Chapter 2 - Permanent Revolution

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The theory of Permanent Revolution is one of the main contributions made by Trotsky to Marxism. Like all important theories it is often completely misunderstood.

Right-wingers sometimes suggest that it is a call for a never-ending series of revolutions. It is as though Trotskyists are irresponsible maniacs who want society to be in a state of constant upheaval, never settling down.

Earlier critics adopted a different tack. Stalin and his supporters opposed the ?Menshevik ?theory of permanent revolution?, which it would be an insult to Marxism to call a Marxist theory.?

So what is Permanent Revolution really about, and why did it become such an important issue for its supporters and opponents alike?

The theory of Permanent Revolution deals with two main questions. The first is the role of the working class in revolutions in ?backward? countries. The second is the international character of the socialist revolution.

The bourgeois revolution

In the 1880s and 1890s, Plekhanov and his small group of Russian Marxists had asked themselves the question: what sort of revolution is approaching in Russia? They had answered ? a bourgeois revolution. This was the approach adopted by all the Russian Social Democrats, from the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks through to Trotsky and his small band of followers.

A bourgeois revolution? To socialists in industrially developed capitalist countries the very idea sounds like a contradiction in terms. Today the bourgeoisie are the ruling class. Revolution is the last thing they want.

The minority of financiers and industrialists own society?s wealth and control the state, using the unelected power of the courts, the army, police and civil service to protect their property and their privileges.

All over the world they have resorted to the most drastic measures, including civil war and dictatorship, to prevent revolution.

But this was not always the case. To establish their power in the first place, the bourgeoisie had no option but to turn to revolution.

The French Revolution of 1789 was a classic example. It swept away the old land-owning class and the monarchy, and opened the way for the development of modern capitalism. The bourgeoisie encouraged the mass of the people ? the peasants and the poorest city-dwellers ? to rise up and fight for ?Liberty, Fraternity and Equality?.

But once the King and the aristocracy had been overthrown, the poor were abandoned by the bourgeois
revolutionaries, and were left without power, without the vote, and without rights.

The capitalists had made their revolution: now the impoverished population should settle down and get to work ? for the capitalists.

By the turn of the century Russia was still so backward that it had not had even a bourgeois revolution. There was no parliament and no free speech; even the capitalists had no right to vote. The land was still in the hands of the old aristocracy.

The many nations under Russian rule had no right to determine their own future. Russian Tsarism was the most conservative force in Europe, sponsoring counter-revolution and opposing democracy wherever it could.

Marxists all agreed that the coming revolution would be bourgeois. By this they meant that the rise of capitalism in Russia would undermine the whole basis for Tsarism and bring it crashing down.

The main aim of the revolution would be to overthrow the obstacles to capitalist development: Tsarism, the absence of democracy, and the old-fashioned feudal system in agriculture. They believed that such a revolution was necessary as a means of creating the basis ? modern capitalist democracy ? for a later, socialist revolution against capitalism.

Lenin against the Mensheviks

The split in the RSDLP in 1903 drew attention to a question that sharply divided the different factions. The coming revolution was bourgeois, but which forces in society, which classes, were going to lead it?

The Mensheviks gave a simple answer. The revolution was bourgeois, so it would be led by the bourgeoisie. What could be more logical than that?

The RSDLP should, accordingly, build an alliance with those parties that represented the most liberal sections of the capitalist class, for they would lead the revolution. Once the bourgeoisie had overthrown the Tsar, the way would be clear for the peaceful expansion of capitalism in Russia.

The working class would grow gradually bigger and stronger as capitalism developed. Eventually, the workers would overturn capitalism itself, and establish socialism. But this was the music of the distant future.

Lenin had a different view. He was aware that over the preceding decades the bourgeoisie had played a far less heroic role than it had in its revolutionary past. During the revolution in Germany in 1848, for example, the capitalists had not overthrown the monarchy, but instead come to a compromise with the landowners and the Emperor, allowing them to crush the revolutionary workers and peasants.

Things had changed since 1789. The capitalists now had an industrial working class to worry about. The threat of revolution from below scared them far more than the survival of the monarchy and the landowners.

Lenin summed up the difference between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks:

?Our revolution is a bourgeois revolution, therefore the workers must support the bourgeoisie ? this is what the worthless politicians from the ranks of the liquidators say. Our revolution is a bourgeois revolution, is what we Marxists say. Therefore the workers must open the eyes of the people to the deceit of the bourgeois politicians, teach them not to believe them, to rely on their own forces, on their own solidarity, on their own arms.?
The bourgeoisie was untrustworthy and cowardly. They would not carry out even their own revolution. Instead the workers would have to rely on themselves and build up their own organisations.

Because the workers were still a minority of the people in Russia, they would need allies. They would find them in the millions of poor peasants, desperate for land and freedom.

The proletariat should lead the peasantry in the struggle for democracy. Only in that way, argued Lenin, could Tsarism be overthrown and a democratic republic established. The new government would not be of the normal bourgeois type, but would be a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry?

**Uneven and combined development**

Trotsky agreed with Lenin's hostility to the liberals and his stress on the role of the working class in the revolution. But he went a step further.

The first sign of Trotsky's new theory came in 1905. He wrote a pamphlet about Bloody Sunday and the beginning of the revolution in January that year. The powerful general strike proved that the working class was the most revolutionary force in Russia. But in an introduction to Trotsky's pamphlet, a new idea appeared:

> Now no one can deny that the general strike is the most important means of fighting . . . One need only add that revolution in Russia may place a democratic workers' government in power.

These lines were written by Parvus, who together with Trotsky in 1905 and 1906, worked out the bare bones of what was to become the theory of permanent revolution. The bourgeois revolution in Russia would take place under different circumstances from classical bourgeois revolutions like in France.

The key to understanding this was the theory of uneven and combined development. This is a much simpler idea than it sounds. Native Americans, for example, that came into contact with white colonial settlers eventually swapped their bows and arrows for rifles, without first having to discover gunpowder for themselves. In this way modern technologies can exist alongside many of the structures of a less economically developed society.

So it was in Russia. Russian capitalism had evolved more quickly than the Russian capitalist class. The great centres of modern industry had been paid for with loans and investments by the West European bourgeoisie.

The process was also highly uneven. The new working class was concentrated in very large factories and enterprises; but the Russian bourgeoisie was extremely weak and had only very slender connections with the rest of society.

The monarchy and the state took so much of the wealth that the capitalist class was prevented from growing in size and power. There was no way they could be expected to lead the revolution.

The idea of combined and uneven development was useful: it explained how Russia could be facing a bourgeois revolution without having a revolutionary bourgeoisie.

The events of 1905 had shown the power of the working class; the general strike, the Soviets and the armed uprising had proved beyond doubt that the proletariat would play the leading role in the revolution.

But what would happen after the Tsar had been overthrown? One Austrian socialist leader had told Trotsky not to worry about that? the Russians had enough to worry about in the here and now. But it was
Trotsky’s strength as a revolutionary thinker that he always looked to the great questions of the future, as well as the tasks of the present day.

**The Permanent Revolution**

The workers would have to form a government. The first steps of this revolutionary government would be to complete the bourgeois revolution, abolishing the monarchy, granting freedom to oppressed nationalities and officially recognising the peasants’ right to land.

But should the workers then guarantee to preserve the capitalist system? Trotsky said no. The workers’ government would have to go further and take specifically socialist measures.

In his pamphlet *Results and Prospects*, Trotsky gave an example to explain what he meant. The RSDLP was campaigning for a maximum working day of eight hours — something that workers all over the world are still fighting for. This was a demand that could be met within the capitalist system — it was what Marxists call a democratic reform. But what would happen in the very likely event that some employers refused to carry it out?

If the workers went on strike for an eight hour day, then a workers’ government would have to support them. If the employers still refused to change their ways, then the workers’ government would have to take over their businesses and run them in the interests of the workers.

The government would have to undertake the expropriation [confiscation] of the closed factories and organising production on a socialist basis. The workers’ government would have to organise the country to meet the workers’ need, not the capitalists’ greed.

The only alternative would be to limit the revolution strictly to capitalist measures, which would mean siding with the bosses. The workers’ government would have to attack the workers. This would, in Trotsky’s words, compromise Social Democracy from the very start.

Lenin’s idea of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry was too vague. It correctly pointed out that the workers would have to lead the people in overthrowing Tsarism. But it did not clearly explain what the tasks of the workers would be once they had conquered power. Trotsky’s position was more definite:

>... the democratic revolution grows over directly into the socialist revolution and thereby becomes a permanent revolution.

The events of 1905 proved the point:

>It was not the opposition of the liberal bourgeoisie, not the elemental risings of the peasantry or the terrorist acts of the intelligentsia, but the strike of the workers that for the first time had brought Tsarism to its knees. The revolutionary leadership of the proletariat revealed itself as an incontrovertible fact. I felt that the theory of permanent revolution had withstood its first test successfully.

Lenin did not accept Trotsky’s theory, which seemed to fly in the face of everything the Russian Marxists had been arguing for decades. He dismissed permanent revolution as absurdly left. But he still pushed for the workers to play a leading role in the revolution, and to fight the cowardly liberals.

What is more, he recognised that the workers would have to set themselves the goal of dominating the revolutionary government. He argued:
One cannot engage in a struggle without expecting to capture the position for which one is fighting.

In 1917 Lenin was true to these words. When the Mensheviks joined a coalition government with capitalist ministers, he opposed it and argued for all power to pass to the workers? and soldiers? Soviets. The bourgeois Provisional Government refused to carry through even the bourgeois revolution.

It was left to the new Soviet Government to give the land to the peasants and to hold parliamentary elections. As Trotsky had predicted, the workers? government did not stop there. In the face of sabotage by the private owners, it steadily took over industry and placed it under workers? control.

In early 1917 some leaders of the Bolshevik party ? including Stalin ? wanted to use Lenin?s old slogan to get the party to support the Provisional Government. Lenin replied:

?Whoever talks now only about the ?revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry? has lost touch with life, has, in virtue of this circumstance, gone over, in practice, to the petit-bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle; and he ought to be relegated to the museum of ?Bolshevik? pre-revolutionary antiquities.?

Though Lenin never expressed support for permanent revolution in writing, his practice in 1917 showed that he had accepted its conclusions. Immediately after the seizure of power in October, he declared to the Soviet Congress that the Bolshevik government would now proceed to construct the socialist order.

Adolphe Joffe, a Bolshevik leader in 1917, claimed to the end of his life that in 1919 Lenin had told him that, on the question of permanent revolution, Trotsky had proved to be right.

**Russia and the World Revolution**

The Russian Revolution produced cries of anger not only from the capitalists, but from reformist opponents of revolution in Social-Democratic parties around the world. Plekhanov himself declared that ?against the Bolsheviks all methods are good.?

In their arguments against the Bolshevik revolution, the Mensheviks and other Social-Democrats used the language of Marxism, but they gave it a special right-wing twist of their own.

Marxism teaches that socialism can only be built on the basis of the most modern and advanced developments. If society?s wealth is to be shared out equally, there has to be enough to go round. Capitalism would provide the conditions for going forward to socialism, by creating a modern industrial economy, the latest technology, and a large working class.

Russia had none of these things. The Mensheviks drew the conclusion from this that the Bolsheviks had been wrong to take power. The workers should have waited until capitalism had developed Russia further. They thought the socialist revolution would have to begin in the most ?civilised? countries of Western Europe, not in a rural backwater like Russia.

Trotsky never believed that Russia would be able to build socialism alone. He accepted that socialism would have to be based on the achievements of the most advanced capitalist economies.

But he sharply rejected the anti-revolutionary conclusions of the Mensheviks. Despite Russia?s backwardness, it was the Russian working class that first had the chance to take power. They had rightly taken it. The task now was to spread the revolution to other countries.

The overthrow of the powerful capitalists of Germany, Britain and France would remove the greatest threat to the survival of the Russian workers? republic. A federation of workers? states would help to overcome
Russia's isolation and backwardness.

This was the second vital element of the theory of permanent revolution. The revolution in a backward country like Russia was just the first blow of the world socialist revolution. Without this, the revolution in Russia could not survive for long. As Trotsky explained:

"The conquest of power by the proletariat does not complete the revolution, but only opens it . . . 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 our entire planet."

In short, the Mensheviks said that because socialism could not be built in Russia alone, the Russian workers should not have taken power and introduced socialist measures. In contrast, Trotsky and Lenin said that because socialism could not be built in Russia alone, the Russian workers should take power and strive to encourage and spread socialist revolution across the globe.

Trotsky's theory had predicted the events of 1917. The workers had proved to be the real leaders of the bourgeois revolution. Nor had the revolution remained at the capitalist stage. February had given way to October - the struggle for peace, land and democracy had led directly to the struggle for socialism.

Lenin's actions seemed to confirm that Trotsky had been right. The Bolshevik leader had seen the significance of the Soviets as a basis for a workers' government, changed his party's policy, and led them to take power in a second, socialist, revolution.

Trotsky must have been satisfied that history itself had proved the value and validity of his theory of permanent revolution.

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