



Culture as permanent revolution: Lev Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*

Robert Bird¹

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Abstract

First published in 1923, Lev Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* was the first systematic treatment of art by a Communist Party leader. The international history of its publication and reception has gone hand-in-hand with the development of the Marxist theory of culture. This article highlights several specific concepts in Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* which exerted decisive formative influence on critical theory, including the relative autonomy of culture, a broadening of ideology to include cultural practices, and an innovative treatment of class. I conclude that for Trotsky culture can only be described negatively, as its own constant overcoming, as permanent revolution.

Keywords Trotsky · Theory · Culture · Ideology · Class · Permanent revolution

Literature and Revolution

Throughout his life Lev Trotsky was not only a professional revolutionary, but also a prolific and indefatigable writer, emitting a constant flow of books and articles on the broadest possible array of subjects. In 1922–1923 he wrote and published several series of articles in *Pravda*, the main Party newspaper, in a genre somewhere between feuilleton and political tract. Some of these articles were collected as *Problems of Everyday Life* (*Voprosy byta*), which came out 1923 and again in 1925. Others were collected as *Literature and Revolution* (*Literatura i revoliutsiia*), padded out with a section of earlier essays by Trotsky under the subtitle “On the Eve” (*Nakanune*). *Literature and Revolution* was published first in 1923 and then again in 1924, with a new preface and the transcript of a recent speech and its ensuing discussion. Thus, *Literature and Revolution* became the first systematic treatment of art by a Communist Party leader, whether in the Soviet Union or elsewhere.

✉ Robert Bird
bird@uchicago.edu

¹ The University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

Trotsky was an unlikely source for this accolade since as the founding head of the Red Army he had spent the preceding years consumed with a vicious civil war and then with urgent Party work in the wake of Lenin's debilitating strokes. Nonetheless, Trotsky had clearly kept up on his reading and set aside a couple of summers to gather his thoughts about literature and art. Throughout the book he repeatedly invokes the ancient conflict between Achilles and Hector, war and culture. "No matter how important and vital is our cultural work [*kul'turnichestvo*]," Trotsky writes, "we remain as before soldiers on the march" (Trotsky 1991: 150). We need "a detached literature," he adds, "like a soldier on the march needs glass beads [*stekliarus*]" (Trotsky 1991: 37). Surprisingly, however, Trotsky generally strikes a quite conciliatory tone, expressing confidence in art's autonomy. "The Party has and can have no ready decisions" about the methods and outcomes of artistic practice, he writes (Trotsky 1991: 112). Trotsky remained true to this position throughout his remaining life, writing in 1938 to André Breton that "the struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic *truth*, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of *the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self!*" (Trotsky 1970: 132).

Trotsky's advocacy of relative autonomy for culture made *Literature and Revolution* into a bellwether of cultural leftism within world Communism. Like *Problems of Everyday Life, Literature and Revolution* was first published by the publishing house Krasnaia nov', led by Aleksandr Voronskii, with a dedication to Khristian Rakovskii, a Soviet politician of Bulgarian origin. Both Voronskii and Rakovskii would later be ostracized as members of the Left Opposition and then executed as Trotskyites. *Literature and Revolution* also absorbs a brief text by Antonio Gramsci about post-World War I developments in Italian futurism. Despite the contingencies and vagaries of its appearance, *Literature and Revolution* received very wide international circulation. It appeared in China in 1930, while in Japan it was quickly published in two distinct editions, in 1925 and 1931. It was published in Spanish translation in 1923, and German in 1924, and English in 1925. Appearing simultaneously in Britain and the US (from G. Allen and Unwin and from International Publishers, respectively), the English-language edition was widely noted and commented upon by writers and critics as diverse as Sinclair Lewis and T. S. Eliot. The prevailing response was one of cautious fascination; for instance, F. R. Leavis saw Trotsky's position on culture and the means of production as "calamitous," but he accepted that Trotsky was its best advocate to date (Leavis 1932). Thus, *Literature and Revolution* was a decisive event not only in the history of a left opposition to Stalin, but also in the formation of a broad international discourse about Marxist theories of culture.

This far-ranging influence can be traced by mapping individual editions as nodes in international networks of revolutionary ideology and cultural production. For instance, the translator of *Literature and Revolution* into English, Rose Strunsky (1884–1963), was born to a Russian-speaking family that emigrated to the US when she was an infant. After graduation from Stanford University Rose settled in San Francisco in the midst of fellow radicals, including Jack London and the journalist William English Walling, who married Strunsky's sister Anna. Rose and Anna

accompanied Walling to Russia in 1905 to witness the first Russian revolution (Simkin 2014; Boylan 1998). Rose stayed on for a couple of years, and in 1907 the three of them were arrested for revolutionary activity. After returning to the US Rose rejoined the cultural fray. Sinclair Lewis's biographer reports that around 1910 he was "in love with Rose for a while, but when he asked her to the Anarchists' Ball she refused" (Lingeman 2002: 42). In 1914 she published a biography of Abraham Lincoln. Rose returned to Russia in 1921 to accompany her husband Louis Levine, who was stationed as a journalist there. Evidently, she was still in Soviet Russia when Trotsky's book was published 2 years later. Later Rose Strunsky became related to George and Ira Gershwin by marriage. Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, George Gershwin: such was the cultural milieu in which the English-language edition of Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* was generated and received.

Seen in this way, as an articulated series of nodes in the development of revolutionary ideas and cultural networks, the publication history of *Literature and Revolution* closely tracks the destiny of communism in the twentieth century. After the initial wave of editions (nine in eight years), there were none for over 25 years. The revolutionary period of 1964–1974 saw a spike in interest, with ten editions in eight languages (French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish). Yugoslavia saw two editions in the early 1970s, as it broadened the canon of socialist theory. It was republished in Chinese in 1971, but this time in Hong Kong, not Beijing, where it was republished only in 1992.

The book's fate in English tells a slightly different story, namely that of the displacement of Marxist theory by the academic fields of intellectual history and Sovietology. It was rereleased in 1957 (without indication of the translator) in the series "Russell Scholars' Classics in Philosophy, History of Ideas, History, Literature and Criticism," alongside books by Georg Brandes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Henry C. Lea's *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, complete in three volumes. The jacket featured approving blurbs from Leonard Woolf and Upton Sinclair. This edition appeared just as Isaac Deutscher was releasing his seminal three-volume biography of "the prophet," in which Trotsky is lauded as "Russia's leading critic" in the 1920s (Deutscher 1959: 180). The 1957 edition was then re-issued in 1960 and 1966 by the University of Michigan Press, likewise without indication of the translator, the second time as an Ann Arbor Paperback for the Study of Communism and Marxism." In this way a potent revolutionary text enjoyed a second life in the late 1950s and 1960s, but only as defanged classic. It is perceived analogously in Russia itself, where since 1924 it has been republished only once, by Politizdat in 1991. In the quarter century since there has been little active citation of it in Russian critical theory, literary studies or art history.

Despite Paul N. Siegel's publication in 1970 of *On Literature and Art*, a selection of Trotsky's writings on culture that included excerpts from *Literature and Revolution*, and an expanded edition of *Problems of Everyday Life* in 1973, the Anglophone world of the 1970s evinced little interest in *Literature and Revolution*. This is true even of leftist intellectuals like Raymond Williams, Tony Bennett and Terry Eagleton, who were actively producing an English-language version of Marxist critical theory. In his 1979 book *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* Eagleton writes dismissively that "if Trotsky is acutely conscious of

the asymmetries of the aesthetic and historical, he lacks the theoretical instruments to define them precisely” (Eagleton 2006: 171). As I shall relate below, Eagleton does go on to engage with Trotsky’s text, but it is telling that in his later anthology of Marxist literary theory, co-edited with Drew Milne, Eagleton included only Trotsky’s critique of Russian formalism, a movement that in the Western canon has replaced Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* as the truly revolutionary development in early Soviet theory, reflective of a broader intellectual revolution occurring in Russia in the 1910s and 1920s (Eagleton and Milne 1996: 46–59).

However, the pendulum swings back; a new edition of Strunsky’s translation was released in 2005 by Haymarket Books (Chicago), self-described as “a non-profit, progressive book distributor” (Trotsky 2005). The editor William Keach, a specialist in English romantic poetry, augmented the book with poems by poets discussed by Trotsky, as well as a biographical chronology and glossary; he also solicited blurbs for the back cover from Tariq Ali and Terry Eagleton, among others. Here Eagleton hails “Trotsky’s rare combination of literary sensitivity and historical understanding [which] gives the lie to all those for whom Marxist criticism can deal with modes of production but not with metaphors.” Tariq Ali comments: “Re-reading Trotsky on literature 40 years later is a delight.” Thus, as it approaches its centennial, *Literature and Revolution* might be regaining its revolutionary charge (Keach 2005; Wald 1995).

I highlight these bibliographical details not only to illustrate how one might trace the media and networks of revolutionary ideas, but also to demonstrate how the book *Literature and Revolution* has served as a catalyst in successive waves of Marxist cultural theory and critical theory as such. This was, I will argue, one of Trotsky’s major goals in publishing the book in the first place. In the following I will highlight three areas where Trotsky makes decisive interventions that remain productive and problematic within critical theory: the definition of literature as a medium; the mechanism of the superstructure; and the relation between cultural production and class.

Literature

Trotsky’s title announces its vast and startling ambition. It is not “literature of revolution” or “literature about revolution.” Indeed, Trotsky begins by declaring that since the Russian revolution “Art has revealed—as always at the beginning of a major epoch—terrifying helplessness” (Trotskii 1991: 32). Nor can Trotsky’s argument be reduced to mere advocacy for a particular policy towards literature on the part of the government and the Russian Communist Party. Instead, Trotsky seeks to bring literature into a direct theoretical relation with revolution, understood not only as a changeover of power, but also as the ongoing process of transforming the world into socialism, under the hegemony of the proletariat, what Trotsky called “permanent revolution.”

But what is “literature” for Trotsky? Although Trotsky touches upon many distinct mediums, including architecture and sculpture, at first glance his title

betrays the logocentrism of the Russian radical tradition. It is possible at times to superimpose Trotsky's argument onto that of Lenin's 1905 article "Party Organization and Party Literature," which advocates a hard line in bringing all literature purporting to be Social Democratic under the direct supervision of the Social Democratic Party:

Today literature, even that published "legally", can be nine-tenths party literature. It must become party literature. In contradistinction to bourgeois customs, to the profit-making, commercialized bourgeois press, to bourgeois literary careerism and individualism, "aristocratic anarchism" and drive for profit, the socialist proletariat must put forward the principle of *party literature*, must develop this principle and put it into practice as fully and completely as possible. (Lenin 1965: 45)

Evidently, by "literature" Lenin is often taken to mean didactic tracts and the like. It could be that Lenin simply never thought of imaginative literature as a subject pertinent to political struggle, unless it served clear and unambiguous didactic purposes, like social satire or like his favorite novel, Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What is to be done?* However, several of Lenin's phrases, especially those railing against "pornography," lead one to think that he might also include in the Party's purview imaginative literature and even visual art that purports to serve the cause of social emancipation, for example the works of Leonid Andreev from the time of the 1905 Revolution. Therefore Lenin probably has in mind all aesthetic and theoretical media produced under the aegis of the Party, broadly construed.

Another source of ambiguity is precisely the word "partiinyi," which could equally be translated into English as "party" or as "partisan." Is it enough that literature (in the broad sense, whether didactic or imaginative) ally itself with a distinct political standpoint, or must it be part and parcel of organized party work, something that we might call propaganda? Towards the end of his essay Lenin appears to come down decisively on the latter position:

Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work. (Lenin 1965: 45)

However one understand the bounds of "literature" and "partisanship"/"party-mindedness" for Lenin, the most telling word here is "planned" (*planomerno* in the original Russian). As the consciousness of the working class the Party has the ability and authority to establish a roadmap valid not only for political, but also for all other kinds of intellectual work. Even work that is not directly political must still perform a pre-determined role within the planned revolutionary process.

Despite his vastly broader scope and depth of reading, at times in *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky gestures towards a position similar to Lenin's on the need for writers to slot into the Party's plan. The fellow travelers, Trotsky writes, "must feel all the more disappointment, the clearer it becomes that the revolution is not

a rave [*radenie*], but intention, organization, plan and labor” (Trotskii 1991: 68). Any poet “will become a poet of the revolution [...] when he learns to encompass it entirely, to evaluate its defeats as steps to victory, when he penetrates into the planned nature of its retreats and is able to find the undying spirit of revolution and its poetry even in the tense preparation of forces in the periods when spontaneity ebbs” (Trotskii 1991: 87). When Trotsky makes specific criticisms, he is capable of sounding not only like a mouthpiece of official Party policy about art and culture, but even like a prosecutor indicting the criminally guilty, in a foretaste of high Stalinism. “To be outside the revolution means to be in emigration,” says the man who had recently supported the deportation of hundreds of intellectuals on the notorious “philosophers’ steamboats” (Trotskii 1991: 69). So, is *Literature and Revolution* a presaging of totalitarian cultural politics or a still-relevant contribution to our understanding of cultural production in a society undergoing radical social and political change?

I treat these passages as anomalous with respect to Trotsky’s major arguments, in which he mostly deploys “literature” in a broad sense to denote a complement to the concept of “consciousness,” in the old Leninist dichotomy of consciousness and spontaneity. Distinct from pure spontaneity and from pure consciousness, literature is the place where spontaneous cultural force manifests itself to consciousness before being formed into ideology. This arena of public life has been marginalized in the wake of the revolution, which deploys ideas but does not create new ones. “When weapons ring out, the muses are silent,” Trotsky intones (Trotskii 1924: 211). But it turns out that revolution can yield peaceful phases, and then laggard, untamed literature catches up to the conscious historical process and begins to form the terms of the next phase of struggle. NEP was just this kind of lull, where the Party’s plan temporarily recedes and literature again becomes a vital arena. Acknowledging literature’s centrality and autonomy under NEP, Trotsky is inquiring into its structure and mechanisms.

A telling passage comes in the speech added in the 1924 edition, where Trotsky disputes Fëdor Raskol’nikov’s and David Riazanov’s questioning of Dante’s value except as a historical document. Trotsky argues that Dante retains “artistic” significance even if his historical world has passed: “Dante is a genius. He raises the experiences of his epoch to an enormous artistic height” (Trotskii 1924: 199). In support of this admittedly vague argument Trotsky cites the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola, who in an 1896 essay on historical materialism had argued against reductive views of history that “turn Marxian theory into a cliché and a universal skeleton key” (Trotskii 1924: 201). “It is one thing to understand something and express it logically,” Trotsky concludes, “but quite another to assimilate this new thing organically, reconstruct the order of one’s feelings, and find for this new order artistic expression. The latter process is more organic, slower, and more grudgingly submits to conscious action—and in the final analysis it always comes belatedly” (Trotskii 1924: 197).

Labriola was not only an authority on Dante, but also the translator of the Italian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. In his 1893 preface to this translation Engels tipped his cap to Labriola by identifying Dante as “the final poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times”: “Today, as in 1300, a new

historical era is approaching. Will Italy give us the new Dante, who will mark the hour of the birth of this new, proletarian era?" (Jossa 2012: 81). Clearly aware of this history, Trotsky draws on both Labriola and Engels in his defense of the historical agency of literature, which registers the emergence of historical change. Though it might lag behind consciousness and therefore belongs "in the supply train of historical movement" (Trotskii 1991: 183), Trotsky avers, it retains singular value. It is, he writes, "a special, specific area of human creativity" (Trotskii 1924: 207). Adapting the traditional terminology of philosophical aesthetics, we might say that literature possesses a relative autonomy, i.e. an autonomy that can be coordinated with social and economic history, but which follows its own logic and speed:

Disputes about "pure art" and about tendentious art were appropriate between liberals and populists. They do not suit us. Materialist dialectics is above this: seen from the viewpoint of the objective historical process, for materialist dialectics art is always socially-auxiliary, historically-utilitarian: for obscure and vague moods it finds the needed rhythm of words, bringing thought and feeling together or opposing them to each other, enriching the spiritual experience of the individual and the collective, refining feeling, making it more flexible, more responsive, more resonant, broadening the volume of thought through experience accumulated not in an individual manner, educating the individual, the social group, the class, and the nation. (Trotskii 1991: 134)

Trotsky habitually compares the autonomous process of literature and art to the tide as well as to the experience of a mapless traveler on a road that unfurls before him unexpectedly, with all its twists and turns. Writers and art itself are described as following their own roads: "Art must travel its paths on its own two feet. The methods of Marxism are not the methods of art. The Party governs the proletariat, but not the historical process" (Trotskii 1991: 170). A key word in the book is *poputchik*, or fellow traveler, which denotes those writers who follow the path of the revolution without necessarily accepting the leadership of the Party. Trotsky grants such fellow travelers as Boris Pil'niak a proud place among revolutionary writers, although they do not subscribe to revolutionary ideology in any explicit way. It is precisely their autonomy from Party authority that allows them to see and to register the unplanned contingencies that history throws up before those traveling the path of revolution.

Despite Terry Eagleton's afore-cited dismissal of Trotsky as lacking in theoretical sophistication, in his *Criticism and Ideology* Eagleton cites Trotsky's consideration of Dante at length. According to Eagleton, Trotsky's point is as follows:

It is not that Dante's work is valuable because it 'speaks of' an important historical era, or 'expresses the consciousness' of that epoch. Its value is an effect of the process whereby the complex ideological conjuncture in which it inheres so produces (internally distantiates) itself in a play of textual significations as to render its depths and intricacies vividly perceptible. (Eagleton 2006: 177–178)

Based on this appreciative summary, Eagleton concludes:

Trotsky's riposte to Raskolnikov is certainly correct: literature is not just some form of documentary access to ideology. Literature is a peculiar mode of linguistic organization which, by a particular 'disturbance' of conventional modes of signification, so foregrounds certain modes of sense making as to allow us to perceive the ideology in which they inhere." (Eagleton 2006: 185)

Trotsky does not possess such a sophisticated vocabulary for his literary theory, but he has been reading Freud and the Russian formalists. He explains his leniency towards Dante by saying that it is more difficult for an artist to endure a "class-based, social turn in his art," than it is for non-artists to undergo ideological change. This is not only because "Art is created on the basis of constant interaction between class and its artists in the senses of everyday life, culture and ideas" (Trotskii 1924: 208), but also because in its proximity to non-logical sources of cognition art encounters additional sources of resistance. Art must be treated differently than politics "... because it has its own techniques [*priemy*] and methods, its own laws of development and because in artistic creativity an enormous role is played by subconscious processes—slower, lazier and less obedient to governance and direction—precisely because they are subconscious" (Trotskii 1924: 208).

Trotsky's critique of futurism is founded similarly less on its relation to the Party than this movement's attempt to bypass the logic of history and plan a socialist art in the laboratory, instead of in direct contention with historical pressures. "You can't arm an army with the idea of an unrealized invention," Trotsky jokes (Trotskii 1991: 112). Mayakovsky, for instance, "... decided to orient himself on the proletarian line and wrote 150,000,000," but here "in a logical sense he overtook his creative underpinning [*podopleka*]." Consciousness cannot outstrip material being, and the new art can only be produced "on the broad, universal economic and cultural pathways" (Trotskii 1991: 23). But it would be wrong to reduce this critique to bourgeois taste or a rhetoric of populism. "An idea must become flesh in order to become a force," Trotsky writes ((Trotskii 1991: 28). The artist is based not in the realm of pure reason, but in its material substrate, a kind of basis within the superstructure. The artist doesn't govern the phenomenon, but she can shape it and affect its perception by others.

I have traced several of his metaphors, but Trotsky's key image throughout the book is the insistence that nothing can happen "behind the back" of the proletariat. History has to be informed by consciousness, spontaneity by "revolutionary teleology" (Trotskii 1991: 91). The proletariat must look the revolution in the eye. And literature denotes a primary mode of this vision.

The superstructure

Literature, then, is the material form of ideology. It is subordinate to pure ideology in that its intentions are opaque to itself and it is belated in its arrival. But it is superior to pure ideology in that it permeates everyday life and is subject to endless acts of manipulation, interpretation, and adaptation. Literature is ideology as

an interactive and dialectical process: “The reader creates the writer, and the writer creates the reader,” Trotsky writes (Trotskii 1991: 152). Trotsky never once uses the term “superstructure” in *Literature and Revolution*, but he consistently indicates that ideological conflict must be waged not only in the realm of theory, but also in realms of material cultural practices.

The saturation and malleability of everyday life was the particular emphasis of Trotsky's other 1923 book, *Problems of Everyday Life*, echoes of which abound in *Literature and Revolution*:

For a materialist, religion, law, morality and art are all separate aspects of a basically unified process of social development. Becoming articulated from their productive basis, becoming more complex, consolidating and detailing their particularities, politics, religion, law, ethics, and aesthetics remain functions of a socially-encumbered person and are subordinated to the laws of his social organization. (Trotskii 1991: 144).

Trotsky calls this picture “realistic monism” (Trotskii 1991: 183). Under socialism ideological theory and practice will merge with their productive basis into a single process.

The problem is to describe the ways in which the superstructure exerts a shaping force on the material base of society, including the cultural practices of “socially-encumbered” people. Marx and Engels bestowed the terms base and superstructure without providing much guidance in thinking about their dialectical interaction. Lenin resolves the problem by positing the ability of ideology to drive the transformation of the base. Trotsky consistently indicates that there is a difference between pure ideology and the material ideology reproduced by cultural practices. This latter, mediated ideology must be viewed as following its own historical logic, and therefore it requires a distinct methodology. In the realm of art, this means understanding that even the most revolutionary art does not occur in a vacuum, that “the new artist will need all the techniques and methods created by the past, and some additional ones as well” (Trotskii 1991: 183). These new methods include new media, like the newspaper and the cinema, about which Trotsky writes repeatedly and passionately.

Trotsky explicitly articulates these theoretical postulates as a response to Russian formalism, which he perspicaciously singles out as the main theoretical alternative to a Marxist aesthetic. This was the first robust convergence of Marxism and formalism, and therefore, I would argue, a crucial event in the emergence of critical theory as such. Like Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov at the end of the decade, Trotsky is keen to acknowledge the achievements of the formalists in terms of identifying and describing the autonomous historical and cognitive logic of art, while also seeking to qualify this autonomy as relative to the broader process of history and ideology. “It stands to reason that the social criterion does not exclude but goes hand in hand with formal critique” (Trotskii 1991: 58). I will highlight two specific concepts that Trotskii develops in response to formalism.

First is the sense of art as existing always in a historical chain, what Trotsky calls *preemstvennost'*, which he defines as “dialectical continuity”: “Artistic creativity is always a complex re-facing of old forms under the influence of new stimuli coming

from an area outside of art itself” (Trotsky 1991: 142). As much as the revolutionary’s attention might be drawn to the “new stimuli,” he can only read them through the deformation of pre-existing forms, which comprise the material basis of the superstructure.

Second, Trotsky focuses on the functioning of genre. Revolution does not denote the death of old genres. Quite the contrary; the revolution needs to find expression within the meaningful structures inherited from the old world, even such seemingly antithetical ones as the lyric: “The epoch, the class and its world-feeling are expressed in plotless lyric just as much as in the social novel” (Trotsky 1991: 180). “The new human will not be formed without a new lyric” (Trotsky 1991: 131). In other words, genre denotes a specific set of constraints on meaning and expression, but also a set of potentialities capturing the new and giving it flesh. Genre is not indifferent to its ontological determination (i.e., the lyric is inherently inclined towards the subjective), and so is not ideologically neutral, but it is also cannot be confined wholly to this determination and cannot be voluntaristically rejected, only transformed in practice.

The history and taxonomy of literary forms thus constitute the material basis of literary ideology. To practice literature or to understand its ideological significance means to intervene in these specific dimensions, in terms dictated internally, autonomously from the ideological or economic needs of the moment (i.e., the Party’s “plan”). As long as cultural interventions observe this autonomy, they can ultimately be read on a larger scale as steps towards the reconciliation of the material practices of society and their ideological interpretation. Literature correlates ideology to the emerging totality of revolutionary practice.

Class

Trotsky makes his most controversial argument when he takes up the relationship between class and culture, specifically the possibility of a properly proletarian culture. On the one hand, he writes that “each ruling class creates its own culture” (Trotsky 1991: 146). On the other, he proclaims that “There is no such thing, of course, as bourgeois poetry, insofar as poetry is a free art and not class service” (Trotsky 1991: 57). The question therefore becomes whether the proletariat as a ruling class can follow the bourgeoisie in producing a literature that will not be servile but provide as a relatively autonomous arena for the free development of class consciousness.

In resolving this dilemma Trotsky relies heavily on the notion of an intelligentsia, which he presents as a kind of ideological superstructure within society, or a social consciousness. Just as art is relatively autonomous of the socio-economic processes, so the intelligentsia appears to have a relative monopoly on cultural production despite the proletarian revolution. If the ultimate *telos* of history is the “complete overcoming of the alienation” between physical and intellectual labor (Trotsky 1991: 25) and the end of class conflict, then in a sense socialism means the universalization of the condition of the intelligentsia.

This distinction becomes particularly controversial when Trotsky considers the prospects of a properly proletarian culture. The proletariat is the ruling class, but it has not yet mastered the means of cultural production. Even the proletariat's development of an internal intelligentsia testifies to an imbalance of cultural power within the class that prevents the proletariat from becoming a cultural hegemon. Trotsky even suggests that it is somehow inherent to the proletariat to be alienated from cultural production. "Before the proletariat leaves the stage of cultural tutelage it will cease to be the proletariat" (Trotskii 1991: 153).

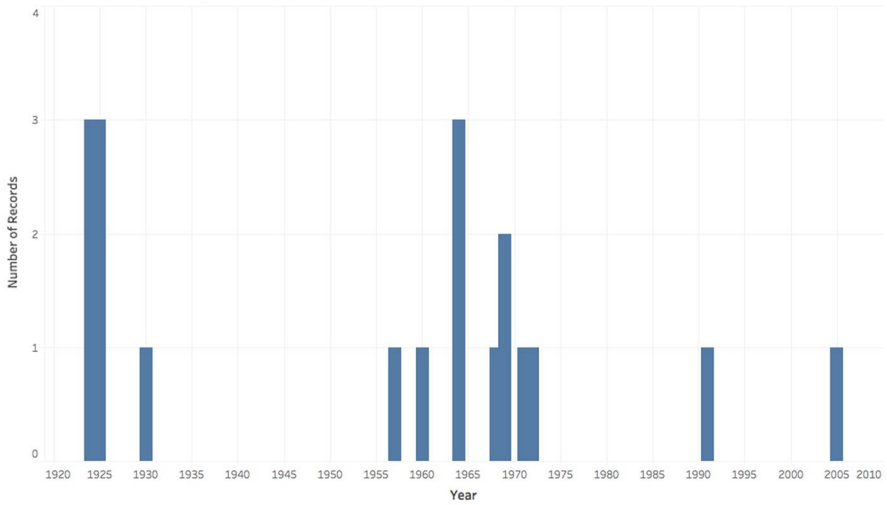
At the same time, the imminence of other revolutions means that the proletariat will not preside over a peaceful period of construction until world revolution is complete and socialism is achieved, a process that Trotsky anticipates will take merely several decades (Trotskii 1991: 146). Therefore "the fully-fledged cultural and artistic harvest," Trotsky writes, "will fortunately be no longer proletarian, but socialist" (Trotskii 1991: 168). In this light, Trotsky defines the present moment as "preparation for the preparation" (Trotskii 1991: 25). It is a facet of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

This point became the most controversial in the immediate reception of Trotsky's book by his contemporaries, especially on the occasion of a discussion of literary policy convened by the Central Committee in 1925. Anatolii Lunacharsky averred that Trotsky "treated the proletarian dictatorship as a cultural vacuum and viewed the present as a sterile hiatus between a creative past and a creative future" (Deutscher 1959: 198). Nikolai Bukharin took issue with Trotsky's rather compressed timeframe, arguing that "the proletariat would in time achieve cultural preponderance as well and impart its character to the spiritual creation of the last epoch of class society" (Deutscher 1959: 199). As Isaac Deutscher points out, history has shown the legitimacy of Trotsky's doubts concerning proletarian culture in the Soviet Union. The empowerment of nominally proletarian groups in the late 1920s led to a reductive *agit-prop*, while the attempt to create socialist realism led arguably to a cultural and media system alienated from the actual lives of working men and women (Deutscher 1959: 198). As Trotsky remarks, "you can't create a class culture behind the backs of the class itself" (Trotskii 1991: 153). Cultural production was relatively autonomous from economic production not only in its ontology, but also in its social makeup.

Walter Benjamin picked up on this point, claiming that "it is far less a matter of making the artist of bourgeois origin into a master of 'proletarian art' than of deploying him, even at the expense of his artistic activity, at important points in this image space. Indeed, mightn't the interruption of his 'artistic career' perhaps be an essential part of his new function?" (Benjamin 1999: 217). In conclusion, then, in *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky proposes permanent revolution not only as a change in political institutions and social structures, but also as the constant disruption of the material forms of cultural practice, until the agents of culture eventually overcome their own autonomy.

Figure compiled by Alexandra Price

Number of Publications per Year



Geographical Distribution of Editions of *Literature and Revolution*



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