



# On Permanent Revolution

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A basic task for a Marxist is to expose programmatic issues concerning revolutionary praxis today and to critically judge political conceptualizations and practice from this perspective. With this concern we reorient ourselves here towards Trotsky's theorization of 'Permanent Revolution' and judge its usefulness in informing our debates and practice. However, reading Trotsky's classic works today would require a point of reference in the context and debates that produced them. Below we try to present a brief overview of this context so as to make available this reference point.

Like any social theory, a Marxist theory of social revolution must be analyzed in the context of objective conditions at the time of its theorization, but its correctness must be judged in terms of its potentiality to trace the tendencies and possibilities inherent in the historical evolution of existing social conditions. Its meaningfulness at the present stage too is determined by this potentiality, as only then would

it enrich the conceptualization of present reality and guide our practice. This requires us to visualize societal transformation as a culmination of the contradictions inherent in the historical process producing and reproducing a particular social structure.

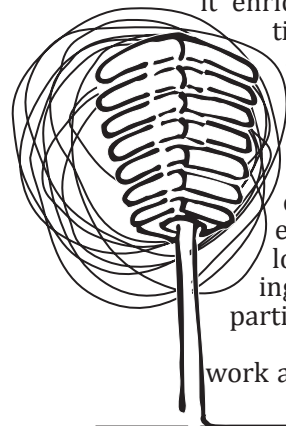
Marx's whole life work and his theoretical en-

deavors were towards the sole aim of unfolding the processes constituting capitalism and the catastrophic tendencies inherent in them, posing the possibility of a complete emancipation of humanity from class exploitation and oppression. Transcending capitalism requires a complete negation of its essence. Marx saw its eventual transcendence only in class struggle and conscious endeavours of the proletarian class - the only class capable of completely breaking away from the 'prehistoric' (or rather trans-historic) nostalgia that afflicts all the other classes. These conclusions were the result of his immense research in and a thorough critique of the political economy of capitalism. Although Marx was always conscious of the political transformations throughout the globe and was involved in vocalizing the evolving agenda of the working class politics, he was still striving towards a dialectical conceptualisation of capitalist reality, and its logical and historical processes.

During Marx's time, capitalism had just become politically triumphant with the 1848 revolutions, that too with enormous compromises. Marx found Germany and the rest of the Continental Europe still suffering "not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development." (Marx, Capital Vol.1) The possibility of a wide-scale proletarian upsurge against the system was still not evident anywhere (Paris Commune of 1871 being the first experience),

hence it was not possible for Marx or anyone at that time to pre-empt all the intricacies of the world revolution co-ordinating varied class experiences in the societies at various levels of capitalist development.

This is not to say that he did not have any theory of revolution at all, but it was still latent in his political economic researches. It is in this light that we can understand Lenin's view that imperialism is the age of socialist revolutions, and during Marx's time capitalism was still in a pre-imperialist phase. Marx's writings starting from the Communist Manifesto to The Civil War in France, on Paris Commune etc must be studied as his reflections on the objective conditions and social changes that were effected by the French Revolution and the growth of industrial capitalism, culminating in the rise of industrial working class movement which first came into the forefront with the 1848 revolutions. Of course, Marx's contributions in this regard were not simply historical "interpretations"; rather they established the theoretical foundation for revolutionary proletarian praxis directed towards "changing the world". But Marx more than anybody else was aware that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) Hence, the circumstantial limitation imposed on the proletarian praxis at the time





delimited its direction. This is true for all conceptual and practical aspects of revolutionary praxis of all ages. The same holds good for Lenin's theory of imperialism or Trotsky's "permanent revolution".

It was in the struggle against Bernstein's evolutionism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that the issue of the relationship between class-consciousness and the negation of capitalism became most prominent in the revolutionary discourse. Bernstein saw socialism as a result of the natural processes within capitalism, thus he rejected any revolutionary endeavor for building it. He was severely criticized by his comrades in the Second International, especially Kautsky and Plekhanov, who fore-grounded the issue of a conscious destruction of the capitalist system.

The radical bloc of social democracy led by Kautsky and Plekhanov did the groundwork for the future revolutionary critique of the Second International and social democracy found in the works of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others. These revolutionaries for the first time systematically confronted the issue of revolutionary agencies and the nature of revolution itself. One reason for this was essentially conjunctural, as capitalism was exhausting its capacity to reproduce itself after the crisis of 1890s. This state of moribundity leading to imperialist clashes and regimentation, to an upsurge in working class radicalism with the increasingly cohesive national liberation struggles in the colonies, made an eventual collapse of the world capitalist system seem sufficiently possible, forcing the revolutionaries to take the task of making this possibility a reality through insurrections, mass strikes, soviets and workers controls. The lassitude of the traditional working class parties in Europe and their accommodation in the political competition characterizing bourgeois liberal polity compelled the revolutionaries to polemicise against the legalist leadership of these parties, and sharpen the conceptual and practical tools simultaneously. The strategic and tactical formulations comprising the major

theory/theories of revolution were the product of this burning time.

Till this period the Marxists always viewed proletarian politics in an international framework aiming towards an eventual destruction of world capitalism. It was not that they glossed over the local specificity, but they saw capitalism as a world system thriving on unevenness, hence the co-ordinated efforts of the revolutionaries all over the world were the only possible way of realizing socialism. The minimal tasks defined in a particular locus have to be coordinated to realize the maximal goal, their dialectical convergence being the only radical resolution of the crisis determining both. Their mechanical separation led to revisionism and scholasticism, evident in the Second International. This was the conclusion to which all the formidable critiques of the Second International came separately or together. This conceptual solidarity led to their eventual camaraderie whenever the situation demanded despite their mutual diatribes of many years, during the Zimmerwald Congress and the October Revolution. Trotsky recognized this when he said that by reissuing his 1905 work, Results and Prospects (where he for the first time tried to systematically deal with the theory of permanent revolution), in 1919 he "only desires to explain the theoretical principles which rendered it possible for him and other comrades, who for many years had stood outside the Bolshevik Party, to join their fate with the fate of that party at the beginning of 1917."

The phrase 'revolution in permanence' was used first by Marx in his 1850 address to the CC of the Communist League. Marx took revolution to be continuous, an uninterrupted bottom-up negation of capitalism. He viewed capitalism not as any pure and even system, which many have endeavored to put in his mouth, but as essentially comprising of simultaneous

existence of various levels of capitalist development even combined with pre-capitalist vestiges. Hence, anti-capitalist revolution cannot be achieved in installments, but continuously. But as noted earlier the circumstantial limitation delimited Marx's reflections. He could provide the basic foundation for such conceptualization, but the task of its elaboration was left to future generations.

The concept of permanent revolution as understood by Trotsky was representative of the revolutionary spirit prevalent at that time, which recognized capitalism as a global system on the one hand (thus its negation had to be global too), while on the other it took into account the unevenness of capitalist development (thus necessitating the strategic-tactical formulations specific to locations). It is dialectical to the very core viewing revolution as a continuum embedding the particular in general and appearance in essence, with the latter necessarily getting represented through the former. It seeks to stress that the localized peasant struggles and the struggles of other

classes and communities against their oppression and alienation can be successful only if they are articulated with and in the world proletarian struggle against capitalism. This becomes more and more true with the evermore intensification of capitalist accumulation that thrives on the continuous subsumption of living labour by capital (formally or actually).

With the introversion of the Russian Revolution as the world revolutionary situation subsided after the defeat of the German revolution, the Soviet Union became more and more isolated—being in power and creating firewalls around it became an existential problem leading to the petty bourgeois nationalist formulation of 'socialism in one country'. Socialism in this framework was reduced to nationalization, cooperatives and planned economy. This reaction concurred with the nationalist introver-

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sion throughout the world due to the particular crisis that capitalism faced with the 1929 Great Crash. With direct colonialism becoming burdensome and unsustainable, the regime of capitalist accumulation demanded a reconstitution of national economies. In this situation, the world revolution lost its immediate appeal, as the ruling class everywhere found the nationalist shell of Keynesian/welfarist policies not only effective in refurbishing the capitalist economies, but sufficiently ideological too to contain the anti-systemic mobilizations through welfarism, full employment and doles. One finds a strong structural and ideological affinity between the political economic governance under 'socialism in one country' and Keynesianism, thus licensing the conceptualization of the Soviet economy as State/State-Monopoly Capitalism. But the scope of the hegemonic struggle between the bureaucratic/intermediate class/petty bourgeoisie and proletarian segments in the party and the state justified the notion of a 'degenerated workers' state' of Trotsky.

Simultaneously, the fascist menace that capitalism nurtured to gather the fruits of reaction after the defeat of the European proletarian radicalism in the 1920s and pre-empt any further working class consolidation became a very dangerous option for global capitalism itself, as it began curbing the reconstruction of advanced economies devastated by the Great Crash. It was in this phase that the Comintern's existentialist policy of the United Front was envisaged in their late attempt to counter fascism. This definitely provided a popular base for the Allied forces in the Second World War. This tactical formula when transformed accordingly and sustained was sufficiently corporatist and useful for bourgeois polity, as it could delay any radical resolution of the capitalist crisis co-opting the leadership of the working class in its service. And this was what the existential logic of socialism in one country led to in the Cold War phase—the Soviet Bloc in order to sustain its influence around the globe blunted the radical movements by nurturing collaborationist tendencies so that the ruling

classes of the newly liberated countries were not alienated and did not fall in the lap of the Anglo-American bloc. Hence, the United Front was extended to the anti-imperialist struggle, quite contrary to Lenin's conceptualization, thus disarming this struggle of its anti-systemic tenor. This trend of disarming the working class by preaching neo-corporatism got its ultimate representation in Khrushchev's theory of peaceful coexistence.

Nonetheless the Soviet model was posed as a model for nationalist reconstruction in opposition to the liberal model sold by the Anglo-Americans and their agencies. This competition coupled with militarism marked the global polity in the post-World War II era. It is not to say that revolutionary situations did not arise during this phase. They definitely arose, but at the wake of no preparation and frequent betrayals by the unconfident 'vanguards' in the name of countering and curbing anarchism and adventurism, they were crushed easily but bloodily. Wherever radical upsurges really became successful they had to struggle against isolation and regimentation before getting recognition, as Cuba and Nicaragua. The existence of the Soviet bloc definitely was a boon for the ruling classes of the underdeveloped world as it allowed the latter to bargain in the world polity. But it acted as a hindrance in the radicalization of the movements against exploitation and oppression, as its own existential problems demanded stable support from the regimes there. This pragmatic requirement guided the officialisation of the formulaic Marxism (which DD Kosambi termed as OM - Official Marxism) that was nurtured to suit the exigencies of the Cold War. This brand of Marxism reified tactical notions and presented them as universally applicable laws and principles. Varieties of 'democratic revolutions' were conceptualized to explain the popular upsurges under the communist leadership. They not only explained the class limit of these upsurges, but more importantly they inhibit their transformation into an "uninterrupted revolution" under a proletarian leadership. These conceptualizations became weapons to contain working

class radicalism, preaching class collaborationism and blunting the class offensive at crucial junctures as in Indonesia and Iran. The 'stage theory' of revolution is always defined in a nationalist framework, despite the lip service paid to proletarian internationalism. It mechanically dissociates anti-capitalist revolutionary politics from democratic struggles, which are essentially reformist. This deconstructs the uninterrupted revolutionary politics of the working class into discrete moments never allowing it to heighten itself onto a newer 'stage'. And this is justified in the name of pragmatism and practicality.

In retrospect, the struggle between the dialectical conceptualization of permanent revolution (involving a continuum between maximal and minimal agenda of the working class movement) and that of socialism in one country is a struggle for ideological hegemony over the working class movement between the proletarians and national/petty bourgeoisie. This struggle has been going on right from the time of Marx and Engels, when they contested Proudhon, Lassalle and Bakunin. The importance of Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution lies in its analytical ability to discern moments in revolutionary politics without reifying them. It takes revolution to be continuous.

Rereading Trotsky's classic works on "permanent revolution" acquires a new meaning today with the collapse of "official Marxism", on the one hand, and with capitalism being in a perpetual crisis, sustaining itself through the export of this crisis from one region to another, on the other. It provides a formidable departure point for a critical assimilation of revolutionary struggles dominated by the tendencies of which it was one of the first critiques. Furthermore, at the time when proletarian internationalism is evidently the only answer to capitalist globalization, the concept of permanent revolution provides us with a powerful tool to confront programmatic issues in coordinating local struggles and articulating them within the anti-capitalist struggle, which is intrinsically international.