

# A Note on Permanent Revolution

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## 1. Some experiences

(additional background to a study of the situation of Trotskyists in Iran after the revolution and the accession of Khomeini).

1. In November 1920 Chicherin received a telegram containing the following words:

'On the day when the workers of the West on the one hand, and the enslaved peoples of Asia and Africa on the other, understand that at the present time international capital is using them to annihilate and enslave one another for the exclusive benefit of their masters ...the power of the bourgeoisie will end.'

The writer was Turkish 'national liberator' Kemal Pasha.

In January 1921 began Kemal's brutal suppression of the Turkish communists.

In 1923, the Soviet ambassador to Turkey declared:

'Mutual relations between the USSR and Turkey are defined at the present time by the struggle for national independence which is still being waged by Turkey, and cannot yet be regarded as completed.'

In 1925, pressure from British imperialism brought Kemal's Turkey and the Soviet Union closer together. Carr writes: 'This gave Kemal the assurance of a free hand with Turkish communists.' Mass arrests, trials, executions followed.

Stalin made a 'theoretical' conclusion in 1926:

'(The Turkish revolution) got stranded at the **first step**, the first stage of the bourgeois-democratic movement, without even attempting to make the transition to the second stage of its development, the agrarian revolution.'

2. In Persia, Reza Khan became Minister for War in February 1921 and was hailed in Moscow as progressive, a national-liberation leader, etc. He became Prime Minister in October 1923. One 'official' Soviet article of 1924 was entitled 'Through Military Dictatorship to a National State', and called Reza 'the leader of the Persian national-revolutionary movement, the man who succeeded in securing Persia's independence.'

In October Reza overthrew the Shah. The journal of the Communist International expressed the hope that Reza would now proclaim himself president at the head of a 'national revolutionary movement'.

On December 16, 1925 he was installed as Shah and founder of a new dynasty.

A Communist International report of early 1926 hoped that 'the national bourgeoisie in Persia would prove strong enough to give a democratic content to Reza's **Caesarist** rule.'

3. The story of the Third Chinese Revolution is familiar to everyone.

For the early period (in which the Communist International Second Congress of 1920 adopted Lenin's Theses on the national and colonial question), one should not lightly dismiss the point made by Carr:

'...the dangers inherent in this situation were not obvious. In the first place, cooperation with bourgeois-national movements, like the expedients recommended by Lenin in **Left-wing Communism**, was conceived in terms of the brief period before the now imminent European proletarian revolution, which would transform the Asiatic scene and sweep away any embarrassments resulting from these transitory alliances, etc.'

## 2. The Theory

Despite some sentences in Trotsky which could be taken to indicate the contrary, the theory of permanent revolution is **not** in its essentials a sort of alternative model to and refutation of 'two-stage' theories and strategies in backward countries. When used in relation to such countries, it does rely on the notion of 'uneven and combined development' to explain the peculiarities of national development, to demonstrate in the imperialist epoch the impossibility of a 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution except under the leadership of the proletariat **and** (often forgotten) through its dictatorship. But this by itself is not sufficient for an understanding of the insistence in the theory on the necessity for the proletariat in power to go forward to socialist measures and to go beyond the national framework.

Concentration on 'permanent revolution' as antidote to

the 'two-stage' theory and strategy has meant that little thought has been given to the two fundamental aspects of permanent revolution: (a) it is the insoluble nature of imperialism's contradictions at the international level (i.e., the level of the system as a whole) that gives the revolution its 'permanent' character; and (b) the 'permanence' (in the sense of its 'going over to socialist measures' and its uninterruptedness) of the revolution is for Marx not only a matter of the proletariat's interests impelling it onwards when the other classes need to halt it, but contains and expresses the very essence of the proletarian revolution, viz., that this revolution requires the self-emancipation of the working class, the continuous development of what Marx called 'mass communist consciousness' (a practical, revolutionary consciousness) through 'the alteration of men on a mass scale'.

Thus, it is the entry on to the scene of the proletariat itself (not its leaders or 'instruments' or representatives) that gives the revolution a mass character, the mass of men and women wresting from the rule of capital every aspect of life and transforming it as their conscious creation, at the same time appropriating the conquests of historical culture (labour). I am trying to say that the 'permanent' nature of the revolution cannot be separated from its mass nature (and see Meszaros, *Beyond Capital*). (Here all the passages on the nature of the proletariat as a class in Marx 1844 Manuscripts and Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right should be cited)

Trotskyists have (inevitably) over-concentrated on the refutation of Stalinism, and therefore on strictly historical-political questions, and this has narrowed our theoretical outlook. In the WRP/Workers International we began to get a glimmer of this when we had to argue, after 1990, that Trotskyism is not only anti-Stalinism (comrades said, 'yes, but why do you emphasise this?') and that the new situation demanded of us that we try to overcome a too narrowly political-historical 'Marxism'.

### 3. Texts

**Marx and Engels** '*Address of the Central Council to the Communist League*':

The Address ends:

'If the German workers are not able to attain power and achieve their own class interests without completely going through a lengthy revolutionary development, they at least know for a certainty that the first act of this approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will be very much accelerated by it.

'But they themselves must do the utmost for their final victory by making it clear to themselves what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an

independent party as soon as possible and by not allowing themselves to be misled for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeois into refraining from the independent organisation of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence.'

**Trotsky** '*Permanent Revolution*' and '*Results and Prospects*':

In his Introduction Trotsky says,

'In its essential features the theory of the permanent revolution was formulated by me even before the decisive events of 1905....The bourgeois character of the revolution, however, could not answer in advance the question of which classes would solve the tasks of the democratic revolution and what the mutual relations of these classes would be...

'I drew the conclusion that our bourgeois revolution could solve its tasks radically only in the event that the proletariat, with the aid of the multi-millioned peasantry, proved capable of concentrating the revolutionary dictatorship in its own hands.

'What would be the social content of this dictatorship? First of all it would have to carry through to the end the agrarian revolution and the democratic reconstruction of the state. In other words, the dictatorship of the proletariat would become the instrument for solving the tasks of the historically-belated bourgeois revolution. But the matter could not rest there. Having reached power the proletariat would be compelled to encroach ever more deeply upon the relationships of private property in general, that is to take the road of socialist measures....

'Whether the dictatorship of the proletariat leads to socialism or not, and at what tempo and through what stages, will depend upon the fate of European and world capitalism.

'These were the essential features of the theory of the permanent revolution at its origin in the early months of 1905.'

Only one page later, before elaborating on this summary, Trotsky refers to Marx:

'The permanent revolution in the sense which Marx attached to this concept, means a revolution which makes no compromise with any single form of class rule, which does not stop at the democratic stage, which goes over to socialist measures and to war against reaction from without; that is, a revolution whose every successive stage is rooted in the preceding one and which can end only in the complete liquidation of class society....

'Marx regarded the bourgeois revolution of 1848 as the direct prelude to the proletarian revolution. Marx "erred". Yet his error has a factual and not a methodological character. The revolution of 1848 did not turn into the socialist revolution. But that is just why it did not achieve democracy.'

Three main elements then:

(a) '...the central idea of the theory. While the traditional view was that the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat led through a long period of democracy, the theory of the permanent revolution established the fact that for backward countries the road to democracy passed through the proletarian dictatorship.'

(b) It is important to note that in this introduction, giving an outline of the theory, Trotsky goes into the point made above about the **socialist** revolution as permanent (the continuous transformations of society by the working class in its own and humanity's interests):

'For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo transformation. Society keeps on changing its skin. Each stage of transformation stems directly from the preceding. This process necessarily retains a political character, that is, it develops through collisions between various groups in the society which is in transformation. Outbreaks of civil war and foreign wars alternate with periods of "peaceful" reform. Revolutions in economy, technique, science, the family, morals and everyday life develop in complex reciprocal action and do not allow society to achieve equilibrium. Therein lies the permanent character of the socialist revolution as such.'

(This aspect of the theory needs developing with the essential emphasis on the development of 'mass communist consciousness' in the course of the '(self)-alteration of men on a mass scale' - above)

(c) The socialist revolution begins on national foundations - but it cannot be completed within these foundations... a national revolution is not a self-contained whole; it is only a link in the international chain. The international revolution constitutes a permanent process, despite temporary declines and ebbs.'

**Trotsky** *'The Third International After Lenin'*:

'The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international programme corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism. An international communist programme is in no case the sum total of national programmes or an amalgam of their common features. The international programme must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its

connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not **vice versa**. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.'

'There were two fundamental propositions in the theory of permanent revolution (as formulated in 1905-6). First, that despite the historical backwardness of Russia, the revolution can transfer the power into the hands of the Russian proletariat before the proletariat of advanced countries is able to attain it. Secondly, that the way out of those contradictions which will befall the proletarian dictatorship in a backward country, surrounded by a world of capitalist enemies, will be found on the arena of world revolution. The first proposition is based upon a correct understanding of the law of uneven development. The second depends upon a correct understanding of the indissolubility of the economic and political ties between capitalist countries.'

'...in the present epoch for which the programme (draft programme of the Communist International, 1928) was created, capitalist development as a whole is faced with insurmountable obstacles and contradictions and beats in frenzy against them. **It is precisely this that invests our epoch with its revolutionary character and the revolution with its permanent character.**' (my emphasis, CS)

In this book is, 'Summary and Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution: its lessons for the countries of the Orient and for the whole of the Comintern'. The whole of this is essential for discussion of permanent revolution. In particular see section One, 'On the Nature of the Colonial Bourgeoisie'. On pp. 170-171 Trotsky deals with Bukharin's 'theoretical justification' of long-term political blocs with the colonial bourgeoisie. Bukharin had declared: 'The liberal bourgeoisie in China played an objectively revolutionary role over a period of years, and not months. Then it exhausted itself. This was not at all a "24-hour" holiday of the type of the Russian liberal revolution of 1905.'

Trotsky retorts:

'Everything here is wrong from beginning to end.'

'Lenin really taught us to differentiate rigidly between an oppressed and oppressor bourgeois nation. From this follow conclusions of exceptional importance. For instance, our attitude towards a war between an imperialist and a colonial country. For a pacifist, such a war is a war like any other. For a communist, a war of a colonial nation against an imperialist nation is a bourgeois revolutionary war. Lenin thus **raised** the national

liberation movements, the colonial insurrections, and wars of the oppressed nations, to the level of the bourgeois democratic revolutions, in particular, to that of the Russian revolution of 1905. But Lenin did not at all place the wars for national liberation **above** bourgeois democratic revolutions as is now done by Bukharin after his 180-degree turn. Lenin insisted on a distinction between an oppressed bourgeois nation and a bourgeois oppressor nation. But Lenin nowhere raised and never could have raised the question as if the bourgeoisie of a colonial or a semi-colonial country in an epoch of struggle for national liberation must be more progressive and more revolutionary than the bourgeoisie of a non-colonial country in the epoch of the democratic revolution....'

#### 4. Work to be done

Inevitably, this 'bookish' way of doing things looks like a boring insistence on orthodoxy, but I think it is a necessary and neglected part of what must be done. These notes are no more than a suggestion for further study. Other passages which should be added are to be found in the following pages in 'Permanent Revolution' (New Park edition):

p.57, last paragraph beginning 'Our liberal bourgeoisie...'

pp.62-3 The paragraph beginning 'In all these questions..'

p.106 (Lenin quote) 'In a country..'

pp.126-7 All

p.129-133 All, ending on 133 '..dragged back'

p.150 paragraph beginning 'Between the regime...'  
Chapter 10 Epilogue - all.

Then a mountain of work needs to be done:

1. On the 'national-liberation' movements and 'independent states' set up with the support of the Stalinist bureaucracy since World War II, from the Chinese Revolution up to ANC/South Africa.

2. On the position taken by Trotskyists on that question, and, in particular, their positions where there were sections: Ceylon, Bolivia, Vietnam, China, Iran. Positions on Algeria and Cuba are very important here, obviously.

What is the point of such work?

It is not solely for the purpose of understanding more clearly what 'permanent revolution' means. The theory of permanent revolution was central to the programme elaborated by Trotsky for the International Left Opposition and the Fourth International. Since then, in the many countries where national-independence struggles could be characterised as having a bourgeois-democratic content, the bourgeoisie, and not the proletariat, has established its dictatorship. Every 'national bourgeoisie' today has a relationship with world capital in its historical-structural crisis and with the major capitalist powers which cannot be understood only (and in most cases not at all) as one between oppressor and oppressed capitalist nations.

The 'hypothesis' which must urgently be proposed, in a renewed study of permanent revolution, is: there is no longer any such thing as a bourgeois-democratic revolution. In this case, the emphasis on the theory of permanent revolution as the essential programmatic answer to the Stalinist 'two-stage' revolution has to be dropped, and its essential socialist and international content as proposed by Marx has to be understood and elaborated in the theoretical and practical work of building revolutionary parties in today's conditions of capital's structural crisis and of the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy which is so absolutely central to the unfolding of that crisis. In this context, we surely must conclude that the work done by Iranian comrades (see this issue) is of the very first importance.

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