

Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism

Leon Trotsky

1939

Their Morals and Ours possesses merit at least in this, that it has compelled certain philistines and sycophants to expose themselves completely. The first clippings from the French and Belgian press received by me testify to this. The most intelligible of its kind is the review which appeared in the Parisian Catholic newspaper **La Croix**. These gentlemen have a system of their own, and they are not ashamed to defend it. They stand for absolute morality, and above all for the butcher Franco. It is the will of God. Behind them stands a Heavenly Sanitarian who gathers and cleans all the filth in their wake. It is hardly surprising that they should condemn as unworthy the morality of revolutionists who assume responsibility for themselves. But we are now interested not in professional peddlers of indulgences but in moralists who manage to do without God while seeking to put themselves in His stead.

The Brussels “socialist” newspaper **Le Peuple** – here is virtue’s hide-out! – has been able to find nothing in our little book except a criminal recipe for building secret cells in the pursuit of the most immoral of all goals that of undermining the prestige and revenues of the Belgian labor bureaucracy. It may of course be said in reply that this bureaucracy is smeared with countless betrayals and sheer swindles (we need only recall the history of the “Labor Bank”!); that it stifles every glimmer of critical thought in the working class; that in its practical morality it is in no way superior to its political ally, the Catholic hierarchy. But, in the first place only very poorly educated people would mention such unpleasant things; secondly, all these gentlemen, whatever their petty sins, keep in reserve the highest principles of morality. To this Henri de Man sees personally, and before his high authority we Bolsheviks cannot of course expect any indulgence.

Before passing on to other moralists, let us pause for a moment on a prospectus issued by the French publishers of our little book. By its very nature, a prospectus either recommends a book, or, at least, delineates objectively its contents. We have before us a prospectus of an entirely different type. Suffice it to adduce only one example: “Trotsky is of the opinion that his party, once in power and now in opposition, has always represented the genuine proletariat, and he himself genuine morality. From this he concludes for instance the following: shooting of hostages assumes an entirely different meaning depending upon whether the order is issued by Stalin or Trotsky...” This quotation is quite ample for an

appraisal of the behind-the-scenes commentator. It is the unquestionable right of an author to supervise a prospectus. But inasmuch as in the present case the author happens to be on the other side of the ocean, some “friend”, apparently profiting from the publisher’s lack of information, contrived to slip into a strange nest and deposit there his little egg oh! it is of course a very tiny egg, an almost virginal egg. Who is the author of this prospectus? Victor Serge, who translated the book and who is at the same time its severest critic, can easily supply the information. I should not be surprised if it turned out that the prospectus was written... naturally, not by Victor Serge but by one of his disciples who imitates both his master’s ideas and his style. But, maybe after all, it is the master himself, that is, Victor Serge in his capacity of “friend” of the author?

“Hottentot Morality!”

Souvarine and other sycophants have of course immediately seized upon the foregoing statement in the prospectus which saves them the bother of casting about for poisoned sophisms. If Trotsky takes hostages, it is good; if Stalin, it is bad. In the face of such “Hottentot morality”, it is not difficult to give vent to noble indignation. Yet there is nothing easier than to expose on the basis of this most recent example the hollowness and falsity of this indignation. Victor Serge publicly became a member of the POUM, a Catalan party which had its own militia at the front during the Civil War. At the front, as is well known, people shoot and kill. It may therefore be said: “For Victor Serge killings assume entirely different meaning depending upon whether the order is issued by General Franco or by the leaders of Victor Serge’s own party.” If our moralist had tried to think out the meaning of his own actions before trying to instruct others, he would in all probability have said the following: But the Spanish workers fought to emancipate the people while Franco’s gangs fought to reduce it to slavery! Serge will not be able to invent a different answer. In other words, he will have to repeat the “Hottentot”¹ argument of Trotsky in relation to the hostages.

Once Again on Hostages

However, it is possible and even probable that our moralist will refuse to say candidly that which is and will attempt to beat about the bush: “To kill at the front is one thing, to shoot hostages is something else again!” This argument, as we shall shortly prove, is simply stupid. But let us stop for a moment on the ground chosen by our adversary. The system of hostages, you say, is immoral “in itself”? Good, that is what we want to know. But this system has been practised in all the civil wars of ancient and modern history. It obviously flows from the nature of civil war itself. From this it is possible to draw only one conclusion, namely, that the very nature of civil war is immoral. That is the

¹We shall not dwell here on the shabby custom of referring contemptuously to the Hottentots in order thereby more radiantly to represent the morality of the white slave-owners. It was adequately dealt with in the pamphlet.

standpoint of the newspaper **La Croix**, which holds that it is necessary to obey the powers-that-be, for power emanates from God. And Victor Serge? He has no considered point of view. To drop a little egg in a strange nest is one thing, to define one's position on complex historical problems is something else again. I readily admit that people of such transcendent morality as Azaña, Caballero, Negrin and Co. were against taking hostages from the fascist camp: on both sides you have bourgeois, bound by family and material ties and convinced that even in case of defeat they would not only save themselves but would retain their beefsteaks. In their own fashion, they were right. But the fascists did take hostages among the proletarian revolutionists, and the proletarians, on their part, took hostages from among the fascist bourgeoisie, for they knew the menace that a defeat, even partial and temporary, implied for them and their class brothers.

Victor Serge himself cannot tell exactly what he wants: whether to purge the civil war of the practise of hostages, or to purge human history of civil war? The petty-bourgeois moralist thinks episodically, in fragments, in clumps, being incapable of approaching phenomena in their internal connection. Artificially set apart, the question of hostages is for him a particular moral problem, independent of those general conditions which engender armed conflicts between classes. Civil war is the supreme expression of the class struggle. To attempt to subordinate it to abstract "norms" means in fact to disarm the workers in the face of an enemy armed to the teeth. The petty-bourgeois moralist is the younger brother of the bourgeois pacifist who want to "humanize" warfare by prohibiting the use of poison gases, the bombardment of unfortified cities, etc. Politically, such programs serve only to deflect the thoughts of the people from revolution as the only method of putting an end to war.

The Dread of Bourgeois Public Opinion

Entangled in his contradictions, the moralist might perhaps try to argue that an "open" and "conscious" struggle between two camps is one thing, but the seizure of non-participants in the struggle is something else again. This argument, however, is only a wretched and stupid evasion. In Franco's camp fought tens of thousands who were duped and conscripted by force. The republican armies shot at and killed these unfortunate captives of a reactionary general. Was this moral or immoral? Furthermore, modern warfare, with its long-range artillery, aviation, poison gases, and, finally, with its train of devastation, famine, fires and epidemics, inevitably involves the loss of hundreds of thousands and millions, the aged and the children included, who do not participate directly in the struggle. People taken as hostages are at least bound by ties of class and family solidarity with one of the camps, or with the leaders of that camp. A conscious selection is possible in taking hostages. A projectile fired from a gun or dropped from a plane is let loose by hazard and may easily destroy not only foes but friends, or their parents and children. Why then do our moralists set apart the question of hostages and shut their eyes to the entire content of civil war? Because they

are not too courageous. As “leftists” they fear to break openly with revolution. As petty bourgeois they dread destroying the bridges to official public opinion. In condemning the system of hostages they feel themselves in good company against the Bolsheviks. They maintain a cowardly silence about Spain. Against the fact that the Spanish workers, anarchists, and POUMists took hostages, V. Serge will protest... in twenty years.

The Moral Code of Civil War

To the very same category pertains still another of V. Serge’s discoveries, namely, that the degeneration of the Bolsheviks dates from the moment when the Cheka was given the right of deciding behind closed doors the fate of people. Serge plays with the concept of revolution, writes poems about it, but is incapable of understanding it as it is.

Public trials are possible only in conditions of a stable régime. Civil war is a condition of the extreme instability of society and the state. Just as it is impossible to publish in newspapers the plans of the general staff, so is it impossible to reveal in public trials the conditions and circumstances of conspiracies, for the latter are intimately linked with the course of the civil war. Secret trials, beyond a doubt, greatly increase the possibility of mistakes. This merely signifies, and we concede it readily, that the circumstances of civil war are hardly favorable for the exercise of impartial justice. And what more than that?

We propose that V. Serge be appointed as chairman of a commission composed of, say, Marceau Pivert, Souvarine, Waldo Frank, Max Eastman, Magdeleine Paz and others to draft a moral code for civil warfare. Its general character is clear in advance. Both sides pledge not to take hostages. Public trials remain in force. For their proper functioning, complete freedom of the press is preserved throughout the civil war. Bombardment of cities, being detrimental to public justice, freedom of the press, and the inviolability of the individual, is strictly prohibited. For similar and sundry other reasons the use of artillery is outlawed. And inasmuch as rifles, hand grenades and even bayonets unquestionably exercise a baleful influence upon human beings as well as upon democracy in general, the use of weapons, fire-arms or side-arms, in the civil war is strictly forbidden.

Marvelous code! Magnificent monument to the rhetoric of Victor Serge and Magdeleine Paz! However, so long as this code remains unaccepted as a rule of conduct by all the oppressors and the oppressed, the warring classes will seek to gain victory *by every means*, while petty-bourgeois moralists will continue as heretofore to wander in confusion between the two camps. Subjectively, they sympathize with the oppressed no one doubts that. Objectively, they remain captives of the morality of the ruling class and seek to impose it upon the oppressed instead of helping them elaborate the morality of insurrection.

The Masses Have Nothing at All to Do with It!

Victor Serge has disclosed in passing what caused the collapse of the Bolshevik party: excessive centralism, mistrust of ideological struggle, lack of freedom loving (*“libertaire”*, in reality anarchist) spirit. More confidence in the masses, more freedom! All this is outside time and space. But the masses are by no means identical: there are revolutionary masses, there are passive masses, there are reactionary masses. The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralized organization of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves. To invest the mass with traits of sanctity and to reduce one’s program to amorphous “democracy”, is to dissolve oneself in the class as it is, to turn from a vanguard into a rearguard, and by this very thing, to renounce revolutionary tasks. On the other hand, if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the class is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself. All this is elementary; all this has been demonstrated by the experience of Russia, and confirmed by the experience of Spain.

But the whole secret is this, that demanding freedom “for the masses”, Victor Serge in reality demands freedom for himself and for his compeers, freedom from all control, all discipline, even, if possible, from all criticism. The “masses” have nothing at all to do with it. When our “democrat” scurries from right to left, and from left to right, sowing confusion and scepticism, he imagines it to be the realization of a salutary freedom of thought. But when we evaluate from the Marxian standpoint the vacillations of a disillusioned petty-bourgeois intellectual, that seems to him an assault upon his individuality. He then enters into an alliance with all the confusionists for a crusade against our despotism and our sectarianism.

The internal democracy of a revolutionary party is not a goal in itself. It must be supplemented and bounded by centralism. For a Marxist the question has always been: democracy for what? For which program? The framework of the program is at the same time the framework of democracy. Victor Serge demanded of the Fourth International that it give freedom of action to all confusionists, sectarians and centrists of the POUM, Vereecken, Marceau Pivert types, to conservative bureaucrats of the Sneevliet type or mere adventurers of the R. Molinier type. On the other hand, Victor Serge has systematically helped centrist organizations drive from their ranks the partisans of the Fourth International. We are very well acquainted with that democratism: it is compliant, accomodating and conciliatory – *towards the right*; at the same time, it is exigent, malevolent and tricky – *towards the left*. It merely represents the régime of self-defense of petty-bourgeois centrism.

The Struggle against Marxism

If Victor Serge's attitude toward problems of theory were serious, he would have been embarrassed to come to the fore as an "innovator" and to pull us back to Bernstein, Struve and all the revisionists of the last century who tried to graft Kantianism onto Marxism, or in other words, to subordinate the class struggle of the proletariat to principles allegedly rising above it. As did Kant himself, they depicted the "categorical imperative" (the idea of duty) as an absolute norm of morality valid for everybody. In reality, it is a question of "duty" to bourgeois society. In their own fashion, Bernstein, Struve, Vorländer had a serious attitude to theory. They openly demanded a *return* to Kant. Victor Serge and his compeers do not feel the slightest responsibility towards scientific thought. They confine themselves to allusions, insinuations, at best, to literary generalizations. . . . However, if their ideas are plumbed to the bottom, it appears, that they have joined an old cause, long since discredited: to subdue Marxism by means of Kantianism; to paralyze the socialist revolution by means of "absolute" norms which represent in reality the philosophical generalizations of the interests of the bourgeoisie true enough, not the present-day but the defunct bourgeoisie of the era of free trade and democracy. The imperialist bourgeoisie observes these norms even less than did its liberal grandmother. But it views favorably the attempts of the petty-bourgeois preachers to introduce confusion, turbulence and vacillation into the ranks of the revolutionary proletariat. The chief aim not only of Hitler but also of the liberals and the democrats is to discredit Bolshevism at a time when its historical legitimacy threatens to become absolutely clear to the masses. Bolshevism, Marxism – there is the enemy!

When "brother" Victor Basch², high priest of democratic morality, with the aid of his "brother" Rosenmark, committed a forgery in defense of the Moscow trials and was publicly exposed, convicted of falsehood, he beat his breast and cried: "Am I then partial? I have always denounced the terror of Lenin and Trotsky." Basch graphically exposed the inner mainspring of the moralists of democracy: some of them may keep quiet about the Moscow trials, some may attack the trials, still others may defend the trials; but their common concern is to use the trials in condemning the "morality" of Lenin and Trotsky, that is, the methods of the proletarian revolution. In this sphere they are all brothers.

In the above-cited scandalous prospectus it is stated that I develop views on morality "basing myself on Lenin". This indefinite phrase, reproduced by other publications, can be taken to mean that I develop Lenin's theoretical principles. But to my knowledge Lenin did not write on morality. Victor Serge wished in reality to say something altogether different, namely, that my immoral ideas are a generalization of the practise of Lenin, the "amoralist". He seeks to discredit Lenin's personality by my judgments, and my judgments by the personality of

²Victor Basch is head of the League for the Right of Man in France, organization of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democrats. Rosenmark, one of its members, is an obscure lawyer used by the Stalinists to whitewash the Moscow Trials which, like the Englishman, Pritt, he "happened" to attend. – *TRANS*.

Lenin. He is simply flattering the general reactionary tendency which is aimed against Bolshevism and Marxism as a whole.

Souvarine, the Sycophant

Ex-pacifist, ex-communist, ex-Trotskyist, ex-democrato-communist, ex-Marxist...almost ex-Souvarine attacks the proletarian revolution and revolutionists all the more brazenly the less he himself knows what he wants. This man loves and knows how to collect quotations, documents, commas and quotation marks and how to compile dossiers and, moreover he knows how to handle the pen. Originally he had hoped that this baggage would last him a lifetime. But he was soon compelled to convince himself that in addition the ability to think was necessary... His book on Stalin, despite an abundance of interesting quotations and facts is a self-testimonial to his own poverty. Souvarine understands neither what the revolution is nor what the counter-revolution is. He applies to the historical process the criteria of a petty rationalizer, forever aggrieved at sinful humanity. The disproportion between his critical spirit and his creative impotence consumes him as if it were an acid. Hence his constant exasperation, and his lack of elementary honesty in appraising ideas, people and events, while covering it all with dry moralizing. Like all misanthropes and cynics, Souvarine is organically drawn toward reaction.

Has Souvarine broken openly with Marxism? We never heard about it. He prefers equivocation; that is his native element. In his review of my pamphlet he writes: "Trotsky once again mounts his hobby-horse of the class struggle." To the Marxist of yesterday the class struggle is "Trotsky's hobby-horse". It is not surprising that Souvarine himself has preferred to sit astride the dead dog of eternal morality. To the Marxian conception he opposes "a sense of justice...without regard for class distinctions". It is at any rate consoling to learn that our society is founded on a "sense of justice". In the coming war Souvarine will doubtless expound his discovery to the soldiers in the trenches; and in the meantime he can do so to the invalids of the last war, the unemployed, the abandoned children, and the prostitutes. We confess in advance that should he get mauled while thus engaged, our own "sense of justice" will not side with him.

The critical remarks of this shameless apologist for bourgeois justice "without regard for class distinctions", are based entirely on the prospectus inspired by Victor Serge. The latter, in his turn, in all his attempts at "theory" does not go beyond hybrid borrowings from Souvarine, who, nevertheless, possesses this advantage: that he utters what Serge does not yet dare to say.

With feigned indignation — there is nothing genuine about him — Souvarine writes that inasmuch as Trotsky condemns the morality of democrats, reformists, Stalinists and anarchists, it follows that the sole representative of morality is "Trotsky's party", and since this party "does not exist", therefore in the last

analysis the incarnation of morality is Trotsky himself. How can one help tittering over this? Souvarine apparently imagines that he is capable of distinguishing between that which exists and that which does not. It is a very simple matter so long as it is a question of scrambled eggs or a pair of suspenders. But on the scale of the historical process such a distinction is obviously over Souvarine's head. "That which exists" is being born or dying, developing or disintegrating. That which exists can be understood only by him who understands its inner tendencies.

The number of people who held a revolutionary position at the outbreak of the last war could be counted on one's fingers. The entire field of official politics was almost completely pervaded with various shades of chauvinism. Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Lenin seemed impotent isolated individuals. But can there be any doubt that their morality was above the bestial morality of the "sacred union"? Liebknecht's revolutionary politics were not at all "individualistic", as they then seemed to the average patriotic philistine. On the contrary, Liebknecht, and Liebknecht alone, reflected and foreshadowed the profound subterranean trends in the masses. The subsequent course of events wholly confirmed this. Not to fear today a complete break with official public opinion so as on the *morrow* to gain the right of expressing the ideas and feelings of the insurgent masses, this is a special mode of existence which differs from the empiric existence of petty-bourgeois conventionalists. All the parties of capitalist society, all its moralists and all its sycophants will perish beneath the debris of the impending catastrophe. The only party that will survive is the party of the world socialist revolution, even though it may seem non-existent today to the sightless rationalizers, just as during the last war the party of Lenin and Liebknecht seemed to them non-existent.

Revolutionists and the Carriers of Infection

Engels once wrote that Marx and himself remained all their lives in the minority and "felt fine" about it. Periods when the movement of the oppressed class rises to the level of the general tasks of the revolution represent the rarest exceptions in history. Far more frequent than victories are the defeats of the oppressed. Following each defeat comes a long period of reaction which throws the revolutionists back into a state of cruel isolation. Pseudo-revolutionists, "knights for an hour", as a Russian poet put it, either openly betray the cause of the oppressed in such periods or scurry about in the search of a formula of salvation that would enable them to avoid breaking with any of the camps. It is inconceivable in our time to find a conciliatory formula in the sphere of political economy or sociology; class contradictions have forever overthrown the "harmony" formula of the liberals and democratic reformers. There remains the domain of religion and transcendental morality. The Russian "Social Revolutionists" attempted to save democracy by an alliance with the church. Marceau Pivert replaces the church with Freemasonry. Apparently, Victor Serge has not yet joined a lodge, but he has no difficulty in finding a common language with Pivert

against Marxism.

Two classes decide the fate of modern society: the imperialist bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The last resource of the bourgeoisie is fascism, which replaces social and historical criteria with biological and zoological standards so as thus to free itself from any and all restrictions in the struggle for capitalist property. Civilization can be saved only by the socialist revolution. To accomplish the overturn, the proletariat needs all its strength, all its resolution, all its audacity, passion and ruthlessness. Above all it must be completely free from the fictions of religion, “democracy” and transcendental morality — the spiritual chains forged by the enemy to tame and enslave it. Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral, and nothing else. The welfare of the revolution that is the supreme law!

A clear understanding of the interrelation between the two basic classes — the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the epoch of their mortal combat — discloses to us the objective meaning of the role of petty bourgeois moralists. Their chief trait is impotence: social impotence by virtue of the economic degradation of the petty bourgeoisie; *ideological* impotence by virtue of the fear of the petty bourgeoisie in the face of the monstrous unleashing of the class struggle. Hence the urge of the petty bourgeois, both educated and ignorant, to curb the class struggle. If he cannot succeed by means of eternal morality and this cannot succeed — the petty bourgeois throws himself into the arms of fascism which curbs the class struggle by means of myths and the executioner’s axe. The moralism of V. Serge and his compeers is a bridge from revolution to reaction. Souvarine is already on the other side of the bridge. The slightest concession to these tendencies signifies the beginning of capitulation to reaction. Let these carriers of infection instil the rules of morality in Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier. As for us, the program of the proletarian revolution suffices.

COYOACAN, D.F., June 9, 1939

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