



## IV324 - October 2000

### Introduction

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This dossier, appearing shortly after the 60th anniversary of Trotsky's assassination - a crime denied by its authors and their successors for more than 50 years - deals with some aspects of Trotsky's theoretical legacy. More than a homage - which would certainly be merited - we have attempted to respond to the question of in what respect, sixty years after his death, the theoretical contribution of Trotsky retains relevance.

Theoretician of capitalist contradictions, theoretician and practician of revolution, Trotsky also analysed, while doing all he could to avert them, the two most significant defeats of the world workers' movement: the bureaucratic degeneration of the first workers'

state and the victorious rise of fascism.

Qualified as "prophet" by his biographer Isaac Deutscher because of the impressive number of a posteriori verifications of his predictions, Trotsky has above all left an approach to the main historic turning points of the 20th century which renders them intelligible. This takes on all the more importance today given the social democratic betrayal from 1914 onwards followed by the Stalinist degeneration. The work bequeathed by Trotsky is all the more important for all those who wish to refound the movement for the emancipation of humanity.

### Dossier - Trotsky 60 years on

Trotsky's first major contribution to Marxism came in the early years of

the century with the development of what came to be known as the theory of permanent revolution. **Michael Löwy** analyses the continuing relevance of this theory. After his theory had been vindicated by the October 1917 revolution, Trotsky then witnessed the bureaucratic degeneration of the state and attempted to explain it in his book *The Revolution Betrayed*. **Jan Malewski** examines the origins of and the validity of Trotsky's analysis of the Stalinised Soviet Union. One of Trotsky's major struggles in the last decade of his life was to alert the German workers' movement to the Nazi threat. **Manuel Kellner** looks at how Trotsky's analysis of fascism developed and its contemporary lessons. Finally, **François Vercammen** analyses Trotsky's conception of the revolutionary party and **J-M Krivine** examines Trotsky's final struggle to found the Fourth International.

## The relevance of permanent revolution

7 October 2000, by **Michael Löwy**



Michael Löwy

This theory has undoubtedly been one of the most significant and innovatory 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. [