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Permanent Revolution**

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Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution and Its Relevance to the Third World Today

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Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is one of the half a dozen most important contributions to Marxism since the time of its founders. The appearance of a serious study of the theory by Michael Löwy, the author of excellent books on the young Marx and on Lukacs, is, therefore, to be welcomed. [\[1\]](#)

What does the theory of permanent revolution state? First, and most important, Trotsky broke with the evolutionism of the Second International. Kautsky, Plekhanov and others had defined an orthodoxy according to which modes of production succeeded each other automatically in response to the development of the productive forces. Any attempt to skip over historical stages, to give history a push, as the Narodnik Zhelyabov put it, was doomed to disastrous failure. The other side of the coin was that, in the fullness of time, those who waited would be rewarded by proletarian revolution. The triumph of socialism was predetermined by the laws of capitalist development.

Trotsky swept all this aside. Most fundamentally he did so by shifting the framework of analysis from individual social formations to the capitalist world-system as a whole. ‘Marxism takes its starting-point from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets.’ [2] The class struggle in individual countries could not be understood simply in terms of their internal development, but only if placed in the context of the world system. Thus, Trotsky’s discussions of the peculiarities of the Tsarist state in his writings on the Russian revolution are always firmly related to its situation within the European state-system, and the resulting pressures to modernise Russian society in order to keep up with the more advanced great powers of the West.

The world-system could be understood, Trotsky argued, only in terms of the law of uneven and combined development. [3] ‘The entire history of mankind is governed by the law of uneven development. Capitalism finds various sections of mankind at different stages of development, each with its profound internal contradictions.’ [4] Capitalism, because it operates through competition, in some ways intensifies the differences between and within different countries. At the same time, by drawing all parts of the globe within a single world market and a unified international division of labour, capitalism gives added force to ‘the law of *combined development* – by which I mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms.’ [5] Thus, contrary to the assumptions of evolutionist Marxism, social forms belonging to different phases of historical development could co-exist within the same society. In particular, Trotsky argued:

... the privilege of historical backwardness – and such a privilege exists – permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is

ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages. Savages throw away their bows and arrows for rifles all at once, without travelling the road which lay between those two weapons in the past. The European colonists in America did not begin history all over again from the beginning. The fact that Germany and the United States have now economically outstripped England was made possible by the very backwardness of their capitalist development... The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historical process. [6]

These propositions are a generalisation of Trotsky's brilliant concrete analysis of the Russian social formation in **Results and Prospects** and **1905**. Here he argues that the 'privilege of historical backwardness' in the specific case of late nineteenth-century Russia lay in the import, under the pressure of military competition with Germany and Austria-Hungary, of the most advanced industrial plant and technology. Industrialization sponsored by the Tsarist state and financed by foreign loans and direct investment transplanted into a predominantly feudal rural society an industrial proletariat concentrated in some of the largest and most modern factories in the world. To the age old struggle between gentry and peasantry was added that of capital and labour.

Trotsky's second major innovation was to draw the appropriate political conclusions from this path-breaking theoretical analysis. The Marxists of the Second International held that the bourgeois-democratic and proletarian-socialist revolutions were strictly separate processes. Plekhanov argued that, in Russia, still ruled by feudal absolutism, the working class should support the liberal bourgeoisie in its struggle to introduce a parliamentary regime; socialism was for the future, after the old feudal order had been destroyed. The Mensheviks agreed; Lenin and Bolsheviks also did so to the extent of accepting that all that was possible in Russia for the present was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, but they argued that the agent of this revolution would not be the bourgeoisie, whose dependence on

Tsarism had been clearly proven in 1905, but the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry who together would create a 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship'. Trotsky subjected this formula to ruthless criticism. Such a coalition of workers and peasants would, he claimed, inevitably succumb to the contradictions it contained. Either the proletariat would adopt a self-denying ordinance, and refuse to use their political power to further their economic interests, in which case their position would be gradually eroded by the bourgeoisie, or they would be led to make inroads into the economic power of capital, for example, through the takeover of firms that sacked workers, in which case they would have crossed the boundaries of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and have established the dictatorship of the proletariat. Trotsky advocated the second course. This is the heart of permanent revolution, the claim that, by virtue of the law of uneven and combined development, democratic and socialist revolutions would fuse into a single process whose outcome would be workers' power. [7]

As everyone knows, in April 1917 Lenin abandoned the formula of the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, and adopted Trotsky's strategy. The result was October 1917. However, this major intellectual shift on Lenin's part, made possible by his study of imperialism prompted by the outbreak of world war in 1914, was never formally acknowledged, and was soon negated as a result of Stalin's triumph. Trotsky only seems to have come to see his concept of permanent revolution as involving not merely an analysis of Russian society, but a general theory of revolution in the imperialist epoch in the course of his polemic with Stalin in the 1920s. As Löwy correctly notes, 'it is most likely that Trotsky's generalization of the theory of permanent revolution to the entire colonial and semi-colonial (or ex-colonial) world was catalysed by the dramatic upsurge of the Chinese class struggle in 1925-7, much as his original formulation of the theory was prompted by the Russian revolution of 1905' (p. 86). Indeed, in

the early stages of the debate on China, Trotsky appears to have ruled out the perspective of permanent revolution as anything more than ‘merely a long-term option wholly dependent on the development of the world proletarian revolution.’ His attention was initially concentrated on the need to secure the independence of the Chinese Communist Party from the Kuomintang, [8] and to encourage the formation of workers’ and peasants’ Soviets – a line closer to that of Lenin’s ‘revolutionary-democratic dictatorship’ than to **Results and Prospects**. [9] It was only after the massacre of workers in Shanghai in April 1927, which marked the definitive failure of Stalin’s strategy of fusing the CCP and the KMT, that Trotsky applied the formula of permanent revolution to China, no doubt because of the close connection between this strategy and Stalin’s acceptance of the Menshevik notion of separate bourgeois and democratic ‘stages’ of the revolution.

The third element of Trotsky’s theory was the most prominent in the debates of the 1920s. This was his rejection of the notion of ‘socialism in one country’ and insistence that:

... the completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the Utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on the entire planet. [10]

This thesis was axiomatic among the Bolsheviks at the time of the October revolution, and was only abandoned as part of the shift after Lenin’s death towards a strategy based on the national interests of the Russian bureaucracy. Trotsky did not, of course, mean that world revolution had to be a simultaneous uprising of workers across the globe, an absurd notion foisted on him by

Stalin, and still accepted by some today [11]: ‘That the international revolution of the proletariat cannot be a single act, of this there can of course be no dispute at all among grown-up people after the experience of the October Revolution, achieved by the proletariat of a backward country under pressure of historical necessity, without waiting in the least for the proletariat of the advanced countries “to even out the front”.’ [12] The world revolution would, inevitably, be a process, in which particular countries, because of their specific, historically unique conditions, would take the lead. But, at the same time, this process could be completed only on a global scale. The formation of a world economy of which nation-states were component parts made it impossible for individual countries to break out of the system, and to develop their productive forces in isolation from it. The pressure of the international system would make itself felt upon even the most autarchical economy. Only spreading the revolution to other countries offered a way out.

These three propositions – the international character of capitalism, the tendency for democratic revolutions to ‘grow over’ into socialist ones, and the necessity of world revolution – form the essence of Trotsky’s theory. In the first three chapters of **The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development**, Löwy deploys his considerable resources of textual scholarship to trace the genealogy of the concept of permanent revolution, in the writings of Marx and Engels, to outline its initial formulation by Trotsky in 1905, and to follow its later generalization in the course of the 1920s. The result is admirable, a clear and learned addition to our understanding of the history of Marxism. Unfortunately, however, Trotsky’s concepts were intended for use rather than for study, and it is when Löwy turns from their elucidation to their application that the trouble begins, in particular because of his adhesion to the orthodox Trotskyism of the Fourth International. There are two principal difficulties for those, like both Löwy and myself, who believe the theory of permanent revolution to be of continued relevance today. The

first is the occurrence of a series of purportedly ‘socialist’ revolutions in backward countries – Yugoslavia, China, Cuba and Vietnam being the most important – in which the working class played a negligible role. The second is the ability of a number of Third World countries – the so-called ‘newly industrializing countries’ – to develop dynamic industrial economies, apparently quite contrary to Trotsky’s prognoses.

As to the first question, there is no doubt that Trotsky believed the working class to be the agent of permanent revolution. His entire analysis in **1905**, for example, centres around the inability of other classes to lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia – the capitalists because of their *parvenu* and dependent status, the peasants because their relations of production prevent them from developing the necessary social and political cohesion. The entire logic of the process centres around the consequences of the proletariat filling the gap left by other classes – the inevitable tendency of a democratic revolution to ‘grow up’ into a socialist one once the working class moves onto the centre of the stage. Löwy is well aware of the central role played by the proletariat in the theory of permanent revolution, and of the problem this presents when seeking to interpret cases such as China in terms of the theory:

In October 1917 the working class was directly the principal social actor and architect of the revolution through its organization into Soviets.

Simultaneously, the Bolshevik Party was proletarian, not only by its ideology and programme, but also in social composition. Contrary to Trotsky’s expectations, however, this configuration of a hegemonic proletarian party and massive working-class self-organization was not repeated in the Chinese or other post-1917 revolutions (pp. 213–14).

At the same time Löwy believes that China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam and (perhaps) Cuba are ‘*bureaucratic states of proletarian origin*’: meaning that while they are the products of socialist revolutions under the leadership of proletarian-socialist

parties, the real power in these states is monopolized by a bureaucratic layer with specific social and economic interests' (pp. 215–16).

I do not wish to discuss in any detail the merits and demerits of this formula, which seems to be a variant of, but not in any obvious sense an improvement on the orthodox Trotskyist notion of a 'deformed workers state' [13], merely to concentrate on the immediate difficulty: how can we talk of China, for example, being a 'bureaucratic state of *proletarian* origins' when the industrial working class played a negligible part in the revolution which established it? How does Löwy justify the claim that the Chinese, Yugoslav, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions were 'proletarian'? There seem to be two main elements to his argument.

First, he claims that 'Trotsky's views on the peasantry ... require a thorough re-assessment' (p. 210) – a necessary move on his part, since peasants provided the popular base of all his allegedly 'proletarian' revolutions. Löwy defends Trotsky against the traditional Stalinist accusation that he 'underestimated' the peasantry. Trotsky accepted 'the decisive role of the peasantry in any real revolutionary process' in the backward countries. 'What Trotsky denied was not the crucial weight of the peasantry in the revolution, but its capability of playing an independent political role and of becoming an independent ruling class' (p. 93). And, indeed, Trotsky's analysis of the peasantry centres on the manner in which their conditions of life limit their class capacity:

History cannot entrust the *muzhik* [poor peasant] with the task of liberating a bourgeois nation from its bonds. Because of its dispersion, political backwardness, and especially of its deep inner contradictions which cannot be resolved within the framework of the capitalist system, the peasantry can only deal the old order some powerful blows from the rear, by spontaneous risings in the countryside, on the one hand, and by creating discontent within the army on the other. [14]

Quite consistently with this, Trotsky was highly critical of the strategy pursued by the Chinese Communist Party after the disasters of 1927–8 of abandoning the working class and the cities, and forming peasant armies in the countryside. Highly perceptively, he noted how such a strategy would encourage the bureaucratization of the Party, and even envisaged the prospect of a civil war between a Trotskyist working class and Stalinist peasant armies. [15]

All this makes Löwy very unhappy, since he wishes to claim the revolution made by peasant armies under Mao's leadership as 'proletarian'. Yet he offers no real arguments against what he acknowledges to be 'the classical Marxist conception of the peasantry as a "non-socialist" class' (p. 210). He notes, correctly, that the section of the rural population which has played the most important role in social revolutions is the small-holding peasantry, who possess and work the land themselves but who are exploited through deductions from their product, rather than, for example, agricultural labourers on large estates who are much more subject to their employer's surveillance and control. But it is precisely these smallholders – Lenin's 'middle peasantry' – who are the most hostile to the socialization of the means of production because it is liable to threaten their actual or potential ownership of the plot they work. The French and Russian revolutions vastly increased the economic and social weight of the peasant small-holders, thus creating enormous pools of rural conservatism which provided the popular base of French reaction in the nineteenth century and which underlay the travails of the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s. In China, the CCP spent decades breaking the landowners' hold on the peasantry and drawing the latter into politics, thereby placing a major obstacle in the way of the centralization of their own power after 1949. [16] One cannot help feeling that Löwy's disagreement with Trotsky on the peasantry reflects his presumption that the Chinese revolution, and others of its type were 'proletarian'. The argument is thus circular: Trotsky must be wrong about the

peasantry because they were the main popular force in these revolutions, which were proletarian, and they were proletarian because the peasants took part in them. Löwy escapes from this circle by finally acknowledging that ‘Trotsky was correct in insisting that the peasantry could only play a consistent revolutionary role under proletarian and communist leadership’ (p. 213).

This brings us to Löwy’s second main argument for the proletarian character of the Yugoslav, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions. ‘All the post-1917 revolutions ... can be designated as “proletarian” only *indirectly*, by the nature of the political leadership in the revolutionary process. Indeed, not only was the proletariat not directly the social agent of revolution, but *the revolutionary party was not the direct, organic expression of the proletariat.*’ (p. 214) In other words, industrial workers formed a negligible proportion of the membership of the Vietnamese, Chinese and Yugoslav Communist Parties (Cuba is a slightly different case since the ‘revolutionary party’ only appeared some time after Castro came to power, but we shall consider this issue below). It would, however, be ‘sociologicistic reductionism’ to deny these parties the appellation of ‘proletarian’ merely on the grounds of their class composition (p. 94). This is for two main reasons. First, ‘the parties were the *political and programmatic* expression of the proletariat by virtue of their adherence to the historical interests of the working class (abolition of capitalism etc.)’ (p. 214). Secondly, ‘the parties’ *ideologies* were proletarian and the membership and periphery were systematically educated to accept the values and world-view of the international working-class movement’ (p. 215).

To take the second point first, it is, of course, true that one cannot infer from the working-class composition of a party that it represents the ‘historical interests’ of the proletariat. Look at the Labour Party. It was for it, and other social-democratic parties which represent the interests of the bourgeoisie within the

labour movement that Lenin coined the expression ‘bourgeois workers’ parties’. To determine whose interests a given organization represents one has certainly to look at its professed ideology. But one has, surely, to look at a lot more. Otherwise, one would have to declare capitalism abolished many times over, to judge by the claims of various reformist politicians. One has to look, surely, at a party’s *practice*, and in particular at where that practice places the party in relation to the different classes. The Bolshevik Party was a workers’ party, not primarily because of its proletarian ideology and composition, but because of its *relationship to the Russian working class*, the systematic connection which its everyday activity placed it with Russian workers. Surely the struggle by Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci and others against ‘left’ communism in the Comintern was precisely concerned to establish the point that a workers’ party can only exist in a relation of constant interaction with the mass of the proletariat. Of course, the different factors – ideology, composition, practice-may be out of line with each other. In its day as a propaganda group, the SWP was proletarian not in composition but in ideology, and to the degree possible, practice. To take a much more important example, by the early 1920s the Bolshevik Party was a workers’ party only because of its ideology and history. Such a discrepancy, unless resolved, is likely, however, to alter the character of the party in the long term, as the Russian experience shows.

In any case, it is a serious deviation from Marxism to determine the class character of political organizations by their professed ideology. If carried out consistently, it would lead to a collapse into idealism. A good example of such a tendency is to be found in the work of Charles Bettelheim, who attributes the degeneration of the Russian revolution to the ‘economism’ of the ‘Bolshevik ideological formation’. Similarly the Chinese cultural revolution was ‘proletarian’ because of the ideology involved, not because of the role played by workers in it. [\[17\]](#) The error is especially lamentable in Löwy’s case because of his anti-

Stalinist credentials. The ‘membership and periphery’ of the Yugoslav, Chinese and Vietnamese CPs were ‘systematically educated to accept the values and world-view’ not of ‘the international working-class movement’ but of the Stalinist degeneration of Marxism. Löwy is well able to detect the presence of and criticize Stalinism in, for example, Mao’s writings (pp. 116–20), but seems unable to draw any general conclusions from this.

Löwy is able to escape from this difficulty because his argument for the ‘proletarian’ leadership of post-1917 revolutions contains, in contrast to the subjectivist pole of identifying class character with ideology, an objectivist pole. The idea here is that, irrespective of their Stalinist or nationalist beliefs, the sheer pressure of events drove the leaders of these revolutions to make inroads into the bourgeois order. This claim is most evident in the case of Löwy’s discussion of the Cuban revolution. Here he cannot invoke the role of ideology, for ‘not only did the old Cuban communist party, the PSP, not play any significant role in the revolution, but the actual revolutionary leadership – the rebel army and the M-26-7 [Castro’s liberal-democratic July 26 Movement] – both in ideology and in social composition was far from being a “proletarian vanguard”’ (p152). What happened was the mass conversion of the 26 July Movement into revolutionary Marxists after the overthrow of Batista in 1958–9. ‘The real catalyst was the logic of the revolutionary process itself; first the dynamic relationship between M-26-7 and the poor peasantry until 1959, and with the proletariat afterwards; second, the new political field opened up the destruction of the repressive apparatus of the state; and, third, the inevitable confrontation with imperialism and the national-bourgeoisie set in motion by the first revolutionary-democratic reforms’ (p. 158).

There are two principle problems with this argument, which has been developed at much greater length by Pierre Rousset in his study of the Vietnamese CP, where he claims that objective

circumstances led Ho Chi Minh to break ‘empirically’ with Stalinism, and fight through the democratic revolution to its socialist finish. [18] The first is that it seems to contradict the Leninist thesis of the essential role played by a Marxist party in the success of socialist revolution. To put it another way, why does the ‘logic of the revolutionary process’ operate selectively – bringing about revolution in some cases, but not others? If we are going by purely objective factors, then surely Germany between 1918 and 1923 was far more propitious to a proletarian takeover than any case discussed by Löwy. Trotsky argued that the reason the revolution failed in Germany was ultimately the absence of effective revolutionary leadership. Apparently, he was wrong: history operates rather like Hegel’s Ruse of Reason, bringing about, where it so chooses, socialist revolutions whose agents are quite unaware of what they are doing. As Trotsky himself put it, ‘the permanent character of the revolution thus becomes a law placing itself above history, independent of the policy of the leadership and of the material development of revolutionary events’. [19]

A second difficulty lies with the outcome of the revolutionary process. Löwy’s argument is once again circular. The socialist character of the post-1917 revolutions is proved by the measures taken by Yugoslav, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese regimes, and in particular the nationalisation of private property. But, of course, one of the matters that is at issue is whether state ownership of the means of production is a sufficient condition of the abolition of capitalist relations of production. This journal has consistently argued that Löwy’s ‘bureaucratic states of proletarian origins’ are in fact state-capitalist, so we are going to reject any identification of nationalization with anti-capitalism. Löwy cannot therefore invoke Castro’s post-revolutionary expropriations as independent proof of his ‘adherence to the historical interests of the working class’.

The foregoing arguments leave, I believe, very little support for the claim that the Yugoslav, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese

revolutions can be cited in support of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Where does that leave the theory? Less worse off than it might at first seem. It is worth stressing, in the first place, that the theory of permanent revolution is a theory of *alternatives*. [20] It does not plot the inevitable course of historical development, but merely one historically contingent possibility, bound up with certain specific conditions which are often unfulfilled. The most important of these conditions is the existence of a class conscious proletariat under revolutionary leadership. The significance of this condition is obscured because when formulating the theory of permanent revolution Trotsky rejected the Leninist notion of the party, seeing it instead as merely a means of education and propaganda. As one bourgeois commentator summarizes his views: 'the party is the organization of the workers during the *pre-revolutionary* period; it ceases to be an organization during the *revolutionary* period and becomes an appendage to the workers – and to the Soviet – themselves.' [21] Once involved in struggle the proletariat would necessarily drive towards revolution. It was only in the course of 1917 that Trotsky came to accept the indispensable role of the revolutionary party in concentrating the energies and aspirations of the masses on the struggle for power.

In any case, from the standpoint of Lenin's theory of the party, it is clear that there is nothing inevitable about the working class attaining revolutionary consciousness, and, therefore, about the socialist revolution itself. Equally, there is nothing inevitable about the transformation of the democratic revolution into socialist revolution under working-class leadership. Since the 1930s massive obstacles have existed to the formation of revolutionary consciousness among workers: in the colonial and ex-colonial world these have included the influence of Stalinism and nationalism, the sheer weight of repression, the minority and sometimes privileged status the working class enjoys *vis-à-vis* the mass of toilers in the Third World. At the same time, the objective situation of many Third World countries has led their

peoples to aspire for radical change—for political and economic independence. The social vacuum left by the weakness of the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie has been filled by another social layer, the intelligentsia, closely linked to the traditional petty bourgeoisie. Löwy correctly points to the immensely important role that this group has played in Third World revolutions, a development quite unanticipated by Trotsky (pp. 207–10). He is mistaken, however, in his belief that the ‘anti-imperialist intelligentsia’, through their leadership of the post-1917 revolutions, have been an anti-capitalist force. Certainly, they have been hostile to *foreign* capital, and to *local private* capital, from whose power and profits they were excluded. It is this which explains the willingness of Castro, for example, to undertake wholesale nationalisations. But these and similar expropriations have led to the aggrandizement of those controlling the state, the central political bureaucracy benefiting from the party’s monopoly of power and ruling in the masses’ name. The state has served as the means through which the intelligentsia have corrected what they see to be the imbalance between themselves and private capital, at the same time creating a more effective, because more centralized focus of capital accumulation. We have here a process of what Tony Cliff has called ‘deflected permanent revolution’, in which the masses are mobilized to overthrow the ancien regime, only to find themselves subjected to a new, state-capitalist order from which they are equally excluded.

The continued relevance of the theory of permanent revolution in its classical form turns in part of another issue: that of whether as Trotsky thought, in the epoch of imperialism, the tasks of the bourgeois revolution can be achieved only through the establishment of worker’s power. Trotsky had no doubts on this question: ‘with regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of permanent revolution signifies that 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.’ [22] Decolonization, whose possibility Trotsky does not seem to have allowed for, is not generally thought to have contradicted this assertion, since it left the levers of effective economic power in the hands of the western capitalist countries. But what about the emergence of the ‘newly industrialising countries’ – of Brazil, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Mexico, Argentina, India etc.?

Both Löwy and Ernest Mandel deny that this development represents a disconfirmation of the theory of permanent revolution. [23] They make a number of valid and important points – that industrialisation in itself is not the same as bourgeois revolution, that frequently it occurs in precisely those countries that are most pliant to western capital’s desires, that it is in any case highly dependent on the fate of a world economy in crisis. Doubts remain, however. Does not, for example, the notion of the ‘complete and genuine solution’ of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution set impossibly high standards for Third World countries today? Löwy, following Trotsky, identifies three components of this ‘complete and genuine solution’: a solution to the agrarian question in the sense of the elimination of pre-capitalist modes of exploitation, the break-up of the great estates etc., national liberation, and a democratic republic (p. 161). I can’t help but feel that we have here an identification of bourgeois-democratic revolution with merely one of its cases. This logical slide is understandable, since it is one frequently made in the Marxist tradition. It involves taking as the model of bourgeois revolution the Great French Revolution of 1789, and making its specific features- the abolition of the monarchy, national unification and independence, the division of the estates among the peasantry – necessary components of any ‘genuine’ bourgeois revolution. The trouble is, of course, that, as Löwy acknowledges, the processes which led to the establishment of most of the main capitalist powers do not fit this model – the

main beneficiary of the English revolution was a quasi-capitalist agrarian class which kept firm hold of its land and got rid of kings rather than the monarchy, while Germany, Italy and Japan experienced what Gramsci called ‘passive revolutions’ in which the feudal landowners gradually accommodated themselves to industrial capitalism, leaving many of the structures of the old society intact. Yet Löwy goes on to apply tougher conditions to the Third World than he does to the ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions, insisting on the truth of Trotsky’s claim that only the proletariat can offer a ‘complete and genuine solution’ to the tasks of the bourgeois revolution because ‘no country has so far succeeded in successfully combining all three revolutionary-democratic transformations, and as a result, explosive and unresolved contradictions have persisted in the core of their social formations’ (p. 164). If this is correct, it is equally so in the cases of Germany, Italy and Japan, where the survival of elements of the feudal rural order has been an important factor in the political convulsions of the first half of the century.

Surely it is more sensible, rather than to invoke the metaphysical concept of a ‘complete and genuine solution’, to judge a bourgeois revolution by the degree to which it succeeds in establishing an autonomous centre of capital accumulation, even if it fails to democratise the political order, or to eliminate feudal social relations. Such a process cannot be purely economic, because of the role of the nation state in providing a framework within which accumulation can occur, and to some degree actually organising it. From this standpoint, the key question about the Third World today concerns the extent to which industrialisation takes place under the control of the western multinationals or under the control of indigenous forces. Often the significance of the latter is underplayed because they are identified with private capital, where it is clear that the state is of central importance in Third World industrialisation, even in the South-East Asian showcases of *laissez faire*. [24] The answer to the question raised here depends upon empirical investigation

and cannot be further discussed now. It is likely to be more complex than Mandel's grey certainties would allow. Löwy is, I think, aware of this, but his commitment to orthodox Trotskyism prevents him from coming to terms with the real problems.

There is, finally, one astonishing absence in Löwy's discussion of permanent revolution today. We saw how Trotsky's perspective was irreducibly international: 'Marxism takes its starting-point from world economy'. Yet there is absolutely no discussion of the international context of, and constraints upon Third World revolutions. Or rather, world capitalism is invoked only when it is needed to show how Venezuela or Egypt has failed to break from its bonds. There is no analysis of the manner in which the world economy shapes and distorts the 'bureaucratic states of proletarian origin', forcing certain choices upon them, imposing priorities in the use of their very scarce resources. Yet this is surely a matter of the first importance in a study of permanent revolution, for two reasons. First of all, Trotsky generalised the theory in the course of his polemic against the idea that socialism could be constructed within the limits of a nation-state. Secondly, the power exercised by the capitalist world economy even over supposedly 'workers' states' has been sharply demonstrated in recent years with the enormous rise in the indebtedness of Comecon states to the West, the growing integration of countries such as Poland and Hungary in the world economy, and the partial opening of the Chinese economy to foreign trade and investment. All of this is the most striking confirmation of the theory of permanent revolution, and in particular of the necessity of *world* revolution. One wonders why such a keen defender of the theory as Löwy does not draw these developments to our attention.

The answer, of course, lies in Löwy's belief that the 'bureaucratic states of proletarian origin' have somehow succeeded in transcending capitalism. Here we have the central weakness of his book – the cutting edge of his classical Marxism, its scientific rigour and commitment to proletarian

revolution is blunted by his acceptance of orthodox Trotskyism. The conflicts between, on the one hand, classical Marxism and actual historical developments, and, on the other, orthodox Trotskyism leads Löwy into the sort of metaphysical obscurities characteristic of his discussions of the ‘proletarian’ character of post-1917 revolutions, and of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. The confusion is greater than would be true of a narrower mind, since, especially in the case of the latter issue, Löwy is well aware of the difficulties of the orthodox position, but nonetheless clings to it. More is lost than clarity. In his excellent study of the young Marx, Löwy shows how historical materialism, with the self-emancipation of the working class as its central focus, represented a decisive break with the notion, inherited in part from the Jacobins, of a ‘supreme saviour’ whose benign intervention from outside would liberate the masses which was so common in the early socialist movement. [25] It is sad, then, to see him qualify as ‘proletarian’ revolutions where other social forces substituted themselves for the working class, acting as their ‘supreme saviour’.

In conclusion, the theory of permanent revolution seems to me of continued validity, subject to two important qualifications. The first is that there is nothing inevitable about the proletariat’s assumption of leadership in the democratic revolution. Should it fail to do so, then other social forces – notably the intelligentsia – may fill the vacuum. But the outcome will not be a workers’ state but bureaucratic state capitalism, or, most frequently in the Third World, some unstable hybrid of private and state capitalism (think of Zimbabwe, Angola, Egypt, Iran, Nicaragua). Secondly, a process of ‘passive revolution’ through which certain ex-colonial states emerge as autonomous centres of capital accumulation cannot be ruled out *a priori*. India and Brazil are cases where this may indeed have already happened. It doesn’t follow that there are no democratic demands to be raised in these countries, any more than in pre-1918 Germany, where effective universal suffrage and parliamentary sovereignty had

yet to be achieved. These qualifications do not affect Trotsky's main innovations – the perspective of the world-system, the law of uneven and combined development. Nor do they affect the heart of Marxism, of which the theory of permanent revolution was an application specific to backward countries, and – which Trotsky's followers seem so often to forget – the self-emancipation of the working class.

Notes

1. M. Löwy, **The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution**, London: New Left Books 1981, £4.50. All references in the text are to this book.

2. L. Trotsky, **The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects**, New York 1969, p. 146.

3. There are discussions of this concept in G. Novack, **Understanding History**, New York 1972, chapter 4 and B. Knei-Paz, **The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky**, Oxford 1978, pp. 62–107.

4. L. Trotsky, **The Third International after Lenin**, New York 1970, p. 19.

5. L. Trotsky, **The History of the Russian Revolution** (3 vols), London 1967, i, p. 23.

6. ***Ibid.***, i, pp.22-3.

7. The best discussion of the debates among Marxists about the nature of the Russian revolution is N. Geras, **The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg**, London 1976, chapter 2.

8. **Leon Trotsky on China**, London 1976, p. 129.

9. See ***ibid.***, *Letter to Alsky* (29 March 1927), *To the Politburo of the AUCP (B) Central Committee* (31 March 1927), *On the Slogan of Soviets in China* (16 April 1927).

10. Trotsky, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 279.

11. See J.V. Stalin, **On the Opposition**, (Peking 1974) and N. Krasso, *Trotsky's Marxism*, **New Left Review** 44, July–August 1967.

12. Trotsky, **Third International**, pp. 20–1.

13. The objections to analyses of this sort have been well-aided – see, for example, P. Binns and D. Hallas, [*The Soviet Union – state capitalist or socialist?*](#) **IS 91**, September 1976.
14. L. Trotsky, **1905**, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 237.
15. See [*Peasant War in China and the Proletariat*](#) (22 September 1932), **Trotsky on China**.
16. See T. Skocpol, **States and Social Revolutions**, Cambridge 1979.
17. See A. Callinicos, [*Maoism, Stalinism and the Soviet Union*](#), **IS 2:5**, Summer 1979. Henri Weber makes a similar mistake – see **Nicaragua: the Sandinist Revolution**, London 1981, pp. 58–9 n 13.
18. See P. Rousset, **Le Particommuniste vietnamien**, Paris 1975.
19. **Trotsky on China**, p. 349.
20. This formulation is Colin Sparks’.
21. Knei-Paz, p. 210. See **ibid.**, chapter 5, on the party, which very misleadingly concentrates on the pre-1917 period (49 pages) and virtually ignores Trotsky’s very important discussions of the party after 1917 (8 pages).
22. Trotsky, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 276.
23. E. Mandel, **Revolutionary Marxism Today**, London 1977, chapter 2
24. N. Harris, [*The Asian Boom Economies and the “Impossibility” of National Economic Development*](#), **IS 2:3**, Winter 1978/9. See also Chris Harman’s article [*State capitalism, armaments and the general form of the current crisis*] in this current issue of **International Socialism**.
25. M. Lowy, **La Theorie de la révolution chez la jeune Marx**, Paris 1970, pp. 24ff.

