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The end of history?

The Lessons of Third World Revolutions

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The revolutionary processes in the Third World since World War II have confirmed the validity of the strategy of permanent revolution. Wherever these processes have climaxed in a full break with the old ruling classes and with international capital the historical tasks of the national-democratic revolution (national unification, independence from imperialism) have been realized.

This was the case of Yugoslavia, Indochina, China, Cuba, Nicaragua. Wherever the revolutionary process did not culminate in such a full break, key tasks of the national-democratic revolution remain unfulfilled. This was the case of Indonesia, Bolivia, Egypt, Algeria, Chile, Iran.

The theory (strategy) of permanent revolution is counterposed to the traditional Comintern/CP strategy since the middle nineteen twenties, to wit that of the "revolution by stages," in which a first phase of "bloc of four classes" (the so-called "national" bourgeoisie; the peasantry; the urban petty-bourgeoisie and the proletariat) is supposed to eliminate by a common political struggle the semi-feudal and oligarchic power structures, including foreign imperialist ones. Only in a second phase is the proletarian struggle for power supposed to come to the forefront. This strategy first led to disaster in China in 1927. It has led to grave defeats ever since. It is increasingly challenged inside many CPs themselves.

It is of no avail to avoid making this fundamental choice by the use of abstract formulas. The formulas, "workers and farmers government" or, worse, "people's power" or "broad popular alliance under the hegemony of the working class," just evade the issue. What revolutions are all about is state power. The class nature of state power-and/or of the question which major fraction of a given class exercises state power-is decisive. Either the formulas just cited are synonymous with the overthrow of the bourgeois-oligarchic state, its army and its repressive apparatus, and with the establishment of a workers state; or the formulas imply that the existing state apparatus is not to be "immediately" destroyed-in which case the class nature of the state remains bourgeois-oligarchic and the revolution will be defeated.

When it is said that without the conquest of power by the working class, without overthrow of the state of the former ruling classes, the historical tasks of the national-democratic revolution will not be fully realized, this does not mean that none of these tasks can be initiated under bourgeois or petty-bourgeois governments. After World War II, most of the previously colonial countries did after all achieve political national independence without overthrowing the capitalist order. In some cases at least, India being the most striking one, this was not purely formal but also implied a degree of economic autonomy from imperialism which made at least initial industrialization under national bourgeois ownership possible. Starting with the late sixties, a series of semi-colonial countries succeeded in launching a process of semi-industrialization which went much farther (South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, Singapore, Hong Kong are the most important cases), often supported by substantial land reforms as indispensable launching pads for these take-offs. The famous controversy of the nineteen fifties and the nineteen sixties on the so-called "dependencia" theory-the impossibility of any serious degree of industrialization without a total break with imperialism-has thus been settled by history.

It is likewise incorrect to interpret the theory of the permanent revolution as implying that the overthrow of the old state order and the radical agrarian revolution must perforce coincide with the complete destruction of capitalist private property in industry. It is true that the working class can hardly be supposed to tolerate its own exploitation at factory level while it is busy, or has already succeeded in, disarming the capitalists and eliminating their political power. But from this flows only that the victorious socialist revolution in underdeveloped countries will start making "despotic inroads" into the realm of capitalist private property, to quote a famous sentence of the Communist

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Manifesto. The rhythm and the extent of these inroads will depend on the political and social correlation of forces and on the pressure of economic priorities. No general formula is applicable here for all countries at all moments.

The question of the rhythm and the extent of expropriation of the bourgeoisie is in turn tied to the question of the workers-peasants alliance, a key question of political strategy in most of the third world countries. Keeping capitalist property intact to the extent of not fulfilling the poor peasants' thirst for land is obviously counter-productive. Hitting private property to the extent of arousing fear among the middle peasants that they too will lose their property is counter-productive from an economic point of view (it could become also counter-productive politically).

On balance, however, experience confirms what the theory suggests. It is impossible to achieve genuine independence from imperialism and genuinely to motivate the working class for the task of socialist reconstruction of the nation without the expropriation of big capital in industry, banking, agriculture, trade and transportation, be it international or national capital. The real difficulties only arise when the borderline between that expropriation and the tolerance of small and medium-sized capital (with all its implications for economic growth, social equality and direct producers' motivation) has to be determined.

The historical record shows that a peculiar form of dual power of confrontation between the old and the new state order has appeared during all victorious socialist revolutions in underdeveloped countries: dual power reflecting a territorial division of the country into liberated zones in which the new state is emerging, and the rest of the country where the old state still reigns. This peculiar form of dual power expresses in turn the peculiar form of the revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) processes themselves, in which armed struggle (guerrilla warfare, people's war) occupied a central place. In the cases of China, Yugoslavia, and Vietnam, this resulted from the fact that the revolution started as a movement of national liberation against a foreign imperialist aggressor/invader, while becoming increasingly intertwined with civil war between the poor and the well-to-do, i.e. with social revolution. In the cases of Cuba and Nicaragua, the revolution started likewise as armed struggle against a viciously repressive and universally hated and despised dictatorship, again growing over into a social revolution.

One should of course not simplify the pattern emerging from these experiences. At least in Cuba and in Nicaragua (to some extent also in the beginnings of the Indochinese revolution and in several stages of the Yugoslav revolution) urban insurrections played an important role. A successful general strike and a successful urban insurrection decided the outcome of the Cuban and the Nicaraguan revolutions. The proponents of the strategy of armed struggle today generally adopt a more sophisticated and complex strategy than in the sixties, combining guerrilla warfare, the creation of liberated zones and the mobilization of mass organizations in urban zones (including forms of armed self-defence) in order to lead the revolution to victory. This combination seems reasonable in many semi-colonial countries, where state repression under pre-revolutionary conditions leaves no other alternative to revolutionary strategy. We believe, however, that this pattern should not be considered unavoidable once and for all in all Third World countries, regardless of specific circumstances and particular social-political relationships of forces at given moments.

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