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Trotsky Dossier

The relevance of permanent revolution

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The theory of permanent revolution is not a metaphysical speculation but an attempt to respond to one of the most dramatic questions of our epoch: how to resolve the appalling social problems suffered by the dependent capitalist countries - colonial and semi-colonial in the language of the time - how can they escape pauperisation, dictatorship, oligarchical regimes, foreign domination?

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This theory has undoubtedly been one of the most significant and innovative contributions to Marxism made by Trotsky in the 20th century. How did it emerge and what is its meaning today, at the dawn of a new century?

The idea of permanent revolution - initially uniquely related to the Russian problematic - appeared for the first time in the writings of Lev Davidovitch in the course of the revolutionary upheavals of 1905-1906 in Russia. Trotsky's theses on the nature of this revolution constituted a radical rupture with the dominant ideas in the Second International on the subject of the future of Russia. Marx and Engels had not hesitated to suggest, in their preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto (1892), that if the Russian revolution gives the signal to a proletarian revolution in the West, and the two complement one another, the existing commonly owned property in Russia could serve as a point of departure for a communist evolution.

Bourgeois democratic

However, after their death, this line of thought - suspected of affinity with Russian Populism - was abandoned. Soon it became a universal premise - almost an article of faith - among "orthodox" Marxists, Russian or European, that the future Russian revolution would necessarily, inevitably, have a strictly bourgeois democratic character: abolition of Tsarism, establishing a democratic republic, suppression of feudal vestiges in the countryside, distribution of land to the peasants. All factions of Russian Social Democracy took this presupposition as their incontrovertible point of departure; if they argued with each other, it was on the different interpretations of the role of the proletariat in this bourgeois revolution, and its class alliances: who should be privileged, the liberal bourgeoisie (Menshevik) or the peasantry (Bolsheviks)?

Trotsky was the first and for many years the only Marxist to question this sacrosanct dogma. He was, before 1917, alone in envisaging not only the hegemonic role of the workers' movement in the Russian revolution - a thesis shared also by Parvus, Rosa Luxemburg and, in certain texts, Lenin - but also the possibility of a growing over of the democratic revolution into socialist revolution.

It was during 1905, in a number of articles for the revolutionary press, that Trotsky would formulate for the first time his new doctrine - systematised later in the pamphlet Results and Prospects (1906). He was undoubtedly influenced by Parvus, but this latter never went beyond the idea of a workers' government accomplishing a strictly democratic (bourgeois) programme: he wanted to change the locomotive of History but not its rails. [1]

Inspiration

The term 'permanent revolution' seems to have been inspired in Trotsky by an article by Franz Mehring in the *Neue Zeit* in November 1905; but the sense attributed to it by the German socialist writer was very much less radical and vaguer than that it received in the writings of the Russian revolutionary. Trotsky was alone in daring to suggest, from 1905, the possibility of a revolution accomplishing the socialist tasks - that is the expropriation of the big capitalists - in Russia, a hypothesis unanimously rejected by the other Russian Marxists as utopian and adventurous.

An attentive study of the roots of Trotsky's political audacity and his theory of permanent revolution shows that his positions were founded on an interpretation of Marxism and the dialectical method which was very distinct from the reigning orthodoxy in the Second International. This can be explained, at least in part, by the influence of Labriola, the first Marxist philosopher studied by the young Trotsky' Labriola's approach, of Hegelian-Marxist inspiration, was the polar opposite of the vulgar positivism and materialism so influential at the time.

Characteristics

Here are some of the distinctive characteristics of the Marxist methodology at work in the writings of the young Trotsky and in his theory of the Russian revolution:

1. Partisan of a dialectical conception of the unity of opposites, Trotsky criticised the rigid separation practised by the Bolsheviks between the socialist regime of the proletariat and the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants" as a "purely formal, logical operation". In the same way, in an astonishing passage of a polemic against the Menshevik Tscherewanin, he condemns the analytical- that is to say abstract, formal, pre-dialectical - character of his political approach: 'Tscherewanin constructs his tactics as Spinoza did his ethics: that is to say, geometrically'. [2]
2. Trotsky explicitly rejects economism, one of the essential traits of Plekhanov's Marxism. This rupture is one of the fundamental methodological presuppositions of the theory of permanent revolution, as shown by this well-known passage from *Results and Prospects*: "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". [3]
3. Trotsky's conception of history is not fatalistic but open: the task of Marxists, he wrote, is "to discover the 'possibilities' of the developing revolution by means of an analysis of its internal mechanism". [4] The permanent revolution is not a result determined in advance, but an objective possibility, legitimate and realistic, whose accomplishment depends on innumerable subjective factors and unpredictable events.
4. Whereas most Russian Marxists tended, because of their polemic with Populism, to deny any specificity to the Russian social formation, and insisted on the inevitable similarity between the socio-economic development of western Europe and the future of Russia, Trotsky formulated a new dialectical position. Criticising equally the Slavophile particularism of the Narodniki and the abstract universalism of the Mensheviks, he developed a concrete analysis which explained simultaneously the specificities of the Russian formation and the impact of the general tendencies of capitalist development on the country.

Unique

It is the combination of all these methodological innovations which made *Results and Prospects* - the famous pamphlet written by Trotsky in prison in 1906 - a unique text. Starting from a study of combined and uneven development (the term does not yet appear) in Russia - which had as its result a weak and half-foreign bourgeoisie, and a modern and exceptionally concentrated proletariat - he came to the conclusion that only the workers' movement, supported by the peasantry, could accomplish the democratic revolution in Russia, by overthrowing the autocracy and the power of the landowners.

In reality, this perspective of a workers' government in Russia was shared by other Russian Marxists - notably Parvus. The radical novelty of the theory of permanent revolution was situated less in its definition of the class nature of the future Russian revolution than in its conception of its historic tasks. Trotsky's decisive contribution was the idea that the Russian revolution could transcend the limits of a profound democratic transformation and begin to take anti-capitalist measures with a clearly socialist content.

Iconoclastic

His principal argument to justify this iconoclastic hypothesis was quite simply that "the political domination of the proletariat is incompatible with its economic enslavement". Why should the proletariat, once in power, and controlling the means of coercion, continue to tolerate capitalist exploitation? Even if it wished initially to limit itself to a minimum programme, it would be led, by the very logic of its position, to take collectivist measures. That said, Trotsky was also convinced that, without the extension of the revolution to western Europe, the Russian proletariat would face difficulty in holding power for a long time.

The events of 1917 dramatically confirmed Trotsky's basic predictions of 12 years earlier. The inability of the bourgeois parties and their allies on the moderate wing of the workers' movement to respond to the revolutionary aspirations of the peasantry, and the desire for peace of the people, created the conditions for a radicalisation of the revolutionary movement from February to October. What were called "the democratic tasks" were carried out, so far as the peasantry were concerned, only after the victory of the soviets. [\[5\]](#)

But once in power, the revolutionaries of October were not able to limit themselves to simply democratic reforms; the dynamic of the class struggle obliged them to take explicitly socialist measures. Indeed, confronted with the economic boycott of the possessing classes and the growing threat of a general paralysis of production, the Bolsheviks and their allies were forced - much sooner than anticipated - to expropriate capital: in June 1918, the Council of Commissars of the People decreed the socialisation of the main branches of industry.

In other words: the revolution of 1917 had seen a process of uninterrupted revolutionary development from its 'bourgeois-democratic' phase (unfinished) of February until its 'proletarian-socialist' phase which began in October. With the support of the peasantry, the Soviets combined democratic measures (the agrarian revolution) with socialist measures (the expropriation of the bourgeoisie), opening a 'non-capitalist road', a period of transition to socialism. But the Bolshevik party was able to take the leadership of this gigantic social movement that 'shook the world' only thanks to the radical strategic reorientation initiated by Lenin in April 1917, according to a perspective fairly close to that of permanent revolution. Useless to add that Trotsky, in his role as president of the Petrograd soviet, leader of the Bolshevik party and founder of the Red Army, had himself played a determinant role in the socialist 'growing over' of the October revolution.

Controversy

There remains the controversial question of the international extension of the revolution: did events confirm the conditional prediction of Trotsky - without revolution in Europe, was proletarian power in Russia doomed? Yes and no. Workers' democracy in Russia did not survive the defeat of the European revolution (in 1919-23); but its decline did not lead, as Trotsky thought in 1906, to a restoration of capitalism (this would only take place much later, after 1991) but an unforeseen development: the replacement of workers' power by the dictatorship of a bureaucratic layer originating from the workers' movement itself.

In the second half of the 1920s Trotsky elaborated, in the course of heated political and theoretical confrontations with Stalinism, the international implications of the theory of the permanent revolution. His thought was catalysed by the dramatic explosion of the class struggle in China in 1925-27, just as the first had been stimulated by the Russian revolution of 1905.

In the book *Permanent revolution* (1928) Trotsky for the first time presented his theses on the dynamic of the social revolution in the colonial and semi-colonial countries (to employ the terminology of the time) in a systematic manner, as a theory which was valid on the world scale. It amounted first to a polemic against the disastrous Chinese policy of the Stalinised Comintern, which wished to impose on the Chinese communists the doctrine of the revolution by stages - the bourgeois democratic revolution as separate historical stage - and alliance with the national bourgeoisie, represented by the Kuomintang of Chiang-Kai-Shek. Trotsky insisted that in China as in Tsarist Russia the bourgeoisie, feeling itself threatened by the socialist workers' movement, could no longer play a consequent revolutionary and anti-imperialist role: it was only the proletariat, in alliance with the peasantry, which could fulfil the democratic programme, agrarian and national, in an uninterrupted process of 'growing over' of the democratic into the socialist revolution.

Combined and uneven

The theoretical foundation of this analysis is undoubtedly the law of combined and uneven development, already implicit in the writings of 1906 or in the polemics of 1928, but formulated for the first time in explicit fashion in his *History of the Russian revolution* (1930). It allowed Trotsky to transcend the evolutionist conception of History which makes it a succession of rigid and predetermined stages, and to elaborate a dialectical interpretation of the historic process, which integrates the inequality of rhythm - the 'backward' countries constrained from advancing - and 'combined development', in the sense of the rapprochement of the distinct phases and the amalgam of archaic forms with the more modern.

From this approach flowed decisive strategic and political conclusions: the fusion/articulation of the most advanced socio-economic conditions with the most backward is the structural foundation of the fusion or combination of the democratic and socialist tasks in a process of permanent revolution. To present the problem another way, one of the principal political consequences of combined and uneven development is the inevitable persistence of unresolved democratic tasks in the peripheral capitalist countries.

Vulgar

Rejecting the vulgar evolutionism of the Stalinist doctrine of revolution by stages, Trotsky stresses, in *Permanent revolution*, that there could not be, in China and the other 'Oriental' countries - Latin America or Africa were as yet outside his field of interest - a separate and complete democratic stage, in some way a necessary historic precursor to a second stage of a socialist type. The only authentic revolutionary forces are the proletariat and the peasantry, and once they had taken power, the democratic revolution, in the course of its development, becomes directly transformed into the socialist revolution and thus becomes a permanent revolution. [6]

From the point of view of metaphysical and abstract logic, it is perhaps possible to distinguish two separate stages, but in the real logic of the revolutionary process they would combine organically in a dialectic. [7] As Trotsky wrote in his preface to the Harold Isaacs' book on China, "revolutions, as has been said more than once, have a logic of their own. But this is not the logic of Aristotle, and even less the pragmatic demilogic of 'common sense'. It is the higher function of thought: the logic of development and its contradictions, i.e. the dialectic". [8]

The principal limitation of Trotsky's analysis is of a "sociological" rather than strategic nature: to consider the peasantry uniquely as a "support" of the revolutionary proletariat and as class of "small proprietors" whose horizon did not go beyond democratic demands. He had trouble in accepting, for example, a Chinese Red Army composed in its great majority of peasants. His error - like that of most Russian and European Marxists - was to adopt, without critical examination, Marx's analysis (in the 18th Brumaire) of the French peasantry as an atomised and petty bourgeois class and to apply it to colonial and semi-colonial nations with very different characteristics. However, in one of his last writings, Three conceptions of the Russian revolution (1939) he argued that the Marxist appreciation of the peasantry as a non-socialist class had never had an "absolute and immutable" character.

The theory of the permanent revolution has been verified twice in the course of the history of the 20th century. On the one hand, by the disasters resulting from stageism, from the blind application, by the Communist parties in the dependent countries, of the Stalinist doctrine of the revolution by stages and the bloc with the national bourgeoisie, from Spain in 1936 to Indonesia in 1965 or Chile in 1973.

Predict

On the other hand, because this theory, such as it was formulated from 1906, has largely allowed us to predict, explain and shed light on the revolutions of the 20th century, which have all been 'permanent' revolutions in the peripheral countries. What happened in Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam or Cuba has corresponded, in its broad outlines to Trotsky's central idea: the possibility of combined and uninterrupted revolution - democratic and socialist - in a country of peripheral capitalism, dependent or colonial. The fact that, overall, the leaders of the revolutionary movements after October 1917 have not recognised the 'permanent' character of these latter (with some exceptions, like Ernesto Che Guevara), or have only done it a posteriori and employing a different terminology, takes nothing away from this historically effective relation.

The other dimension of the theory which has been confirmed - above all in its negative form - is the concept of permanent revolution in opposition to the Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one country. Trotsky's view that socialism can only exist on a world scale, that a revolution in a peripheral country could only begin the transition to socialism, and that a socialist society worthy of the name could not be constructed inside the national limits of a single country, has been verified by the inglorious demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Certainly things did not happen as he had hoped - anti-bureaucratic political revolution - but the failure of the Soviet bureaucratic experience is not least a confirmation of his main hypothesis.

The theory of permanent revolution does not just allow us to make sense of the great social revolutions of the 20th century; it remains of a surprising relevance at the dawn of the 21st century. Why?

First, because in the great majority of the countries of peripheral capitalism - whether it be in the Middle East, Asia, Africa or in Latin America - the tasks of a true democratic revolution have not been fulfilled: according to the case, democratisation - and secularisation! - of the state, liberation from the imperial grip, the social exclusion of the poor majority, or the solution of the agrarian question remain on the agenda. Dependence has taken on new forms, but these are no less brutal and constraining than those of the past: the dictatorship of the IMF, the World Bank and soon the WTO over the indebted countries - that is to say practically all the countries of the South - through the mechanism of neo-liberal 'adjustment' plans and Draconian conditions for payment of the foreign debt. One can say that, in many respects, the power exerted by these institutions of the global financial system - in the service of the imperialist powers in general and the USA in particular - over the economic, social and political life of these countries is still more direct, authoritarian and total than that of the old neo-colonial system.

Complex

The revolution in these countries can only, then, be a complex and articulated combination between these democratic demands and the overthrow of capitalism. Today as yesterday, the revolutionary transformations which are on the agenda in the societies at the periphery of the system are not identical with those of the countries of the centre. A social revolution in India could not be, from the point of view of its programme, strategy and motor forces, a pure 'workers' revolution' as in England. The decisive political role - certainly not envisaged by Trotsky! - played in many countries today by the indigenous and peasant movements (the FZLN in Mexico, the Brazilian MST, the CONAIE in Ecuador) shows the importance and social explosiveness of the agrarian question, and its close link with national liberation.

One cannot imagine, for example, a social revolution in Brazil which did not take in hand the effective democratisation of the state, national liberation, radical agrarian reform, the search for a road of autonomous economic development, orientated towards the social needs of the majority. And vice-versa: only a social - that is to say anti-capitalist - revolution can fulfil this democratic programme, in a process of 'uninterrupted' social transformation.

In the struggle of the countries of the South against neo-liberal globalisation, against the world financial institutions, against the inhumanity of the foreign debt system, against the imposition by the IMF of 'adjustment' policies with dramatic social consequences, the national question regains a burning relevance.

Illusions

In this context, one sees a new flourish - with or without the participation of the parties of Stalinist origin - of illusions of a nationalist type on the possibility of a 'national development' (capitalist), of a vigorous policy of promotion of national industry (capitalist), of a strategic alliance with the nationalist military, or again a vast coalition of all the classes supporting an 'independent economic path', turned towards the internal market. The theory of permanent revolution allows us - while giving a decisive place to the aspirations for national liberation and the fight against new forms of imperialist domination - to go beyond this kind of illusion in keeping a hold on the inseparability of the national democratic and socialist struggles in a single historic movement.

In many countries of peripheral capitalism - as well as in the ex-USSR and the countries of eastern Europe - the national question is also taking a new, particularly disturbing, form: bloody inter-ethnic conflicts, inter-communal, inter-religious, promoted by reactionary, often fascist-type, forces, whether manipulated by the western empires or not. There again, only a socialist/internationalist revolution can break the infernal cycle of murders and reprisals, community vendettas, by proposing genuinely democratic federal or confederal solutions, which guarantee the national rights of minorities and create conditions for the unity of workers of all nations. This goes in particular for South-east Asia, the Middle East and the Balkans.

For Trotsky whatever the profound social contradictions of the dependant countries, the revolution is never 'inevitable', the 'necessary' product of the crisis of capitalism or the aggravation of poverty. All that one can advance is a conditional proposition: as an authentic socialist/democratic revolution - in a 'permanent' process - has not taken place, it is unlikely that the countries of the South, the nations of peripheral capitalism can begin to carry a solution to the 'Biblical' (the expression comes from Ernest Mandel) problems which afflict them: poverty, misery, unemployment, crying social inequalities, ethnic discriminations, lack of water and bread, imperialist domination, oligarchical regimes, monopolisation of the land by the latifundistas.

[1] On the differences between Parvus and Trotsky, see Alain Brossat, *Aux origines de la révolution permanente : la pensée politique du jeune Trotsky*, Paris, Maspero, 1974. On the convergences and divergences between Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky, see the remarkable book by Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, London, New Left Books, 1976.

[2] Trotsky, 1905, Penguin, London, 1973.

[3] Trotsky, Results and Prospects, in *The Permanent Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1969, p. 63.

[4] Trotsky, Results and Prospects, op. cit., p. 36.

[5] As Lenin would later write, "it was the Bolsheviks... who, thanks to the victory of the proletarian revolution, helped the peasants to lead the bourgeois democratic revolution to the end".

[6] L. Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, op cit.

[7] Ibid.

[8] L. Trotsky, preface to *The Tragedy of The Chinese Revolution*, Harold Isaacs, Secker and Warburg, London, 1938.