

Book Review Essay: The Case of Leon Trotsky

Jon Bradley

Trotsky's testimony before the 1937 Dewey Commission investigating charges made against him in the Moscow Trials. (2006). New York, NY: Pathfinder Press. (ISBN: 0-87348-868-7, 30\$ paperback)

"No ends are accomplished without the use of force. It is consequently no presumption against a measure, political, international, jural, economic, that it involves a use of force. Squeamishness about force is the mark not of idealistic but moonstruck morals."[John Dewey, 1929, *Character and Events, volume II*, page 787]

Introduction

At almost eighty years of age, and clearly exhibiting some health difficulties associated with his longevity, John Dewey embarked on a somewhat audacious adventure in the summer and fall of 1937. This was not a leisurely family outing, as he had previously made many times previously to far flung places; rather, this was a mental adventure of the most unusual kind. The intellectual and political background to this story has been covered by many authors (Dykhuizen, 1974, chapter 14; Westbrook, 1991, chapter 14; Ryan, 1995, chapter 8; Dalton, 2002, chapter 9; and Martin, 2002, pages 407-423) and, even after the passage of an additional seventy years, it is a monumental journey that deserves remembering.

From this rather brief time frame, two compendiums emerged. The first, published in 1937, is the volume under consideration. The other, published a year later in 1938, was Dewey's own *Not Guilty*. Taken in tandem, these volumes of some 1200 pages, illustrate a very specific historical moment. They encapsulate a development pause in

the emergence of the United States as a world power and, on a more personal and intimate level, say much about America's leading philosopher and the role of that ethereal academic pursuit called 'philosophy' played in everyday life. Equally importantly, they demonstrate in a most tangible way Dewey's belief in the freedom of ideas and in his unshakable hold on democracy, with all of its bumps and foibles, as the only way for people to be governed.

The late 1930's was a time of great political movements. There was engagement and fear. The ideas of titanic political forces clashed and, somewhat akin to wary boxers circling a far too crowded ring, the notions of individual dictatorship (as exemplified in Italy and Germany), state dictatorship (as played out in Japan), the emerging socialist/communist ideologies (as personified in Russia), and reacting democratic regimes (most notably in Britain and the United States) seemed destined to clash. Proponents and opponents engaged in lively debate and, in some cases, physical confrontations. Whatever one's own political orientation, there was no question that 'change was in the air' and it was only a matter of time until winners and losers would emerge.

Too often, contemporary scholars look to the future and to new insights, no matter how small, in their quest for new knowledge and/or deeper understandings. However, a serious examination of the past can just as interestingly lead to the uncovering of long forgotten new ideals.

Historical Context:

It is necessary to pause for a brief moment and take a snap-shot of the United States of America and its place in that late 1930's world. Things were

not going well, so to speak: the Wilsonian ideal of the League of Nations appeared moribund and ineffectual in reality, there was the rise of dictators Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler in Germany, the expansion of the Empire of Japan into vast areas of China and the south Pacific, along with that Russian experiment in a 'proletarian' government and central state control that seemed to be all the rage with branches and advocates springing up all over the place. Additionally, luminaries such as aviation hero Charles Lindbergh in the United States and politician Neville Chamberlain in England were strongly and vocally advocating isolationism and appeasement in various guises.

At the same time, North America was still very much mired in a continuing drawn-out economic depression and most of the 'socialist' (some said 'progressive') plans and notions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been struck down by the United States Supreme Court. So, on a variety of levels, the overall world situation was 'tense' and the domestic realities were not tranquil but, rather, foreboding.

At this point in his life, Dewey was in his late 70's and an Emeritus Professor. In 1935, for example, he had been surprisingly honoured with the creation of the Society that would bear his name. He was a regular contributor to all manner of newspapers and magazines and was still a most active book author. In this time frame, he was mightily struggling to bring closure to *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

John Dewey had previously travelled to the Soviet Union and had, in some ways, approved of things that he saw. He had written positively about Soviet life and education and his books had been translated and were readily

available in many languages throughout Europe. However, over time, Dewey had become increasingly wary of the Soviet system and, in particular, the dictatorship of Stalin. At heart and in his philosopher's soul, Dewey believed in democracy; while he allowed for variations and permeations of this democratic creature, it was clear that Soviet style socialism/communism was not in line with and compatible to any of his own deeply held views.

The Moscow Show Trials, from 1936 to 1938, gripped the world in their scope and speed of administering Soviet-style justice. In actuality, these show trials were in four sections: (1) the trial of the sixteen, (2) the trial of the seventeen, (3) the trial of Red Army officers, and (4) the trial of the twenty-one. Via these trials, Stalin was able to eradicate the vast majority of people who had been allied to Lenin and who had carried out the Russian Revolution. Few escaped this massive purge!

Seen by many watchers as an exercise in state media showmanship, they demonstrated the ruthlessness with which Joseph Stalin dealt with any form of dissent: real or imagined. On a grand and public scale, former colleagues and friends – (the old-guard Bolsheviks, if you will) – had been paraded through a skewed court system and quickly dispatched. A centrality of these trials were the 'confessions' entered into evidence.

There was general revulsion in the western press to these so-called confessions and to the show trials in general. The confessions were known to have been acquired via torture, were unsubstantiated by other views, and often one confession was used to implicate other individuals.

In many cases, the verdict was death while, in others, long sentences of exile in Siberia. The sentences were imposed quickly and appeals seemed to be measured in the minute rather than the possible. Few Russian intellectuals,

politicians, leaders, and the like managed to escape this 'legal' purge. Nonetheless, a small number of accused individuals managed to make a quick and dangerous exit before being apprehended and one of these had been the formidable Leon Trotsky.

A long time companion and comrade to Vladimir Lenin and, at one point, a colleague of Stalin's, Trotsky had been a major player in the 1917 Russian Revolution. He worked tirelessly to help create a 'worker's paradise' and was known to be a ruthless administrator in his own right. After all, he had been 'Commissar of Foreign Affairs' and 'Head of the Red Army'. Like many of the other leaders within the Bolshevik camp, Trotsky was not a formally educated individual; however, he clearly fancied himself a bit of a philosopher and had many years of experience writing essays and making speeches. However, also a very practical realist, he had escaped the tentacles of Stalin (after Lenin's death and after losing out to Stalin in the subsequent power struggle in the late 1920s) and fled through various European countries (often pursued by Stalin's agents) until he acquired a sense of exile and some safety in Mexico. Never allowing the absence of an individual to ruin a good court case, Trotsky (along with his son) was tried in absentia in Moscow in the second set of Show Trials and, naturally, found guilty of crimes against Joseph Stalin and the Soviet State.

While Trotsky had been forced to flee Russia in the late 1920's, such an absence did not stop him from maintaining a steady and constant pointed rage against Stalin; he was, in other words, a most annoying gad-fly who continually piqued the Russian dictator. Trotsky's words were heard by many and credence was given to his criticisms. His stature rose over his many years in exile (and after several failed assassination attempts) and there was genuine consternation when he was found

guilty, in absentia, and sentenced to death. Trotsky begged to be heard in a neutral forum and argued that the testimonies in Russia were incorrect and contrived.

Dewey's Role:

Reacting to the increasingly obvious miscarriages and acknowledging Trotsky's constant missives, a disparate group of American intellectuals came together to form the "American Committee for the Defence of Leon Trotsky". This was not an unimpressive group and included such luminaries as: Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Reinhold Niebuhr, George Novack, and Sidney Hook to name a few. After some debate, a separate "Commission of Inquiry" was established and it would be the role of this committee to specifically investigate the charges against Trotsky.

After even more debate and much soul searching, and against the wishes of many friends and colleagues, John Dewey agreed to be the chair of this committee. As an aside, the very real threat of physical danger to Dewey was raised as it was well known that Stalin was not above the use of brute force to achieve ends. The stage was now set for this unique adventure; henceforth, in the historical record, the "Dewey Commission" became the short-hand for the far more exact but cumbersome "Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials". A sophisticated commission, in its own right, members included Suzanne LaFollette as secretary along with Edward Alsworth Ross, Alfred Rosmer, Carlo Tresca, and John Chamberlain to note a few.

While one can search for many possible reasons to account for Dewey's insistence on taking on this task, I have found that some of his opening remarks offer the most cogent explanation. The basic notions of 'fair

play' and 'basic human rights' ring throughout; Dewey's absolute faith and trust in honest investigation come to the fore.

"In the United States, it has long been customary for public-spirited citizens to organize committees for the purpose of securing fair trails in cases where there was suspicion concerning the impartiality of the courts. Such committees are traditionally known as 'defense committees', and include in their title the name of the defendant. ... In this case, there exists no legally constituted court before which the accused may plead his case. ... Therefore, it became part of the function of his defense committee to initiate the formation of an impartial body before which his side of the case could be heard. ... The simple fact that we are here is evidence that the conscience of the world is not yet satisfied on this historic issue. ... The right to a hearing before condemnation is such an elementary right in every civilized country that it would be absurd for us to reassert it were it not for the efforts which have been made to prevent Mr. Trotsky from being heard..." (April 10, 1937, Dewey's opening remarks at commencement of the first session, as quoted in *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, pages 30 – 31).

Bluntly, it is interesting to note that Leon Trotsky did not want Dewey at all. He felt that Dewey was too old (at age 78) and would be unable to digest and deal with the vast amount of data and information that such an inquiry would entail. Dykhuizen and other biographers note that Trotsky was even worried that Dewey might fall asleep in the heat during the deliberations. However, the names were agreed, the dates selected, the location secured, and Dewey set off by train to Mexico from New York City in April 1937.

As an aside, it is interesting to point out that Dewey and Trotsky were,

philosophically speaking, some what aligned. As Isaac Deutscher points out, "Dewey accepted Trotsky's view of the relationship between means and ends and of the relative historical character of moral judgements" (page 441). Furthermore, Dewey certainly agreed that a means can be justified by an end. However, the main point of departure was Dewey's concern that Trotsky's class struggle was seen and treated as a means in and of itself.

Dewey felt that all so-called Marxists, by seeing this class struggle as the one and only means and ends, were living a contradiction. In passing, it is also important to mention that Dewey was not alone in his criticisms of Marxism, class struggle, and the means/ends duality. Well respected academics such as Max Eastman, James Rorty, Edmund Wilson, Sidney Hook, and Benjamin Stolberg (to name a few) all moved away from what might be labelled 'proletarian dictatorship' and into the larger landscape of 'pragmatic liberalism'.

Dewey in Mexico & Following:

Ever the consummate academic, Dewey did not fall asleep or even dose-off. In fact, by all accounts, he kept the inquiry on track, on time and he was a most formidable questioner over the approximately two weeks of hearings. Massive amounts of documentation were received by the committee and many hours of testimony taken.

Upon his return to New York, Dewey and the committee (with Dewey acknowledging that all of the heavy lifting had been handled by Suzanne LaFalette) drafted a rather complete report. Released in 1938, the title of *Not Guilty* clearly indicated the final summary. At just over 400 pages, the volume painstakingly investigated the charges and the methods and weighed the deposited written documents as well as the testimonials of all who spoke in Mexico. Overwhelmingly, with no room for doubt, the Committee

submitted its report to the intellectual world.

It is a bit sad, in a macabre manner, that the unfolding of world events in the remainder of 1938 and to the start of World War Two in late 1939, truncated the impact of this report. Clearly, the increasing expansion of Germany, Italy and Japan culminating in the invasion of Poland shoved this document into the background. Additionally, with the "Dewey Commission" taking place after the second show trial, two additional Moscow spectacles occurred over the next couple of years. To a certain extent, the march of historical events overshadowed this philosophical debate and, when peace sort of emerged in late 1945, the world scene was a very different place with different philosophical ideologies in play.

Nonetheless, *Not Guilty* must be viewed as a seminal treatise depicting philosophical ideals on a landscape dominated by major players. To a large extent, this kind of independent intellectual investigation was in its waning years, the likes of which were not to be seen again.

"The Commission therefore submits its report to public opinion in all countries, with a profound awareness of the historic and contemporary significance of the issue with which it has had to deal, and in the hope that this result of many months of painstaking investigation will clarify that issue. (Dewey, *Not Guilty*, page 5)

Trotsky's Case:

The specific volume under consideration (*The Case of Leon Trotsky*) in this review essay "contains the verbatim transcript of the hearings" and, as such, presents a philosophical moment in time. Here is one of the most complete explanations of Marxism as defined within a Russian and adapted world scene. In here, one can appreciate the movement of gigantic intellectual forces with practical and real-life implications.

Trotsky cannot be viewed as some kind of outside or minor figure. Rather, he was a major participant in events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, he actively aided Lenin in solidifying power, he dramatically crushed an internal civil revolt, he negotiated a peace treaty with the Germans to end Russian involvement in The Great War, and he had to flee for his life with the emergence of Joseph Stalin. Trotsky 'wrote the book' and 'lived the life' of revolutionary movements and Marxist ideologies in the field.

Originally released in 1937, before the official report was printed, this 700+ page tome captures Trotsky (and his ideas) at their prime (along with personal secretary Jan Frankel). Here is a man who had indeed 'lived' the philosophical moment and had helped bring into reality a philosophical construct.

What also makes these transcripts so enlightening is that they are not simply speeches. Rather, questions are interposed, arguments entertained, and debate encountered. In some cases, one can almost 'hear' the words as figures argue and cross verbal swords. Further, these transcripts represent many hours of testimony over time and, therefore, ideas are re-engaged and notions re-examined.

One of the striking themes to emerge is that of the difference between what might be termed 'traditional Marxism' and that actually practiced by Stalin. Trotsky clearly establishes a strong philosophical base for his notions of revolution, socialism, and the need to use force to achieve desirable ends. Furthermore, throughout the text, interesting exchanges between Dewey and Trotsky highlight possible futures for socialism as well as its place within an evolving industrial society. The many and varied interplays between these two central and passionate men are electrifying, at least philosophically speaking, at times. Finally, Trotsky had been a 'revolutionary' for about 40 years at the time of this commission.

His recollections and historical interpretations give this period a much needed personification.

With the hindsight that this volume provides, one can see the initial beginnings of the fall of modern Russia. True, the small cracks are minor (but philosophical!) and it was Trotsky who first alerted the world to these inherent weaknesses. True, it would be another fifty or so years before the behemoth would collapse under its own weight due to its weak foundation, but these pages illustrate Trotsky's clear foreshadowing of these events.

Closing:

Pathfinder Press is to be congratulated for reprinting and releasing *The Case of Leon Trotsky*. This volume (along with *Not Guilty*) provides a meaningful snapshot into a capsule of time. However, this is not to be viewed as a lost moment in time. Rather, these ideas and ideals from so long ago still ring fresh today and deserve to be reviewed in today's context within a contemporary landscape.

On a realistic note and one justifying concerns for Dewey's health, Leon Sedov (Trotsky's son) was assassinated in Paris in February 1938 and may not have even seen the volume *Not Guilty*. Further, Trotsky, himself, was assassinated in his Mexican house in August 1940 but, at least, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the full report had been released.

Grand philosophical debates ring in these volumes. Values clash! Ideologies conflict! Personalities engage! In no small measure, these two volumes represent a high mark of investigative philosophy. The winners and losers are the ideas and notions against which Dewey fought for and against all of his life. Even to this day, philosophies drive political and economic life and it is in these pages that we can partake and experience the reality and power of philosophy in action.

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Jon Bradley, the Editor of Insights, can be contacted at jon.bradley@mcgill.ca.