

From permanent revolution to permanent confusion

In latter-day Trotskyism the theory of 'permanent revolution' — anti-landlord or anti-colonial revolution being merged with socialist revolution under the leadership of the working class — has become a dogma, used more to obscure the fact of many colonies winning freedom on a capitalist basis than to enlighten. Clive Bradley discusses the issues.

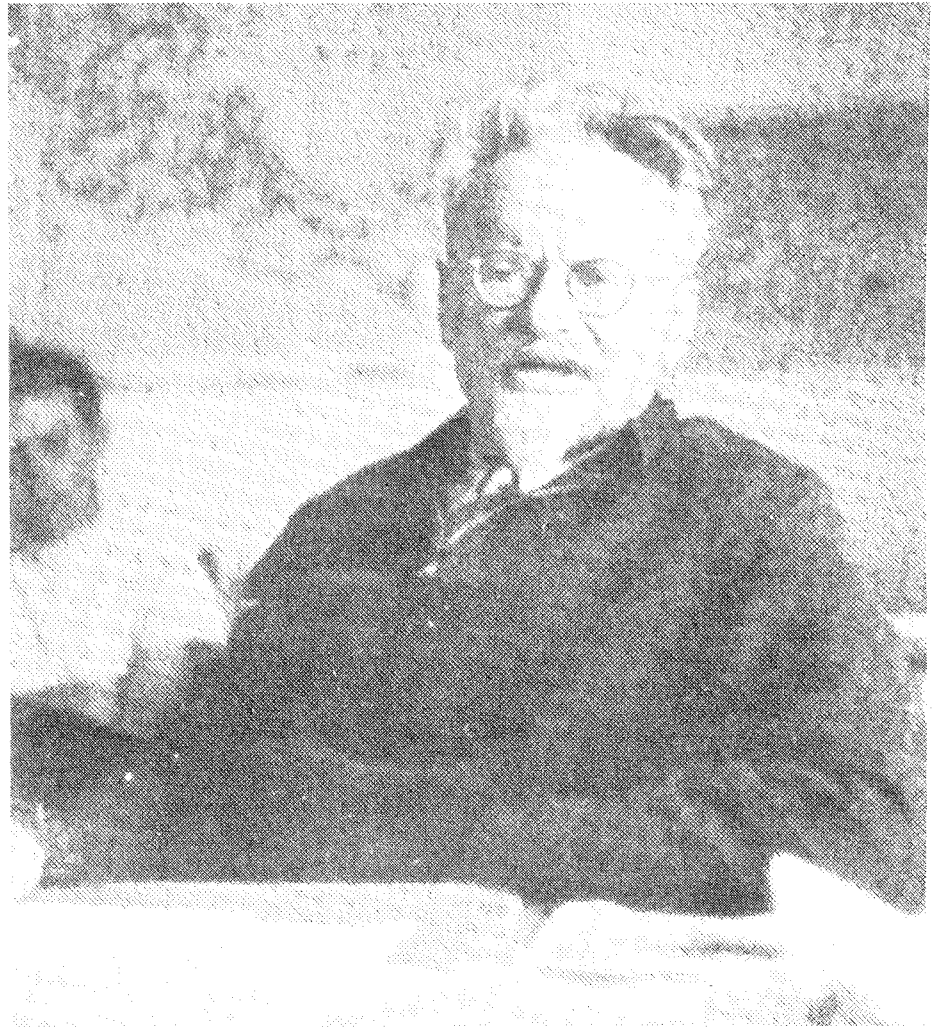
Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution was one of the most important of his contributions to Marxism, but it has become one of the most vulgarised aspects of his legacy.

In particular, the theory of permanent revolution and the Marxist attitude towards the national question have been collapsed into each other, to the detriment of both. In this article, I want to unravel these separate questions, and unearth the real assumptions and points of departure of classical Marxism.

Trotsky agreed with all the Russian Marxists that the revolution against the Tsar would be a *bourgeois* revolution in its general character. Its principal tasks were those of the bourgeois revolution: formation of a democratic republic, land to the peasants, and so on. It would sweep away all the impediments to the free development of capitalism.

Trotsky argued that social conditions in Russia put the young working class at the centre of the revolutionary movement. This was the crucial lesson of the 1905 revolution, and Trotsky was not alone in drawing it (the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg and even Kautsky all stressed it). Indeed the centrality of the working class to the bourgeois-revolutionary movement was common ground among all the early Russian Marxists; it was one of the things that distinguished them from the populists.

Zinoviev writes: "The conflict between Marxism and populism reduced itself essentially to the question of the role of the working class in Russia, whether we



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would have a class of industrial workers and if we did, what its role in the revolution would amount to". (1)

The early Plekhanov advocated the 'hegemony of the proletariat' in the revolution. The Leninist strategy, aiming at a 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry', looked principally to the workers (the Bolsheviks never saw themselves as a 'worker-peasant' party). But the precise relationship between the workers and the peasantry was not clearly understood. Trotsky posed the matter sharply: the peasantry could not play an independent political role.

This meant specifically that it was not a question of forming a strategic alliance with a revolutionary peasant-based party.

The workers would *lead* the revolution, and on the basis of their own power would "stand before the peasants as the class which has emancipated it". (2)

He thus criticised the Bolshevik formula as evasive on the key question of the class character of the state to be fought for. The implications of working class leadership should be faced squarely:

"...the fact that both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks invariably talk about the 'independent' policy of the proletariat...in no way alters the fact that both...become scared of the consequences of the class struggle and hope to limit it by their metaphysical constructs". (3)

The working class in power would be compelled to go beyond the limits of the bourgeois revolution if it was not to hand

power over to the bourgeoisie. Faced with a strike, for example, a workers' government would have to side with the workers, to the point of expropriating the capitalists. The logic of the class struggle thus pointed towards the immediate, 'uninterrupted' development of a bourgeois-democratic revolution into a socialist one.

While both Lenin and Luxemburg hinted at this conclusion, Trotsky alone spelled it out clearly — and was of course vindicated by the course taken by the revolution in 1917. As a result of conscious intervention, the revolution — which began as a bourgeois revolution fired by the industrial workers — became a socialist revolution. Trotsky, in other words, most clearly drew political perspectives and strategy from the logic of the class struggle in the actual conditions of Russia.

Trotsky of course accepted that the objective limits to 'socialist' revolution pointed to by the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were real: backward Russia, where the vast majority of society were illiterate peasants, could not sustain this socialist extension of the revolution. Socialist revolution was only possible if it was extended internationally.

"Without the direct state support of the European proletariat the working class of Russia cannot remain in power and convert its temporary domination into a lasting socialist dictatorship". (4)

The material prerequisites for socialism did not exist in Russia, but *internationally* they did.

The main coherent alternative perspective was that of the Mensheviks: that the revolution was 'bourgeois' and therefore the bourgeoisie would lead it; that socialism was impossible, and therefore it would be wrong to fight for it; that the role of the Marxists was to develop bedrock working-class organisation in preparation for a socialist revolution in the future, after capitalism had further developed.

Lenin, like Trotsky, argued that the weak Russian bourgeoisie was incapable of playing a revolutionary role. But Lenin's position remained somewhat incoherent. What he seemed to envisage was a revolution creating a democratic assembly within which the Marxist workers' party would accept their minority status. He did not think through the implications of the dynamics of class struggle.

Trotsky was historically vindicated. After April 1917, the Bolsheviks fought for a programme essentially similar to that advocated by Trotsky, and took power on that basis. The issue of 'permanent revolution' was thereafter a dead letter — until the Stalinists revived it as part of their campaign against 'Trotskyism'.

The theory after 1917

In the course of the Chinese revolution of 1925-7, the Communist International

retreated from the strategy pursued by the Bolsheviks to a variant of Menshevism. Advocating a 'bloc of four classes' for a 'first stage' in the revolution, they liquidated the Communist Party into the bourgeois Kuomintang. Politically disarmed and organisationally unprepared, the Communists were slaughtered when the Kuomintang inevitably turned on them.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought against this disastrous course (after an initial period of silence on the question). As he was to put it in 1928:

"China is still confronted with a vast, bitter, bloody and prolonged struggle for such elementary things as the liquidation of the most 'Asiatic' forms of slavery, the national emancipation, and unification of the country. But as the course of events has shown, it is precisely this that makes impossible in the future any petty-bourgeois leadership or even semi-leadership in the revolution. The unification and emancipation of China today is an international task, no less so than the



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existence of the USSR. This task can be solved only by means of a desperate struggle on the part of the downtrodden, hungry and persecuted masses under the direct leadership of the proletarian vanguard — a struggle not only against world imperialism, but also against its economic and political agency in China, against the bourgeoisie, including the 'national' bourgeoisie and all its democratic flunkies. And this is nothing else than the road toward the dictatorship of the proletariat." (5)

The experience of China confirmed the general applicability of Trotsky's earlier conclusions for Russia. He therefore *generalised* the theory of permanent revolution. From a theoretical and strategic perspective for Russia, it became a general theory.

"With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries...the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy* and *national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses." (6)

Three theoretical issues come together in this generalisation: permanent revolution, imperialism and the national question. Before the generalisation of the theory, these were quite separate questions: Trotsky's original exposition of permanent revolution makes no reference to imperialism or national independence (and was in any case put forward for a country that was in one sense imperialist itself). Trotsky was right to integrate the issues. But they were and are separate issues, and it is important to look at *how* they do inter-relate. Above all, it is important to remember that Trotsky's position was not simply derived from a theory of imperialism: it was based upon an understanding of the dynamics of class struggle, first in Russia, then in China, and upon a generalisation of these historical experiences.

Permanent Revolution after Trotsky: the historical record

Contrary to Trotsky's hopes and despite his efforts, the international socialist revolution did not happen. After World War Two, both imperialism and Stalinism found a new stability. Old colonial imperialism was largely superseded by a new imperialism, different in important respects from the capitalist system in Lenin's day. Bourgeois democratic movements for national independence were successful across the 'Third World'. Often as a result of long wars against brutal colonial domination, new nation states have been formed throughout Africa and many parts of Asia. In some countries, Stalinist states have been created.

This new reality poses many questions and throws some aspects of the theory of permanent revolution into sharp relief. In some respects this new reality has rendered the theory irrelevant or superfluous — not always or in every case; but in very many parts of the world, to speak today of 'permanent revolution' is an exercise in mystification.

Even in its generalised version, the theory relates to a limited range of situations. As we have seen, it was originally formulated to answer questions posed by an impending *bourgeois* revolution. It was extended to cover anti-colonial movements; but these likewise were, on the whole, bourgeois-revolutionary — not just in the sense that their principal demands were bourgeois democratic, but in the more fundamental sense that the movement for national independence was one part of an actually bourgeois-revolutionary struggle.

What are the limits to the situation Trotsky was describing?

a). The starting point for revolutionary struggle was a general issue of democracy (republic versus Tsar; independence versus colonialism). This democratic struggle mobilised a mass movement.

b). The bourgeoisie itself was at once relatively weak as a class, and closely tied

to the most visible enemy — to the Tsar, or old ruling classes more generally; to the colonial/imperialist power.

c). The working class was socially strong as a class, and its struggle could and did merge and inter-relate with the broader democratic struggle.

d). The bourgeois-democratic struggle was given wider social power and force by its interconnection with the revolt of a large class of poor peasants.

Of course, there have been situations in which these limits are stretched and a perspective of something very similar to permanent revolution applies even though the society is very considerably more developed than Russia was in 1917. The Spanish Revolution was an example. Trotsky specifically criticised the POUm's notion that the revolution was merely 'socialist'. Although Spain was relatively advanced compared to Russia, the criteria specified above were more or less relevant.

Similarly, South Africa today is a relatively advanced capitalist country; certainly what is at stake is not a 'bourgeois revolution' in any meaningful sense. But nor is the revolution merely 'socialist': and a working class strategy is something so broadly similar to the basic idea of permanent revolution that it would be scholastic to deny it. We could argue about whether there is a 'peasantry' in South Africa; but the unmistakable fact is that the *immediate revolutionary issues* are those of elementary bourgeois democracy, and that on the basis of that struggle the organised working class can hope to rally the rural masses.

Generally, however, in conditions where there is no peasantry it is meaningless to speak of 'permanent revolution'. In Argentina, for example, there is no peasantry; nor is the bourgeoisie weak. The common 'Trotskyist' notion that the Argentinian revolution will be 'permanent' is therefore based on the alleged national oppression experienced by Argentina. This begs the question of the relationship between permanent revolution and the national question.

The national question: national independence

Faced with the end of colonial imperialism, many socialists, anxious to preserve their critique of it, reinterpreted basic Marxist ideas. In particular the notion of 'independence' underwent a transformation; and most would-be Trotskyists (albeit often unwittingly) went along with the changed conception.

Ex-colonies (even countries that have not been colonies for a long time) are considered to be only 'formally' independent as a result of decolonisation. 'Real' independence is denied them because of their subordination to more powerful national economies and multinational capital. Independence is thus defined *economically*; 'economic' independence becomes an objective of the socialist

revolution. (7)

The theory of permanent revolution thus ends up looking something like this: under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie or bourgeoisie, anti-colonial movements were unable to break the grip of imperialism; the oppressed nations remain 'semi-colonies' of the imperialist countries; only socialism can break this domination of imperialism; only socialism can bring genuine national (i.e. economic) independence. Socialism (which is defined as the working class seizure of power only as a preferable option) thus will bring 'economic independence'.

Ernest Mandel argues, for example: "the working strata of these ('underdeveloped') countries will have to push the colonial revolution towards the point where *liberation from the capitalist world market* by socialisation of the major means of production and the social surplus product make it possible to solve the agrarian problem and to launch full-scale industrialisation". He adds as an afterthought: "The building of a socialist economy can itself, of course, only be



South Africa: a permanent revolution?

completed on a world scale." (8)

Michael Lowy, Mandel's co-thinker, defines national liberation as "the unification of the 'nation' and its political and economic emancipation from foreign (imperialist) domination...today it would be more familiar to speak of 'dependency'..." (9)

Cruder definitions are innumerable.

While, of course, a socialist workers' government would centralise its available surplus and implement a plan of production, this would by no means entail 'liberation from the capitalist world market'. Indeed, according to Trotsky (who was speaking of a very large country, the USSR):

"The proletariat of Tsarist Russia could not have taken power in October if Russia had not been a link — the *weakest link*, but a link, nevertheless — in the chain of *world economy*. The seizure of power by the proletariat has not at all excluded the Soviet republic from the system of the international division of labour created by capitalism." (10)

Or again:

"Anyone who sees 'pessimism' in an admission of our dependence on the world

market (Lenin spoke bluntly of our *subordination* to the world market) reveals thereby his own provincial petty bourgeois timorousness in the face of the world market, and the pitiful character of his homebred optimism which hopes to hide from world economy behind a bush and to manage somehow with its own resources." (11)

The notion of 'economic independence' belongs to the tradition of 'socialism in one country'. The Marxist programme for dealing with massive inequalities within and between nations, terrible poverty in the Third World and so on, is not 'economic independence', but *international* socialist revolution. A big part of Trotsky's opposition to the idea of 'socialism in one country' was his correct conviction that economic independence was *impossible*, and the idea, indeed, reactionary.

Nor did the notion of 'economic independence' play any role in Lenin's understanding of the national question. The core to the Marxist programme on this question is the right of nations to self-determination. Lenin's opponents like Luxemburg and Piatakov argued precisely that self-determination was impossible because economic independence was impossible.

Lenin argued:

"National self-determination means political independence. Imperialism seeks to violate such independence because political annexation often makes economic annexation easier...But to speak of the *economic* 'unachievability of self-determination under imperialism' is sheer nonsense." (12)

Because:

"...self-determination concerns only politics, and it would be wrong even to raise the question of its economic unachievability" (13)

For Lenin, too, the answer to imperialism as an economic phenomenon was international socialist revolution.

As we have seen, Trotsky considered the unification and emancipation of China to be an international task. And in his later work he stressed the international dimension to the theory of permanent revolution even more, referring to the "permanent character of the socialist revolution as such":

"The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena...it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet." (14)

The democratic programme and permanent revolution

"It is impossible merely to reject the democratic programme; it is imperative that in the struggle the masses outgrow it...As a primary step, the workers must be armed with this democratic programme. Only then will they be able to summon and unite the farmers. On the

basis of the revolutionary democratic programme it is necessary to oppose the workers to the 'national' bourgeoisie.

"Then, at a certain stage in the mobilisation of the masses on the slogans of revolutionary democracy, soviets can and should arise...sooner or later, the soviets should overthrow bourgeois democracy. Only they are capable of bringing the democratic revolution to a conclusion and likewise opening an era of socialist revolution." (15)

A revolutionary democratic programme is therefore central to the general perspective of permanent revolution. It is one aspect of the socialist programme — and like any other aspect it can be fought for and won relatively independently. It is no more impossible in an absolute sense to implement the democratic programme on a capitalist basis than it is 'impossible' to have a sliding scale of wages on a capitalist basis.

Like any other aspect of the socialist programme, in isolation its results will be limited, possibly reactionary, or as Trotsky put it "directed entirely against the working masses". And this is exactly what has happened. National independence, for most of the 'Third World' has been won in isolation from the rest of the socialist programme. It is therefore limited, not usually accompanied by more general democracy, and has produced new 'national' ruling classes. But for many former colonies, the struggle for independence is over: it is as complete as it can be, short of international socialist revolution. It is pure mystification to call, for example, for 'national independence' for Argentina.

And there are some situations where national questions are central to the socialist programme, yet it is nevertheless mystifying to speak of 'permanent revolution'.

Ireland and Israel/Palestine

It is absurd by any rational criteria to believe that the theory and strategy of permanent revolution can be applied to the struggle of the Irish Catholics or the Palestinian Arabs. None of the basic political and social dynamics described by Trotsky apply.

In Russia or China or many anti-imperialist movements, the line of march was clear: the workers could establish their rule on the basis of becoming "the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses." Within the mass democratic movement, the workers could establish their own hegemony, through leadership of the democratic movement, and through integrating the democratic questions with its own programme of class power. You can see the relevance of such a perspective for South Africa today — with the qualifications mentioned above.

But Ireland? There is no Ireland-wide mass democratic struggle. The (legitimate and just) democratic struggle is confined

to a small minority — about 10% of the population. A significant section of the working class is actively hostile to the demands of national democracy. The demand for national independence is not a rallying cry for a mass democratic movement within which the workers can establish their hegemony: it is an issue that *divides* the working class (in a far more fundamental sense than that some, say, black South African workers are not part of the democratic struggle or may actively fight against it). Ending that division requires a working class perspective on the democratic, national question.

For the Palestinians, too, it is difficult to see how a revolution could usher in socialism without having answered the question of relations between Arabs and Jews. As in Ireland, supposed adherents to the theory of permanent revolution try to fuse the specific democratic programme and the socialist programme in one of two ways. Either they call upon a united working class to lead the existing national struggle — without actually addressing the cause of division itself. Or they believe that a more 'revolutionary' or 'working class' prosecution of the existing struggle will *itself, automatically* solve the question of divisions. The democratic secular state, the argument runs, for example, can only be realised through a joint socialist struggle of the workers. But here the democratic and socialist programmes are simply dissolved into each other: 'socialism' is presented as an answer to the national conflict; a supposed answer to the national conflict is a disguised way of saying 'socialism'.

To argue that 'permanent revolution' is not relevant in these cases is not, of course, to advocate a resurrection of the old Menshevik/Stalinist policy of 'two stage revolution'. Both the Mensheviks and the Stalinists argued not just that socialist revolution was not immediately on the agenda, but that it was wrong in principle, premature, Blanquist or whatever. They therefore opposed the class struggle of the workers. The Popular Front policy in Spain was not just an abstract call for 'two stage revolution': the Stalinists opposed workers' struggles to the point of killing revolutionary workers.

We are for the victory of revolutionary working class movements in Ireland and Israel/Palestine. The aim of our democratic programme is to help create such movements. We don't say: hold back on your own specific struggles until the national question is solved. We say: a working class programme for the national question is necessary to build a united workers' movement.

Whether a united Ireland or a democratic solution to the Middle East conflict happen before a socialist revolution, or as a part of one, will depend entirely upon the balance of forces.

Socialists should not fail to fight as hard as we can for an immediate,

democratic answer to national conflicts or situations of national oppression for fear of 'stagism'. That would be madness. And nor should we deck out our opposition to 'stagism' in mystifications.

Self-determination and permanent revolution

The demand for national self-determination is therefore just one democratic demand in the programme of socialist revolution. It can and should be fought for as an *immediate* demand. We are for the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied West Bank, for example, and the right of the Arabs there to self-determination. To add 'but this is only possible on the basis of socialist revolution' would be sectarian ultimatism of a particularly primitive kind. (This also focuses another issue: you *can* demand immediate Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, but you can't demand immediate Israeli withdrawal from Israel; such a programme is therefore not a rational, democratic programme).

It is in any case simply not true to argue that self-determination can only be realised on a socialist basis. Post-war history has proved otherwise. The factor which explains this is the absence of a revolutionary International. Without such an International — without revolutionary parties — many outcomes to democratic struggles are possible. If Trotsky's theory is taken to be a prediction, it has been falsified by events. But it was not a 'prediction': its fulfilment depended upon the development of the 'subjective factor'. The revolutionary parties were not built, and history took a different course ●

Notes

1. Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, New Park, 1973, pp.28-9.
2. Trotsky, *Results and Prospects in Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, New Park, 1982, p.203.
3. Trotsky, *Our Differences in 1905*, Penguin 1971, p.332.
4. Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, p.237.
5. *The Draft Programme of the Communist International — A Criticism of Fundamentals in The Third International After Lenin*, New Park, 1974, p.145.
6. *Permanent Revolution*, *op cit.* p.152, emphasised in original.
7. See Martin Thomas, *The Development of capitalism in the Third World in Under Whose Flag?*, *Workers' Liberty* no. 3.
8. E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, Verso 1978, p.376, emphasis added.
9. M. Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, Verso 1981, p.161.
10. *The Draft Programme...*p.35.
11. *Ibid.* p.37.
12. *A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism*, *Collected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, vol. 23, p.44.
13. *Ibid.* p.49.
14. *Permanent Revolution*, *op cit.* p.155.
15. *The Transitional Programme*, Pathfinder, 1973, pp.137-8.