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Permanent Revolution

The Marxism of Trotsky's "Results and Prospects"

- Features -

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Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, as sketched for the first time in his essay *Results and Prospects* (1906), was one of the most astonishing political breakthroughs in Marxist thinking at the beginning of the XXth century. By rejecting the idea of separate historical stages - the first one being a « bourgeois democratic » one - in the future Russian Revolution, and raising the possibility of transforming the democratic into a proletarian/socialist revolution in a « permanent » (i.e. uninterrupted) process, it not only predicted the general strategy of the October revolution, but also provided key insights into the other revolutionary processes which would take place later on, in China, Indochina, Cuba, etc. Of course, it is not without its problems and shortcomings, but it was incomparably more relevant to the real revolutionary processes in the periphery of the capitalist system than anything produced by « orthodox Marxism » from the death of Engels until 1917.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Lenin_Trotsky_Kamenev.jpg]

Kamenev (left) with Lenin and Trotsky

In fact, the idea of permanent revolution appeared already in Marx and Engels, notably in their Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League, from March 1850, while the German Revolution of 1848-50 - in an absolutist and backward country - still seemed to unfold. Against the unholy alliance of the liberal bourgeoisie and absolutism, they championed the common action of the workers with the democratic parties of the petty bourgeoisie.

But they insisted on the need of an independent proletarian perspective : “while the democratic petty bourgeoisie want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible...it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far - not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world - that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers”. [1]

This striking passage contains three of the fundamental themes that Trotsky would later develop in *Results and Prospects* : 1) the uninterrupted development of the revolution in a semi-feudal country, leading to the conquest of power by the working class ; 2) the need for the proletarian forces in power to take anti-capitalist and socialist measures ; 3) the necessarily international character of the revolutionary process and of the new socialist society, without classes or private property.

The idea of a socialist revolution in the backward periphery of capitalism - although not the terms “permanent revolution”- is also present in late Marx writings on Russia : the letter to Vera Zassoulitsch (1881) and, together with Engels, the preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto : “If the Russian revolution sounds the signal of a proletarian revolution in the West so that each complements the other, the prevailing form of communal ownership of land in Russia may form the starting point for a communist course of development”. [2]

With the exception of Trotsky, these ideas seem to have been lost to Russian Marxism in the years between the end of the XIXth century and 1917. If we leave aside the semi-Marxists in the populist camp, such as Nicolaïon, or the “legal marxists” such as Piotr Struve, there remain four clearly delimited positions inside Russian social-democracy :

I) The Menshevik view , which considered the future Russian revolution as bourgeois by its nature and its driving

force would be an alliance of the proletariat with the liberal bourgeoisie. Plekhanov and his friends believed that Russia was a backward, "Asiatic" and barbarous country requiring a long stage of industrialism and "Europeanization" before the proletariat could aspire to power. Only after Russia has developed its productive forces, and passed into the historical stage of advanced capitalism and parliamentary democracy would the requisite material and political conditions be available for a socialist transformation.

II) The Bolshevik conception also recognized the inevitably bourgeois-democratic character of the revolution, but it excluded the bourgeoisie from the revolutionary bloc. According to Lenin, only the proletariat and the peasantry were authentically revolutionary forces, bound to establish through their alliance a common democratic revolutionary dictatorship. Of course, as we know, Lenin changed radically his approach, after the April Theses of 1917.

III) Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg, while acknowledging the bourgeois character of the revolution in the last instance, insisted on the hegemonic revolutionary role of the proletariat supported by the peasantry. The destruction of Czarist absolutism could not be achieved short of the establishment of a workers' power led by social-democracy. However, such a proletarian government could not yet transcend in its programmatic aims the fixed limits of bourgeois democracy.

IV) Finally, Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution, which envisaged not only the hegemonic role of the proletariat and the necessity of its seizure of power, but also the possibility of a growing over of the democratic into the socialist revolution.

Curiously enough, Trotsky does not mention, in Results and Prospects, any of the above mentioned pieces by Marx and Engels. He probably ignored the Address of March 1850: the re-edition of 1850 in Zurich, in German, was not well known in Russia. His immediate source for the term "permanent revolution" in 1905 seems to have been an article by Franz Mehring on the events in Russia, "Die Revolution in Permanenz", published in the Neue Zeit, the theoretical organ of German Social-Democracy. Mehring's article was immediately translated in 1905 in Trotsky's paper Nachalo in Petrograd and in the same issue appeared also the first article in which Lev Davidovitch used the term "permanent revolution": "Between the immediate goal and the final goal there should be a permanent revolutionary chain".

However, a close reading of Mehring's piece shows that the German Marxist used the words, but was not really a partisan of permanent revolution in the same sense as Trotsky in 1905-1906. The vital kernel of the theory, its concept of the uninterrupted going-over of the democratic towards the socialist revolution, was denied by Mehring. This was well understood by Martov, the great Menshevik leader, who, in a work written many years later, recalled Trotsky's piece as a disturbing "deviation from the theoretical foundations of the Programm of Russian Social-Democracy". He clearly distinguished between Mehring's article, which he considered acceptable, and Trotsky's essay, which he repudiated as "utopian", since it transcended "the historical task which flows from the existent level of productive forces". [3]

The ideas suggested in various of Trotsky's articles in 1905 - particularly in his preface for the Russian translation of Marx's writings on the Paris Commune - were then developed, in a more systematic and coherent way, in Results and Prospects (1906). However, this bold piece of writing remained for a long time a forgotten book. It seems that Lenin did not read it - at least before 1917 - and its influence over contemporary Russian Marxism was desultory at best. Like all forerunners, Trotsky was in advance of his time, and his ideas were too novel and heterodox to be accepted, or even studied, by his party comrades.

How was it possible for Trotsky to cut the gordian knot of Second International Marxism - the economicist definition of the nature of a future revolution by "the level of productive forces" - and to grasp the revolutionary possibilities that lay beyond the dogmatic construction of a bourgeois democratic Russian revolution which was the unquestioned

problematic of all other Marxist propositions ?

There seems to exist an intimate link between the dialectical method and revolutionary theory : not by chance, the high period of revolutionary thinking in the XXth century, the years 1905-1925, are also those of some of the most interesting attempts to use the hegel-marxist dialectics as an instrument of knowledge and action. Let me try to illustrate the connexion between dialectics and revolution in Trotsky's early work.

A careful study of the roots of Trotsky's political boldness and of the whole theory of permanent revolution, reveals that his views were informed by a specific understanding of Marxism, an interpretation of the dialectical materialist method, distinct from the dominant orthodoxy of the Second International, and of Russian Marxism.

The young Trotsky did not read Hegel, but his understanding of Marxist theory owes much to his first lectures in historical materialism, namely, the works of Antonio Labriola. In his autobiography he recalled the "delight" with which he first devoured Labriola's essays during his imprisonment in Odessa in 1893. [4] His initiation into dialectics thus took place through an encounter with perhaps the least orthodox of the major figures of the Second International.

Formed in the Hegelian school, Labriola fought relentlessly against the neo-positivist and vulgar-materialist trends that proliferated in Italian Marxism (Turati !). He was one of the first to reject the economistic interpretations of Marxism by attempting to restore the dialectical concepts of totality and historical process. Labriola defended historical materialism as a self-sufficient and independent theoretical system, irreducible to other currents ; he also rejected scholastic dogmatism and the cult of the textbook, insisting on the need of a critical development of Marxism. [5]

Trotsky's starting-point, therefore, was this critical, dialectical and anti-dogmatical understanding that Labriola had inspired. "Marxism", he wrote in 1906, "is above all a method of analysis - not analysis of texts, but analysis of social relations". Let us focus on five of the most important and distinctive features of the methodology that underlies the Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, in his distinction from the other Russian Marxists , from Plekhanov to Lenin and from the Mencheviks to the Bolcheviks (before 1917).

1. From the vantage point of the dialectical comprehension of the unity of the opposites, Trotsky criticized the Bolsheviks' rigid division between the socialist power of the proletariat and the "democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants", as a "logical, purely formal operation". This abstract logic is even more sharply attacked in his polemic against Plekhanov, whose whole reasoning can be reduced to an "empty syllogism": our revolution is bourgeois, therefore we should support the Kadets, the constitutionalist bourgeois party. Moreover, in an astonishing passage from a critique against the Menchevik Tcherevanin, he explicitly condemned the analytical - i.e. abstract-formal, pre-dialectical - character of Menchevik politics : "Tcherevanin constructs his tactics as Spinoza did his ethics, that is to say, geometrically". [6] Of course, Trotsky was not a philosopher and almost never wrote specific philosophical texts, but this makes his clear-sighted grasp of the methodological dimension of his controversy with stagist conceptions all the more remarkable.

2. In *History and Class consciousness* (1923), Lukacs insisted that the dialectical category of totality was the essence of Marx's method, indeed the very principle of revolution within the domain of knowledge. [7] Trotsky's theory, written twenty years earlier, is an exceptionally significant illustration of this Lukacsian thesis. Indeed, one of the essential sources of the superiority of Trotsky's revolutionary thought is the fact that he adopted the viewpoint of totality, perceiving capitalism and the class struggle as a world process. In the Preface to a Russian edition (1905) of Lassalle's articles about the revolution of 1848, he argues : "Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism (...) This immediately gives the events now unfolding and international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class (...) will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for

which history has created the objective condition". [8] Only by posing the problem in these terms - at the level of "maturity" of the capitalist system in its totality - was it possible to transcend the traditional perspective of the Russian Marxists, who defined the socialist-revolutionary "unripeness" of Russia exclusively in terms of a national economic determinism.

3. Trotsky explicitly rejected the un-dialectical economicism - the tendency to reduce, in a non-mediated and one-sided way, all social, political and ideological contradictions to the economic infra-structure - which was one of the hallmarks of Plekhanov's vulgar materialist interpretation of Marxism. Indeed, Trotsky's break with economicism was one of the decisive steps towards the theory of permanent revolution. A key paragraph in Results and Prospects defined with precision the political stakes implied in this rupture: "To imagine that the dictatorship of the proletariat is in some way automatically dependent on the technical development and resources of a country is a prejudice of 'economic' materialism simplified to absurdity. This point of view has nothing in common with Marxism". [9]

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Fall_of_Saigon.jpg]

May Day 1976. DRV tank crew welcomed into Saigon.

4. Trotsky's method refused the un-dialectical conception of history as a pre-determined evolution, typical of Menchevik arguments. He had a rich and dialectical understanding of historical development as a contradictory process, where at every moment alternatives are posed. The task of Marxism, he wrote, was precisely to "discover the 'possibilities' of the developing revolution". [10] In Results and Prospects, as well as in later essays - for instance, his polemic against the Mencheviks, "The proletariat and the Russian revolution" (1908), he analyzes the process of permanent revolution towards socialist transformation through the dialectical concept of objective possibility, whose outcome depended on innumerable subjective factors as well as unforeseeable events - and not as an inevitable necessity whose triumph (or defeat) was already assured. It was this recognition of the open character of social historicity that gave revolutionary praxis its decisive place in the architecture of Trotsky's theoretical-political ideas from 1905 on.

5. While the Populists insisted on the peculiarities of Russia and the Mencheviks believed that their country would necessarily follow the "general laws" of capitalist development, Trotsky was able to achieve a dialectical synthesis between the universal and the particular, the specificity of the Russian social formation and the world capitalist process. In a remarkable passage from the History of the Russian Revolution (1930) he explicitly formulated the viewpoint that was already implicit in his 1906 essays: "In the essence of the matter the Slavophile conception, with all its reactionary fantasticness, and also Narodnikism, with all its democratic illusions, were by no means mere speculations, but rested upon indubitable and moreover deep peculiarities of Russia's development, understood one-sidedly however and incorrectly evaluated. In its struggle with Narodnikism, Russian Marxism, demonstrating the identity of the laws of development for all countries, not infrequently fell into a dogmatic mechanization discovering a tendency to pour out the baby with the bath". [11] Trotsky's historical perspective was, therefore, a dialectical Aufhebung, able to simultaneously negate-preserve-transcend the contradiction between the Populists and the Russian Marxists.

It was the combination of all these methodological innovations that made Results and Prospects so unique in the landscape of Russian Marxism before 1917; dialectics was at the heart of the theory of permanent revolution. As Isaac Deutscher wrote in his biography, if one reads again this pamphlet from 1906, "one cannot but be impressed by the sweep and boldness of this vision. He reconnoitred the future as one who surveys from a towering mountain top a new and immense horizon and points to vast, uncharted landmarks in the distance". [12]

A similar link between dialectics and revolutionary politics can be found in Lenin's evolution. Vladimir Illitch remained faithful to the orthodox views of Russian Marxism till 1914, when the beginning of the war led him to discover dialectics: the study of Hegelian logic was the instrument by means of which he cleared the theoretical road leading to the Finland Station of Petrograd, where he first announced "All the power to the soviets". In March-April 1917, liberated from the obstacle represented by predialectical Marxism, Lenin could, under the pressure of events, rid

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himself in good time of its political corollary: the abstract and rigid principle according to which "The Russian revolution could only be bourgeois, since Russia was not economically ripe for a socialist revolution."

Once he crossed the Rubicon, he applied himself to studying the problem from a practical, concrete, and realistic angle and came to conclusions very similar to those announced by Trotsky in 1906 : what are the measures, constituting in fact the transition towards socialism, that could be made acceptable to the majority of the people, that is, the masses of the workers and peasants ? This is the road which led to the October Revolution...

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lowysmall.jpg>]

[1] In Marx, Engels, The Revolutions of 1848, Penguin, 1973, p. 323-4.

[2] Marx, Engels, The Russian Menace to Europe, London, 1953, p. 217.

[3] Martov, Geschichte der Russischen Sozialdemokratie, Berlin, 196, pp. 164-165.

[4] Trotsky, My Life, New York, 1960, p. 119

[5] See A.Labriola, La concepcion materialista de la historia (1897), La Habana, 1970, p. 115, 243.

[6] Trotsky, "The proletariat and the Russian revolution", and "Our Differences" in 1905, London, 1971, p. 289 , 306-312.

[7] G.Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, London, 1971, ch. 1.

[8] Quoted in Results and Prospects, London, 1962, p. 240.

[9] Results and Prospects, p. 195.

[10] Ibid p. 168.

[11] Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution, London, 1965, vol. I, p. 427.

[12] I. Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, London, 1954, p. 161