
> thing positive. It frees party members for activity by ensuring that
> they have specific tasks, duties and rights. This is why all the consti-
> tutional apparatus is necessary. Nonetheless there are many socialists
> who feel that any form of party discipline is an alien and constraining

force which they ought to resist in the name of freedom. The error here arises from the illusion that one can as an isolated individual escape from the moulding and the subtle enslavements of the status quo. Behind this there lies the illusion that one can be an isolated individual. Whether we like it or not every one of us inescapably plays a social role, and a social role which is determined for us by the workings of bourgeois society. Or rather this is inescapable so long as we remain unaware of what is happening to us. As our awareness and understanding increase we become able to change the part we play. (MacIntyre 2008g, 132–33)

The knowledge required to identify our social role is not, however, a personal but a collective possession. 'So the individual who tries most to live as an individual, to have a mind entirely of his own, will in fact make himself more and more likely to become in his thinking a passive reflection of the socially dominant ideas; while the individual who recognises his dependence on others has taken a path which can lead to an authentic independence of mind' (MacIntyre 2008g, 133).

Whether the SLL was the type of party that MacIntyre advocated was less clear. The leadership responded obliquely with an article by Cliff Slaughter, 'What Is Revolutionary Leadership?', not criticising MacIntyre by name, but identifying what Slaughter evidently saw as an inadequate conception of the revolutionary party (Slaughter 1960, 103). Slaughter's response was itself a serious contribution, which brought into the debate arguments not only from Lenin but from the early Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, both of whom were virtually unknown in the English-speaking world at this time. Lukács in particular was to be important in MacIntyre's development, although there is no evidence that he had read Lukács before this point. Nevertheless, Slaughter's essay also contained warning signs of the SLL's future development, notably in his insistence on the need to raise 'discipline and centralised authority . . . to an unprecedented degree' (Slaughter 1960, 107, 111).

In the course of an earlier debate in *The Listener,* MacIntyre had written that 'whether the SLL is or is not democratic or Marxist will be very clearly manifested as time goes on. I myself have faced no limitation on intellectual activity of any kind in the SLL' (MacIntyre 1960, 500).

Ironically, within months of writing these lines, MacIntyre was ex-
pelled from the SLL, along with a number of other prominent activists
who refused to act as mere puppets of the leadership. In a letter to SLL
leader Gerry Healy, MacIntyre observed that it was clearly impossible
for a minority to exist within the organisation because of his personal
dominance and the fact that he effectively owned it as private property,
since the assets were in his name. His conclusion, however, was not that
these problems stemmed solely from Healy's personal malevolence—real
though that undoubtedly was—but because of the small size of the Trot-
skyist organisations, which allowed individuals to play this role (Calla-
ghan 1984, 78). Nevertheless, he quickly joined another even smaller or-
ganisation, albeit one with—as Knight would have it—a 'less dogmatic'
attitude to Trotskyism. Of his attitude towards Trotsky himself, however,
there was no ambiguity. In the conclusion to 'Breaking the Chains of Rea-
son', an essay written while he was still in the SLL but published only after
his departure, MacIntyre concluded with an incandescent passage estab-
lishing his admiration for Trotsky as a model for radical intellectuals:

> Two images have been with me throughout the writing of this essay.
> Between them they seem to show the alternative paths for the intel-
> lectual. The one is of J. M. Keynes, the other of Leon Trotsky. Both
> were obviously men of attractive personality and great natural gifts.
> The one the intellectual guardian of the established order, providing
> new policies and theories of manipulation to keep society in what
> he took to be economic trim, and making a personal fortune in the
> process. The other, outcast as a revolutionary from Russia both under
> the Tsar and under Stalin, providing throughout his life a defence
> of human activity, of the powers of conscious and rational human
> effort. I think of them at the end, Keynes with his peerage, Trotsky
> with an icepick in his skull. These are the twin lives between which
> intellectual choice in our society lies. (MacIntyre 2008h, 166)

Having rejected Trotskyist orthodoxy, MacIntyre had two organisa-
tional choices if he wanted to remain an active revolutionary. One was
International Socialism (formerly the Socialist Review Group) which had
been formed out of a much earlier split—in fact, a series of expulsions—

from the last unified British Trotskyist organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Party, back in 1950. The central position of the IS, elaborated by the group's founder Tony Cliff in 1948 on the basis of his reading of the Marxist classics, was the very view of Stalinist states that MacIntyre had earlier rejected, namely, that they represented forms of state capitalism. The other was the post-Leninist, post-Trotskyist, and ultimately post-Marxist organisation established by other former SLL members, initially called Socialism Reaffirmed, then (from 1961) Solidarity. This group also rejected the view that the Stalinist regimes were in any sense socialist, but were far less specific than the IS in giving them a positive characterisation, referring to them instead as examples of 'bureaucratic society'. Another difference was important for MacIntyre's later theoretical and political development. Whereas for the IS, the postwar boom was underpinned by the arms economy, to Cliff and the other major IS theoretician, Mike Kidron, this boom did not lead to permanent stabilisation but rather would ultimately produce its own contradictions. Solidarity, on the other hand, drawing on the work of the one-time Greek Trotskyist known at the time as Paul Cardan (i.e., Cornelius Castoriadis), argued that capitalism had definitively overcome its tendency to economic crisis (compare Kidron 1970, ch. 3, with Castoriadis 1988, 233–57). In terms of how these organisations understood their relationship to the working class, however, there appeared to be far fewer differences, as can be seen by comparing the statements of their respective leading thinkers (Brinton 2004, 19; Cliff 2001b, 129). Cliff continued to talk about leadership, a notion which Maurice Brinton consciously avoids, but both groups had clearly distanced themselves from the kind of bureaucratic machine-Leninism practiced by orthodox Trotskyist organisations such as the SLL. Solidarity and IS coexisted in a relatively fraternal manner, and the early issues of *International Socialism* contained material by prominent Solidarity members, including Brinton (under the name of Martin Grainger) and Bob Pennington. It also published material by both Cardan and other members of his group, Socialisme au Barbarie, including the later prophet of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard (Cardan 1961; Lyotard 1963).

What was the relationship of IS to Trotskyism at this time? In 1965 the American author George Thayer reported an interview with Kidron:

'He claims that his group is not Trotskyist but Trotskyist-derived, point-
ing out that Socialism is his first concern and that his conclusions may
only incidentally incorporate the thoughts and conclusions of Trotsky.
He adds that he welcomes all Socialist thought — from Marx, Lenin, E V
Debs, or anyone else — if it can be of assistance to him' (Thayer 1965, 142).

As a one-time member of the Fourth International, Cliff identified
more closely with Trotsky and the classical Marxist tradition he had done
so much to preserve. There is no reason, however, to think that Cliff was
not being perfectly honest in his 1959 assessment of the best model for
a revolutionary party: 'For Marxists in advanced industrial countries,
Lenin's original position can serve much less as a guide than Rosa Lux-
emburg's, notwithstanding her over-statements on the question of spon-
taneity' (Cliff 2001a, 113).[1] MacIntyre, therefore, would have regarded
himself as having joined a group which had developed out of Trotskyism,
while rejecting some of Trotsky's specific theoretical and organisational
conclusions.

MacIntyre's Heterodox Trotskyism

The most complete statement of MacIntyre's attitude towards Trotsky
and Trotskyism during this period was given in his review of the final
volume of Isaac Deutscher's biography, *The Prophet Outcast* (1963). In
this essay he argued that Trotsky never succumbed to the theoretical con-
servatism that later overtook most of his followers: 'Throughout his life
Trotsky was prepared to reformulate Marxism. The theory of permanent
revolution bears striking witness to this' (MacIntyre 1971d, 58). Conse-
quently, it was entirely in keeping with Trotsky's own theoretical bold-
ness to seek to understand the limitations of his positions, where neces-

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1. Cliff's subsequent revision of this and another passage in the 1969 edi-
tion of *Rosa Luxemburg* was the result of his reconsideration of the nature of the
revolutionary party in the aftermath of the French events of May 1968. The ver-
sion in Cliff's *Selected Works* contains both original and revised passages. See
Cliff 2001a, 113. For the impact of the May events on his thought, see Birchall
and Cliff 2001, 209–13, and Cliff 2000, 98–104.

sary, and to move beyond them. MacIntyre now accepted Cliff's version of the theory of state capitalism as an attempt to do this and raised the possibility that Trotsky himself might have come to share this view, had he been faced with the evidence that private capitalism and socialism were not the only available alternatives; there was also 'the collective class rule of the bureaucracy'.

> For the Trotsky of the 1930s, as for Marx, socialism can be made only by the workers and not for them. It is in part because of this that Trotsky, had he lived, would have had to treat his predictions about the aftermath of the Second World War as falsified. He could not but have concluded from his own premises that Russia was in no sense a workers' state, but rather a grave of socialism. . . . He could never have accepted Deutscher's analysis, which has only one thing in common with his own: the use of nationalised property as a criterion for socialism. (MacIntyre 1971d, 55, 57)

The failure of more orthodox Trotskyists to make comparable theoretical reconsiderations condemned them to sterility. Consequently, his attitude towards these parties in some senses reverted to an earlier dismissiveness:

> So-called Trotskyism has always been among the most trivial of movements. It transformed into abstract dogma what Trotsky thought in concrete terms at one moment in his life, and canonised this. It is inexplicable in purely political dimensions, but the history of the more eccentric religious sects provides revealing parallels. The genuine Trotskyism of [Alfred] Rosmer or Natalya [Sedova] must have at most a few hundred adherents in the entire world. (MacIntyre 1971d, 59)

It is perhaps worth noting that, since MacIntyre was still active in IS at this time, he presumably did not regard himself as belonging to political equivalent of a 'religious sect'. But, when all due recognition is granted to Trotsky's intellectual achievements, was there some connection between the chronic irrelevance of Trotskyist organisations and his own thought? MacIntyre hinted at an answer in a review of Trotsky's *Literature*

and Revolution, in which he wrote that Trotsky's literary criticism revealed the 'unity of greatness and weakness' in his thought: 'The greatness lies in the grasp of actual social connections. . . . The weakness comes out in the substitution of an *a priori* scheme of things for the actual complex reality whenever he comes to a point made difficult by his own theory' (MacIntyre 1962b, 33). In another context MacIntyre gave a specific example of this weakness:

> When, in the early 1930s, Trotsky was confronted with the facts of this growth [in working-class standards of living] by the Marxist economist Fritz Sternberg he remarked that he had no time recently to study the statistics; that on the truth or falsity of the statements involved much else that he was committed to depended he does not seem to have noticed. Nor was this attitude restricted to Trotsky, whom I select here as the most honest, perceptive and intelligent of post-1939 Marxists. (MacIntyre 1968, 90–91)

This is less than fair to Trotsky, who wrote (in a series of notes not intended for publication), 'The dialectic does not liberate the investigator from painstaking study of the facts, quite the contrary; it requires it' (Trotsky 1986, 92). And this scrupulousness with 'the facts' is attested to, for example, by his handling of source material in *The History of the Russian Revolution.* What is of interest here is less the accuracy of MacIntyre's judgment than the source he identifies of Trotsky's theoretical weakness: 'Trotsky is as helpless as anyone else imprisoned in the categories of Leninism' (MacIntyre 1962b, 33). As this suggests, MacIntyre takes a far more ambivalent position towards Lenin than towards Trotsky. He noted that Wright Mills regarded himself as a Leninist without being a Marxist (MacIntyre 2008n, 244). What would a non-Marxist Leninism involve? In a discussion during which he accused Sartre of effectively holding this position, he accused him of lacking Lenin's 'practical realism' (MacIntyre 2008l, 206). But is that all Leninism is? The core of Marxism is summed up in the phrase Marx wrote into the Provisional Rules of the International Working Men's Association: 'That the emancipation of the working-class must be conquered by the working-class themselves' (Marx 1974, 82). From this perspective, the problem with Sartre (and Wright Mills) is more that the working class has no inde-

pendent role to play in the revolution, and consequently will simply end up exchanging one set of masters for another. A non-Marxist Leninism would therefore be the elitist, conspiratorial affair that Liberals and Anarchists always accused actually existing Leninism of being.

This highlights the ambiguity in MacIntyre's position. In certain places he implies that the charge of elitism falsely identifies Lenin's politics with those of Stalin, whereas he instead links Trotsky and Lenin together as proponents of socialism from below: 'Trotsky's emphasis that socialism can only be built consciously and Lenin's that it cannot be built by a minority, a party, together entail that a pre-condition of socialism is a mass socialist consciousness' (MacIntyre 2008j, 189). In other places, however, he suggests that Lenin's politics were genuinely elitist, in other words, non-Marxist, and he invokes other Marxists to remedy this apparent defect in Lenin's thought. In particular, he claims that James Connolly had been truer to Marx's notion of political movement of the working class arising in the 'transition . . . from the trade union movement concerned with purely isolated economic issues to the trade union movement concerned with the political issue of class power' (MacIntyre 2008i, 172–73). Here MacIntyre retreats from his own earlier insights in 'Freedom and Revolution'. The party cannot be an expression of the class because the class itself is uneven in terms of consciousness; instead, it is a political selection of individuals to develop and maintain class consciousness (Harman 1968–69).[2] A trade union cannot fulfill the function of a party precisely because it has to include all eligible workers regardless of

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2. The essay by Harman referenced here was the most significant advance in the discussion of the revolutionary party since the MacIntyre/Slaughter contributions eight years earlier. Harman was the first British Marxist since Slaughter to make serious use of Gramsci in this context, and it is regrettable that MacIntyre does not seem to have encountered his work. This is particularly frustrating since, in several articles written during his membership in IS, MacIntyre raises themes that were to later to be popularised with the partial translation into English of the *Prison Notebooks,* notably that of contradictory consciousness. 'All sorts of facts may limit social consciousness', wrote MacIntyre in 1963; 'But false consciousness is essentially a matter of partial and limited insight rather than of simple mistake' (MacIntyre 2008o, 252–53). Compare Gramsci 1971, 333.

their politics. Consequently, unions can be more or less militant in their behaviour, more or less progressive in their policies, but inevitably they must embody rather than overcome unevenness. Since MacIntyre does not accuse Trotsky himself of elitism, this reading suggests that the sole problem of Trotskyism was its attempt to maintain organisational forms that perpetuated bureaucratic elitism. Whatever there is to be said for this, it is quite clear that, from the point at which Trotsky became convinced of Bolshevism in 1917, he never wavered in his insistence that a revolutionary party was required for the success of the socialist revolution.[3] There may be circumstances in which building the party may not be immediately feasible, there may be examples where attempts to build revolutionary parties reproduce Stalinist rather than Leninist norms, but it would be difficult for anyone claiming fidelity to Trotsky's thought to rule out building a vanguard party as a matter of principle. Paraphrasing his own judgment on Wright Mills and Sartre, we might therefore say that MacIntyre regarded himself as a (idiosyncratic) Trotskyist without being a Leninist — a position whose coherence Trotsky would have questioned.

The problem that MacIntyre thought Lenin and Trotsky had in common was what he came to describe as their voluntarism. This position was explicable, he acknowledged, as a response to the Mensheviks' 'mechanical view of social development', but it did not provide a coherent alternative since it did not take account of 'the objective limitations of possibility'. So, Menshevik automatism led to Bolshevik voluntarism; Stalinism's mechanistic philosophy to Trotskyism's voluntaristic talk of crises of leadership; and even the orthodoxy of the British Communist Party to the voluntarism of the New Left (MacIntyre 2008o, 255). In some circumstances it is, of course, correct to say that the 'possible alternatives' are limited. Earlier in the same essay MacIntyre had discussed these in general terms: 'We may become conscious of the laws which govern our behaviour and yet be unable to change it; for there may be no alternative to behaving in the way that we do. Or again there may be alternatives, but not ones that enough of us would prefer to the present social system' (MacIntyre 2008o, 252). And later he pointed to a specific example from the degeneration of the Russian Revolution: 'The key lies in

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3. Compare Trotsky 1975, 252, with Trotsky 1973, 215.

the nexus between Stalin's economic policies—which were directed to-
ward problems for which, as Trotsky never fully understood, there were
no *socialist* solutions—and the political need for purges created by the
failure to acknowledge that socialist theory had perforce been left be-
hind when these policies were adopted' (MacIntyre 1971c, 50).

By contrast, in his earlier writings MacIntyre had emphasised pre-
cisely how the subjective intervention of revolutionaries helped shape
what would, in due course, become a new set of objective conditions:

> The Marxist standpoint starts from the view that this question is not
> a question about a system outside us, but about a system of which
> we are a part. What happens to it is not a matter of natural growth
> or mechanical change which we cannot affect. We do not have to sit
> and wait for the right objective conditions for revolutionary action.
> Unless we act now such conditions will never arise. (MacIntyre
> 2008d, 102)

What he is proposing here is far from a 'voluntarist' belief that any set
of obstacles can be overcome by an act of will. The existence of circum-
stances in which alternatives are restricted or even nonexistent does not
mean that they apply in every case. Furthermore, in his critique of Deut-
scher, MacIntyre gave perhaps the greatest example of the opposite situ-
ation in twentieth-century history, involving Lenin and Trotsky! (MacIn-
tyre 1971d, 59).

Reading MacIntyre's work during this period can produce a dizzy-
ing effect, as the author moves back and forth between one assessment
and other, often in quick succession, suggesting at the very least some un-
certainty on his part as to his own conclusions. What is interesting about
MacIntyre's positive reading of an 'activist' reading of history, in the pas-
sage quoted above, is how closely it echoes some of the positions taken by
Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and *Lenin: A Study in the Unity
of His Thought.* MacIntyre was soon to revisit the theme, decisively, in
the terms set out by Lukacs and his pupil, Lucien Goldmann.[4]

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4. *International Socialism* reprinted several works by Lukács and Gold-
mann in the 1960s.

In Goldmann's outstanding study of Pascal and Racine, *The Hidden God* (1964), he wrote:

Marxist faith is faith in the future which men make for themselves in and through history. Or more accurately, in the future that we must make for ourselves by what we do, so that this faith becomes a 'wager' which we make that our actions will, in fact, be successful. The transcendental element present in this faith is not supernatural and does not take us outside or beyond history; it merely takes us beyond the individual. (Goldmann 1964, 90)

MacIntyre expanded on the parallel drawn by Goldmann between 'Pascal's wager' and the Marxist understanding of the relationship between theoretical understanding and action in the world:

If tragic thought and dialectical thought differ in . . . crucial respects, they also resemble each other at key points. Both know that one cannot first understand the world and only then act in it. How one understands the world will depend in part on the decision implicit in one's already taken actions. The wager of action is unavoidable. . . . Not eternity but the future provides a context which gives meaning to individual parts in the present. The future which does this is as yet unmade; we wager on it not as spectators, but as actors pledged to bring it into being. (MacIntyre 1971f, 81, 84–85)[5]

Other Marxists, unknown to MacIntyre, had framed the issue in similar terms, notably Gramsci and Walter Benjamin (Gramsci 1971, 438; Löwy 2005, 4, 114, 137). But it is important to understand that when MacIntyre invokes the notion of tragedy in this context, he means this quite literally, for what seems to be entering his work at this point is a view

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5. Compare the famous aphorism by MacIntyre's hero James Connolly—a favourite of Cliff's, incidentally—which makes precisely this point: 'For the only true prophets are they who carve out the future which they announce' (Connolly 1987, 263).

that the basis of the Marxist wager — the revolutionary capacity of the working class — might have been mistaken. Consequently, Marxists tended to invest the actual working class with characteristics it does not possess, at least to the extent that would allow the revolutionary project to be realised. MacIntyre sees this as a major theoretical reason for Lukács's collapse into Stalinism (MacIntyre 1971g). But why were the working class — whose self activity MacIntyre had hailed only a few years before — now deemed to be incapable of successful revolution?

Goodbye to All That

The emergent differences between MacIntyre and his comrades surfaced in a public meeting on June 5, 1965, organised by Solidarity. Ostensibly it was a debate between MacIntyre and Cardan on the latter's book, *Modern Capitalism and Revolution.* Solidarity had asked MacIntyre to represent the IS position without formally approaching the other organisation. The outcome of the debate seems to have surprised everyone, as the account of the meeting in Solidarity's own journal stated: 'The two main speakers, although approaching the problem from different angles, did not disagree on fundamentals. The similarity of many of their views led one comrade, who had come "expecting a debate", to deplore the presence of "two Cardans"' ('Cardan Debate' 1965, 22). The comrade was Kidron, whose contribution was actually one of the more measured from IS contributors. In his response to the discussion, MacIntyre detected 'a very bad tone in what Kidron and Cliff had said . . . because it was translated from the Russian, about the year 1905': 'The crucial difference between those who managed capitalism in the 19th century and those who manage it today was that the latter had achieved a degree of consciousness as to what they were doing' ('Cardan Debate' 1965, 23).

It was clear from this discussion that MacIntyre's own position was far closer to that of Solidarity and Socialisme au Barbarie than it was to the organisation to which he ostensibly belonged, but with one crucial difference: whereas Brinton and Cardan still maintained that the working class was a revolutionary force, this position was precisely what MacIntyre

was increasingly coming to reject. His starting point was Lukács's claim that 'historical materialism both can and must be applied to itself' (Lukács 1971). Cardan made similar claims in a series of articles first published between 1961 and 1964, which were gradually translated by Solidarity throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Cardan 1971; Castoriadis 1987). But for Cardan, the self-investigation called for by Lukács would reveal that Marxism had to be abandoned, not least because of the ways in which it treats as permanent aspects of human society those which are particular to capitalism. MacIntyre appeared to converge on this version of the argument as the 1960s drew to a close:

> It would be inconsistent with Marxism itself to view Marxism in any other way: in particular, what we cannot do is judge and understand Marxist theory as it has really existed with all its vicissitudes in the light of some ideal version of Marxism. It follows that by the present time to be faithful to Marxism we have to cease to be Marxists; and whoever now remains a Marxist has thereby discarded Marxism .(MacIntyre 1970, 61)

The failure of Marxism was that it had accepted the division of the economic, political, and social that was characteristic of capitalism and was reproduced in the categories of liberal theory. This failure led most Marxists to misunderstand how a class could arise in Russia which had apparently abolished capitalist property relations and which used Marxist vocabulary to cover their continued exploitation of the working class (MacIntyre 1968, 100–104). MacIntyre argued that, hitherto, Marxists had explained away the failure of Marx's predictions either by claiming that the time scale was simply longer than Marx had supposed, or by asserting a series of 'supplementary hypotheses', including those of the labour aristocracy and 'doctrinal corruption', but that these were ways of avoiding two painful facts: 'The first of these was that the working class—not just its leadership—was either reformist or unpolitical except in the most exceptional of circumstances, not so much because of the inadequacies of its trade union and political leadership as because of its whole habit of life' (MacIntyre 1968, 90–91). The point was not that Marxism had never been true, but that it no longer was true:

> [O]ne might write the history of the age which Marxism illumi-
> nated so much more clearly than any other doctrine did, the period
> from 1848 to 1929, as one in which Marx's view of the progress of
> capitalism was substantially correct, but at the end of which when
> the Marxist script for the world drama required the emergence of
> the European working-class as the agent of historical change, the
> working-class turned out to be quiescent and helpless. (MacIntyre
> 1970, 42, 43)[6]

The second painful fact, which had contributed to the 'quiescence', was
that living standards had generally improved, if unevenly and incon-
sistently, especially after 1945, when 'the ability of capitalism to inno-
vate in order to maintain its equilibrium and its expansion was of a radi-
cally new kind. Consequently, not only has the future crisis of capitalism
had—for those who wished to retain the substance of the classical Marx-
ist view—to be delayed, there had to be additional explanations why, in
the new situation, capitalism is still liable to crisis in the same sense as
before'. The resulting degeneration can take two main forms. On the one
hand are those who 'flee from the realities of that society into the pri-
vate cloud-cuckoo lands of Marxist sectarianism where they tilt at capi-
talist windmills with Marxist texts in their hands, the Don Quixotes of
the contemporary left'. On the other hand are those who 'embrace what
Lenin called the worship of what is . . . allowing Marx's notion of revo-
lutionary working class power to be confused with that of the adminis-
trative manoeuvres of the Soviet bureaucrats' (MacIntyre 1968, 105).

    As a result of these changed conditions, those who describe them-
selves as 'revolutionaries' are, according to MacIntyre, likely to have five
main characteristics. First, theirs is an 'all-or-nothing existence', whose
activities allow them, second, to 'sustain a plausible social existence'.
Third, they must believe that their activities have 'world-historical signifi-
cance', which provides the justification for their revolutionary beliefs,

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6. Open statements of working-class incapacity are actually quite rare in
the writings of ex-Trotskyists, but for an earlier rejection of Marxism on these
grounds by Trotskyists in the United States, see Vannier 1948.

despite their apparent lack of significance in the world: 'In this way miniscule Trotskyist groups can represent their faction fights as a repetition of the great quarrels of the Bolshevik party'. Fourth, the tension between activity and aspiration gives their lives an inevitable precariousness: 'Joseph Conrad understood this; so did Henry James; so, in his own way, did Trotsky'. Fifth, and finally, revolutionaries must believe that their activities are justified by both history and their own activity, but both are refutable by counterexamples: 'This requirement is in obvious tension, however, with the revolutionary's commitment to make the predictions derived from his theory come true'. MacIntyre claims that a comparable elitism links the revolutionary with the industrial manager and the professional social scientist: 'The ideology of expertise embodies a claim to privilege with respect to power'. Consequently, the 'contemporary revolutionary' is 'antidemocratic' (MacIntyre 1973a, 340–42).

Examples of 'antidemocratic' revolutionaries abounded in the late 1960s, of course, not least in the Third World. Yet even at this stage, MacIntyre still counterposes Trotsky the revolutionary democrat against such revolutionaries and their sympathisers in the developed world: 'One can well understand why Trotsky's ghost haunts Sartre and Debray. For both Sartre and Debray have a peculiar conception—far more elitist than that of Leninism—of an inert mass of, be it workers, be it peasants, who need a leadership of particular gifts to rouse them to revolutionary activity'. But on this view, Trotskyism is not an alternative strategy for revolutionaries in the Third World, but an analysis which identifies why they are bound to fail and, in doing so, bound to endlessly repeat the experience of Socialism in One Country, in other words, of Stalinism (MacIntyre 1971e, 73).

MacIntyre's description 'Marxism of the Will' indicates that for him, the Marxists he is criticising have succumbed to the illusions of voluntarism. Yet in some contexts he had accused Trotsky of the same failing that he now invokes against these Marxists. MacIntyre is not, of course, arguing that Trotsky was a secret gradualist, but rather, claiming that he is the supreme realist in the Marxist tradition. In effect, MacIntyre is arguing that Trotsky has demonstrated that there can be nothing beyond capitalism. This general conclusion is brought out with the greatest clarity in the closing pages of *After Virtue*:

> [I]f the moral impoverishment of advanced capitalism is what so
> many Marxists agree that it is, whence are these resources for the fu-
> ture to be derived? It is not surprising that at this point Marxism
> tends to produce its own versions of the *Übermensch*: Lukács's ideal
> proletarian, Lenin's ideal revolutionary. When Marxism does not
> become Weberian social democracy or crude tyranny, it tends to
> become Nietzschean fantasy. One of the most admirable aspects of
> Trotsky's cold resolution was his refusal of all such fantasies.
>
> A Marxist who took Trotsky's last writings with great seriousness
> would be forced into a pessimism quite alien to the Marxist tradi-
> tion, and in becoming a pessimist he would in an important way have
> ceased to be a Marxist. For he would now see no tolerable alternative
> set of political and economic structures which could be brought into
> place to replace the structures of advanced capitalism. This conclu-
> sion agrees of course with my own. (MacIntyre 1985a, 262)

But is it legitimate to infer this conclusion from Trotsky's last writings?
A passage that seems to have had particular importance for MacIntyre
occurs in Trotsky's last sustained discussion of the nature of the USSR
before his assassination:

> The historic alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the
> Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming
> bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the
> first stage of a new exploiting society. If the second prognosis proves
> to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new rul-
> ing class. (Trotsky 1973, 11)

This is how MacIntyre interpreted these words in 'Trotsky in Exile':

> Although Trotsky continued to defend the view that in some sense
> the Soviet Union was a workers' state, he had committed himself to
> predictions about the results of the Second World War, the outcome
> of which would for him settle the matter. If his view were correct,
> the Soviet bureaucracy after a victorious war would be overthrown
> as a result of proletarian revolution in the advanced countries of
> the West. If the view of those Trotskyists who held that a kind of

bureaucratic state capitalism existed in Russia were correct, they would be vindicated by the failure to occur of such a revolution and such an overthrow. (MacIntyre 1971d, 55)

And here is how he interprets it a superficially similar passage from *After Virtue*:

Trotsky, in the very last years of his life, facing the question of whether the Soviet Union was in any sense a socialist country, also faced implicitly the question of whether the categories of Marxism could illuminate the future. He himself made everything turn on the outcome of a set of hypothetical predictions about possible future events in the Soviet Union, predications which were tested only after Trotsky's death. The answer they returned was clear: Trotsky's own premises entailed that the Soviet Union was not socialist and that the theory which was to have illuminated the path to human liberation had in fact led to darkness. (MacIntyre 1985a, 262)

Between these two texts, the position MacIntyre derives from Trotsky has shifted from one in which the outcome of the war decides whether or not the USSR was a form of bureaucratic state capitalism, to one of deciding whether socialism is possible. The first vindicates Marxism because it is capable of explaining this outcome; the second condemns Marxism as being responsible for it. Given that in 'Trotsky in Exile' MacIntyre dismissed those Trotskyists who transformed 'into abstract dogma what Trotsky thought in concrete terms at one moment in his life', there is a certain irony in the fact that this is precisely what he does in *After Virtue*. Trotsky's position towards the USSR in the last years of his life is clearly bound up with his 'now or never' attitude to the entire world situation on the eve of the Second World War—a perspective which also included the irreversible decline of the capitalist economy, the collapse of Social Democracy, the impossibility of Third World development, and many other predictions which turned out to be false. The source of MacIntyre's error actually occurs in the first quoted passage above, for Trotskyists who identified the USSR as a form of state capitalism did not argue that revolution was impossible in Russia. Rather, they simply argued that the state was not an unstable, temporary formation, which

would shatter under the impact of war, as Trotsky and his orthodox epigones claimed. Indeed, Cliff ended his initial statement of the state capitalist case by predicting 'gigantic spontaneous upsurges of millions' in a forthcoming revolution (Cliff 2003, 130).

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, ORTHODOX TROTSKYISTS FOUND THAT reality did not correspond to what their theory had predicted. Their initial response was to deny reality, then to revise their theory to such an extent that it lost contact with the notion of working-class self-emancipation that had been at heart of both Trotskyism and the classical Marxist tradition it sought to continue (Callinicos 1990). MacIntyre, in effect, did the opposite. He too understood that the world had changed, but he was too intellectually honest to produce endless 'auxiliary hypotheses' to protect the theory. If MacIntyre had simply overestimated the extent to which these changes signaled permanent shifts in the nature of capitalism, reality would soon have provided a check with the onset of crisis from the mid-1970s. Yet this was not the only or the main reason why MacIntyre abandoned Trotskyism and, with it, Marxism as a tradition. Rather, it was the source of individual insights. He has restated that second reason, namely, working-class incapacity, on several occasions since, most recently in 'The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken'.

In this essay, MacIntyre discusses the world of the hand-loom weavers, as documented by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class,* and of the Silesian weavers whose struggle Marx himself noted in 1844, and contrasts the militancy of both of these with the situation of the contemporary working class: 'But [Marx] seems not to have understood the form of life from which that militancy arose, and so later failed to understand that while proletarianisation makes it necessary for workers to resist, it also tends to deprive workers of those forms of practice through which they can discover conceptions of a good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance' (MacIntyre 1998f, 232). This does not mean that MacIntyre has become reconciled to capitalism. According to his current Aristotelian position, 'the costs of economic development are generally paid by those least able to afford them', but politics offers no alternative:

Attempts to reform the political systems of modernity from within are always transformed into collaborations with them. Attempts to overthrow them always degenerate into terrorism or quasi terrorism. What is not barren is the politics involved in constructing and sustaining small-scale local communities, at the level of the family, the neighbourhood, the workplace, the parish, the school, or clinic, communities within which the needs of the hungry and the homeless can be met. (MacIntyre 1998i, 265)

'I do not see any prospects of overthrowing the dominant social order', MacIntyre has written. 'But perhaps it can be outlived; and even if it cannot be overthrown, it ought to be rejected' (MacIntyre 1984a, 252). The difficulty is that it looks increasingly likely that the dominant social order may not allow us the luxury of outliving it. If we do not succeed in overthrowing it, then things will not simply continue in the old oppressive way, getting perhaps a bit better, perhaps a bit worse. Socialism is necessary simply to remove the threats to existence for millions from starvation, epidemics, and war, and for everyone, including the capitalists themselves, of environmental catastrophe. It may be that one of the other Marxists who understood revolution as a form of 'wager' was belatedly right in his assessment. 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history', wrote Walter Benjamin in 1940: 'But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake' (Benjamin 2003, 402). In these circumstances, revolution appears, not as a sectarian indulgence, but as the only serious option, so we had better find a way to make it work without reproducing the very forms of oppression which make it necessary. In periods of crisis and social upheaval, Marxism, or rather, Marxisms, always experience a revival in interest. The variants which attain the greatest popularity are not always those which embody the emancipatory heart of the tradition. And if MacIntyre's critique, of which his engagement with Trotsky was such a central part, cannot be accepted as a whole, it may still alert us to potential dangers and indicate the roads not to take.