

# Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*, Revisited

Giulio Di Basilio

---

What is the attitude of Marxists to morality? 'Morality' is here understood, roughly, as a set of principles of conduct, however implicitly accepted, which should act as a compass for people to make practical decisions, solve situations of conflict, and more generally orient themselves in their lives. On the one hand, one might think that since Marxists tend to emphasise those systemic aspects of our society that prevent people from realising themselves as free individuals, they are unlikely to encourage people to put abstract moral pronouncements into practice. On the other hand, it is hard to deny that, behind Marxists' rejection of workers' exploitation, racism and other forms of discrimination, as well as imperialistic wars, there seems to lie a genuine form of moral outrage. Thus, one would expect Marxists to be able to make explicit the core moral ideas underlying their considered views on these issues and underpinning their political practice.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, questions of strategy and tactics, which are par for the course for revolutionary socialists, seem to pose with particular urgency moral issues, which one would hope to answer in the light of the underlying principles of one's moral standpoint.

In the history of the socialist movement Marxists have been accused of disregarding entirely the requirements of morality for the purpose of overthrowing capitalism and bringing about socialism. Leon Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours* is the most sustained attempt to meet this criticism by showing how this accusation itself is rooted in the class struggle and is weaponised by the ruling class against revolutionary Marxists. This article looks at Trotsky's pamphlet anew. First, I shall remind readers of Trotsky's main arguments. His views should be carefully considered by anyone interested in developing a Marxist view of morality. Second, I set out to emphasise the value of some of his considerations for Marxists today, with a particular focus on the present discussion to do with the war on Ukraine and the debate around it.

## I. An Outline of *Their Morals & Ours*

Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours* is a polemical pamphlet written towards the end of his life in 1938, while he was in exile in Mexico. The aim of the pamphlet is, first and foremost, to respond to charges made against the Bolsheviks and their political practice in the lead-up to, during, and after the Russian revolution of 1917. In addition, Trotsky takes the opportunity to distinguish himself and his followers from Stalin and Stalinism. This is because, in Trotsky's time, many considered Stalinism the natural outcome of Bolshevism; hence the need to keep the two carefully apart.<sup>2</sup> It is worth bearing in mind the historical context in which the pamphlet was written: WWII loomed large, fascism was on the rise across Europe, liberal democracies acquiesced to Hitler's requests, and Stalin's purges were at their peak. Trotsky's pamphlet is dedicated to his son and close political collaborator Leon Sedov, who had just fallen victim to Stalin's political repression.

The main charge levelled against the Bolsheviks, which Trotsky responds to, is that of amorality, namely the idea that the end justifies the means. In his response Trotsky develops a Marxist approach to morality, which by and large amounts to the application of Marx and Engels' method of historical materialism to the case of morality. As it emerges early on in the pamphlet, the accusation levelled at the Bolsheviks comes from the ranks of the bourgeoisie: Trotsky points out how petty bourgeois intellectuals, in particular, were tasked with discrediting the Bolsheviks and showing how there is an intrinsic link between their political practice and Stalinism. Bolsheviks are prepared to condone any means, so the criticism goes, notably deceit and violence, in order to bring about the coveted political revolution. Trotsky retorts that any criticism whereby the end justifies the means is in a sense trivial, in another sense hypocritical: it is, on the one hand, trivial to criticise a moral standpoint by saying that the end justifies the means, for in a sense this is true of any moral standpoint. In and of itself, a means can be a matter of indifference and it is only in so far as it is conducive to a given end that it becomes morally assessable as either to be pursued or alternatively to be shunned. In other words, the function of the end is, precisely, to justify the means. The only alternative left to the talk of means and ends would be to trust some kind of absolute deliverance of reason, common sense, or some other allegedly infallible source, which Trotsky is rightly sceptical of. What is meant by the above accusation 'the end justifies the means' must be understood in the sense that the Bolsheviks are ready to countenance *any* means for the purpose of revolution. But in this sense the accusation ends up being hypocritical because, significantly, bourgeois morality too is prepared to justify otherwise inadmissible means as soon as they prove conducive to their own ends.

For instance, liberal commentators have no hesitation in condemning the war crimes perpetrated by Russia against Ukraine, but are wilfully blind to the crimes committed by US-led imperialism, presumably because the latter serve intrinsically worthwhile ends like the defence of democracy, human rights, and the like. Be that as it may, what matters here is that, for Trotsky, the means does receive justification from the end. If that is accepted, the role of the ultimate end becomes paramount. In the light of this, it seems safe to conceive of Trotsky's moral approach as 'teleological' ('telos' being the Greek word for 'end'): morality is understood as a matter of finding means conducive to an intrinsically desirable end. In a society divided into antagonistic classes, moral discourse becomes a place of contestation between different and competing ends.<sup>3</sup>

Three points stand out among Trotsky's criticism of bourgeois morality. First, Trotsky argues that abstract morality is religion in disguise. This applies equally to any appeal to a supposed foundation of morality in common sense, a moral sense, conscience, or Kant's categorical imperative. In so doing Trotsky issues an indictment against the whole philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment (roughly 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century), which attempted, albeit in significantly different ways, to provide a foundation for morality by grounding it in some non-religious source. Trotsky argues that moral reflection has to start from the ultimate end to pursue: if said end does not come from a personal or social dimension, it will inevitably come from the heavens, so to speak, regardless of what is explicitly claimed. Despite modern philosophers' effort to 'naturalise' or, at any rate, to provide it with a non-religious foothold, any attempt to transcend an individual or social foundation for morality is bound to be a cloak for religious views.

Second, bourgeois morality is an instrument for class exploitation. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose views Trotsky considers in his pamphlet, articulated the point of view of the bourgeoisie, which gained power with the English, American, and French revolutions. Despite the differences existing between them, all these thinkers share in common an appeal to abstract norms equally binding on everyone. Trotsky debunks these views by showing that, far from being imperative on each and every one regardless of one's position in society, the supposed norms are vehicles of class exploitation: 'the appeal to abstract norms is not a disinterested philosophical mistake but a necessary element in the mechanics of class deception'.<sup>4</sup> In so doing Trotsky echoes Marx and Engels' well-known tenet that 'the ideas of the ruling class are, in any age, the ruling ideas'.<sup>5</sup> But, crucially, the ruling class cannot spread their ideas by force; they need what Trotsky calls 'the cement of morality': 'the ruling class forces *its* ends upon society and habituates it to considering all those means which contradict its ends as immoral'.<sup>6</sup> One is reminded of Nietzsche's criticism of morality when Trotsky writes that 'it is the function of these abstract norms to prevent the oppressed from arising against the

oppressors'.<sup>7</sup> Let us consider, for instance, the *prima facie* absolute moral norm that theft is wrong: it is evident to what extent the prohibition of theft is meant to protect private property and uphold property rights. A society in which the prohibition of theft plays an important role will be a society whose members are much less likely to resort to it despite the deep inequalities likely to be endemic to it. Against this, and cashing in on his criticism of abstract as well as of bourgeois morality, Trotsky points out that 'morality is a product of social development; it serves social interests; these interests are contradictory; morality more than any other form of ideology has a class character'.<sup>8</sup>

There is a third important point made by Trotsky, which is arguably his finest philosophical contribution to morality and moral thinking from a Marxist perspective. Contrary to the accusation that the end justifies the means, which suggests some kind of rigid division between the two, he suggests that there is a dialectical interdependence of end and means. That is to say, the end and the means cannot be considered independently of one another; rather, they go hand in hand, with the understanding that ultimately it is the end which justifies the means. What is more, what is sometime pursued as an end becomes a means in relation to a further end: for instance, revolutionary Marxists sometimes support reforms and look for ways of securing them, but ultimately those very reforms are pursued in view of a further end, namely a deeper transformation of society. Hence, means and ends swap places in some cases. There remains, however, an ultimate end for Marxist to pursue. Here, Trotsky comes as close as possible to articulating what such an end would look like from a Marxist standpoint: 'the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another'.<sup>9</sup> The first part of this formulation, with its emphasis on the power of humanity over nature, might cause unease among contemporary readers, for in light of the current climate crisis a call could be made for decreasing the power of humanity over nature.<sup>10</sup> However that may be, the second part of the clause, with its talk of abolishing class exploitation, presents succinctly a Marxist conception of the ultimate end. As for the idea that ultimately any means conducive to the end of social revolution is justified, Trotsky takes pains to note that this is not the case. 'When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, replacing it by worship for the "leaders"'. Primarily and irreconcilably, revolutionary morality rejects servility in relation to the bourgeoisie and haughtiness in relation to the toilers, that is, those characteristics in which petty-bourgeois pedants and moralists are thoroughly steeped'.<sup>11</sup> Before concluding our outline of Trotsky's views, we need to raise the question *why*, given the above, *our* morals would be better than *theirs* at all: if morality has a class

character, and, owing to the division into classes of present society, the moral outlook of the working class is pitted against that of the bourgeoisie, why would the former be superior to the latter? As Marx famously put it, between 'equal rights, force decide'.<sup>12</sup> The reply that can be made here is, first, that in capitalist societies the working class represent the vast majority of people, whereas the bourgeoisie only the minority at the top. Second, and perhaps more importantly, while the moral outlook of the bourgeoisie represents the viewpoint of the oppressor, that of the working class represents the oppressed: it is only the oppressed class that is in a position to bring about the requisite changes in a deeply unjust society and act as the liberator of humanity as a whole.

## II. *Their Morals and Ours for Today*

There is much of value in the second part of Trotsky's pamphlet. His main order of business in the later sections of his work is to tackle one by one the charge made against the Bolsheviks in terms of the specific means they are prepared to resort to. Three such extreme means are discussed in detail: the question of lying and deceit; the question of hostages; and the question of violence. On the whole Trotsky contends that it is only in a classless society that it will be possible to do away with lying, deceit, and violence altogether. Until such time, it will be impossible to shun these means unconditionally if one really wants to enhance the prospects of a socialist revolution. Class society is shot through with contradictions and forces pulling in opposite directions; the revolution meant to overcome such a society will inevitably bear some of the signs of its origins. There is much which is of interest here, but in the remainder of this essay I propose to focus on the question of violence; not only is Trotsky's examination of this question particularly insightful, but it also has consequences for the topical question of inter-imperialist war and resistance in the face of external aggression raised by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ever mindful of the experience of the 1917 Russian revolution, Trotsky argues that the end in view as envisaged by Marxist socialists, namely the liberation of mankind and the self-emancipation of the working class, can only come about through a revolutionary process; and revolution in its turn will inevitably issue in civil war. Thus, for those who are seriously committed to overthrowing capitalism, violence cannot be ruled out, on pain of giving up on the whole revolutionary project. Of course, in many circumstances, indeed in most of them, violence will not be justified. Significantly, individual terror, Trotsky argues, is never justified if that is meant to replace a mass movement and the direct involvement of workers and ordinary people. This raises the question as to when violence is justified. On this point Trotsky issues a salutary reminder to avoid posing this question in the abstract: rather, one has to judge on a case-by-case basis, whilst making sure consideration is given to the concrete historical circumstances one finds oneself in. Here Trotsky

remarks that abstract moral pronouncements, those, for instance, condemning all manner of violence (he mentions explicitly both Tolstoy and Ghandi), play into the hands of counter-revolutionary projects: 'idealist morality is counterrevolutionary, that is, in the service of the exploiters'.<sup>13</sup>

There is in my view much of interest in Trotsky's considered views for present-day revolutionary socialists. I have in mind, in particular, the heated debate around the Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced on 24 February 2022. On the one hand, revolutionary socialists should have no hesitation in condemning the Russian invasion, dictated as it is by imperialist reasons and disregard of any humanitarian concern. On the other hand, revolutionary socialists have tended to argue, first, that the Ukrainian people has a right to defend themselves against the Russian invader; second, that Western countries should not send weapons to Ukraine; third, that economic sanctions against Russia are a blunt instrument, which is bound to miss its intended targets. Now, this places revolutionary socialist in a hard position: for, mainstream commentators have tended to argue that sending weapons to Ukraine is a means to helping them defend themselves, and that the economic sanctions against Russia are a necessary tool to condemn the invasion and hopefully make it short-lived. I take it, however, that the above stance is consistent, and that Trotsky helps us to see why this is the case: revolutionary socialists are not averse to violence as such, for when push comes to shove it will be inevitable to engage in it in order to transform society for the better; what they are averse to is state violence and other such forms of violence passing for institutional conduits like the international banking system as well as, above all, military institutions like NATO.<sup>14</sup> These are structures that escape the control of ordinary people and workers, and, worse still, are designed to protect the interest of capitalist empires and the economic status quo as a whole. Furthermore, there is a substantial difference between the violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed. It is one thing to invade another country and condemn its cities to material devastation and its people to innumerable victims; it is quite another to respond to violence in self-defence or, similarly, to resort to violence in order to resist an occupation or other mechanisms of oppression and domination. If this is correct, it follows that revolutionary Marxists can still consistently hold on to the three views mentioned above in a way which is morally sustainable and in keeping with their political practice.

Finally, Trotsky's pamphlet helpfully reminds us to be on the look-out for double standards in contemporary political and moral discourse. Time and again he criticises the way allegedly absolute norms turn out not to be applied consistently but only on the condition that they foster a given agenda. On foot of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the radical left has tried to call out the double standards implicitly accepted by the establishment and the mainstream media in so far as refugees from Ukraine seemed to receive special treatment in comparison to other

refugees. Free from imperialistic allegiances, revolutionary socialists should seize the moral high ground to expose these double standards and distinguish themselves by consistently advocating the defence of humanitarian concerns.

### III. Conclusion

If Marxists do have a morality, the question becomes what kind of morality they rely on. In *Their Morals and Ours* Trotsky has responded to those who contend that Marxists do not have a moral compass at all. But other scholars, more sympathetic towards Marxism, have called into question whether Marxist morality really represents an alternative to moral modern approaches. Notably, there has been a tendency to think that, with their emphasis on freedom and autonomy, Marxists will inevitably fall back on some form of Kantianism; or alternatively on some kind of utilitarianism when it comes to what is acceptable for the sake of furthering the ultimate end.<sup>15</sup> These are large questions that cannot be adequately dealt with here. But I think it is appropriate to conclude by re-stating the necessity for Marxists to take part in these debates and stake out a claim for their moral standpoint as a consistent moral alternative to other well-established contenders (notably Kantianism and utilitarianism). It would be unfortunate if Marxists were to shy away from discussion of these themes because they are seen as irrelevant to their political views and practice.

<sup>1</sup> On Marx and morality, see P. Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics*, Albany: SUNY, 2012; P. Blackledge, 'Marxism and Ethics', *International Socialism* 120, 2008; Gasper, Phil, 'Marxism, Morality, and Human Nature', *International Socialist Review* 82, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See Kolodner, M., 'Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*', *International Socialist Review* 42, 2005, esp. 'Leninism v. Stalinism'.

<sup>3</sup> Trotsky had an interesting discussion with philosopher John Dewey throughout the '30 on revolutionary morality. Dewey responded to Trotsky' pamphlet in an interesting article entitled 'Means and Ends'.

<sup>4</sup> Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> See also Engels' concise pronouncement that 'men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based — from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange', Engels, *Antidühring*, IX. Morality and Law. Eternal Truths.

<sup>6</sup> Trotsky, *Morals*, 21, his emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> But then of course what Trotsky means need not be some kind of exploitative, endless maximisation of the power of human beings over nature: he may very well mean that, for instance, natural disasters can be predicted and avoided through scientific research; that poor and destitute people should be provided for and natural resources allocated for that end; and so on.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, London: Penguin, 1990, 344.

<sup>13</sup> Trotsky, *Morals*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> In his pamphlet Trotsky does talk about state violence: 'In so far as the state is concerned, in peaceful times it limits itself to legalized killings of individuals so that in time of war it may transform the "obligatory" commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" into its opposite. The most "humane" governments, which in peaceful times "detest" war, proclaim during war that the highest duty of their armies is the extermination of the greatest possible number of people', *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> This criticism is succinctly presented in A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London: Duckworth, 242-243.