

Socialism and "backward" countries

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How and why do revolutions happen in 'undeveloped' countries?

In December 1917, the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci welcomed the revolution in Russia with an article called 'The revolution against Capital'.

Like many other socialists across Europe, Gramsci thought socialist revolution was ruled out in a backward, semi-feudal country. In Russia there were only five million industrial workers out of a population of 150 million and more than 80 per cent of the population were peasants.

'This is a revolution against Karl Marx's Capital', Gramsci declared. 'In Russia Marx's Capital was more a book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat. It stood as a critical demonstration of how events should follow a pre-determined course; how in Russia a bourgeoisie had to develop, and a capitalist era had to open before the proletariat could even think in terms of its own revolt, its own class demands, its own revolution.'

What was Gramsci talking about? Why would a Marxist have ruled out socialist revolution in a country like Russia?

George Plekhanov, the 'father of Russian Marxism', had popularised the idea that Russia had to go through capitalist development before it reach socialism. The idea arose in the debate between socialists and 'populists' in the 1880s.

The populists argued that Russia's revolution could skip straight over from a peasant economy to communism because in some places peasant life was communal. Plekhanov argued that Russia would have to follow the road of western European development.

With the development of capitalism the working class would grow and, Plekhanov thought, make common cause with the liberal bourgeoisie to establish democratic rights. Only then, after decades of capitalist development, would the working class enter into direct struggle with the bourgeoisie for a socialist revolution.

At the time, most socialists agreed with this.

Plekhanov could certainly point to a number of passages from Marx to justify his position. In a much quoted passage in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy of 1859, Marx wrote:

'No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed.'

This economic argument 'that in a 'backward' country there could be no question of the workers taking power, as the productive forces were not developed sufficiently for socialism' proved decisive within the Marxist movement.

On the other hand, every socialist in the second half of the nineteenth century could see that the bourgeoisie was becoming afraid of its 'own' revolution: of the struggle for land, democratic rights and national independence. In many cases the bourgeoisie, terrified of the revolutionary working class, turned to the military machine of the old order to crush the workers, abandoning their own struggle for a democratic republic.

Marx summed up his view of the relationship between the workers' revolution and the unfinished bourgeois revolution in his Address to the Communist League in 1850:

'While the democratic petty bourgeoisie want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible it is in our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions.'

He went on to outline how the workers should do this: 'Alongside the new official government they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, local executive committees, councils and clubs. The whole proletariat must be armed at once with muskets, rifles, cannon and ammunition, and the revival of the old style citizens' militia, directed against the workers, must be opposed.'

Fifty years later, the Russian socialists were locked in debate about what this meant.

By the eve of the 1905 revolution in Russia there were two strategies for the Russian revolution within the workers' movement. One was held by Plekhanov and the Mensheviks which saw the main task of the Russian Social Democrats as prodding and encouraging the liberal bourgeoisie into establishing a democratic republic, a regime that would develop a capitalist economy. This meant, above all, not 'driving the bourgeoisie into the camp of reaction' with talk of socialism and the arming of the workers. The other conception was developed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Instead of saying, 'we have to wait for a bourgeois revolution, made in alliance with the liberal politicians', Lenin 'the leader of the Bolshevik faction' argued: we can't wait for the liberals, we can't refrain from struggle for fear of frightening them. If revolution breaks out we fight for a provisional government of workers and peasant parties, and we make the revolution as democratic as possible 'even if that means fighting against the so-called liberal bourgeoisie.

Like Plekhanov, Lenin stuck to the idea that Russia could not jump over the bourgeois revolution. He wrote in 1905:

'The Marxists are thoroughly convinced of the bourgeois character of the Russian revolution. We cannot jump out of the bourgeois-democratic framework of the Russian revolution but we can considerably broaden that framework, create within the bourgeois society more favourable conditions for the further struggle of the proletariat.'

But for Lenin there was no question of believing that the cowardly Russian bourgeoisie would take on the Tsar and consummate their own revolution. Lenin recognised that the proletariat would have to look for other allies to break the power of the autocracy and its army. For Lenin this meant a fighting alliance with the peasantry.

Lenin correctly recognised the agrarian question as 'the crux of the Russian revolution'. The demand for the nationalisation of the land, a bourgeois measure, which would allow the development of capitalist agriculture on the American model, with peasants leasing their lands from the state, had the potential to destroy the landed aristocracy and the monarchy that headed it. Lenin knew the bourgeoisie would have

no truck with such a measure because of their links to the landed gentry and their fear of the revolutionary masses.

So, in contrast to the Mensheviks' perspective of an alliance with the bourgeoisie, Lenin counterposed an alliance with the peasantry. This could take the form, Lenin believed, of the 'democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants'.

The new regime would establish a democratic republic, bring about a radical redistribution of land, end despotism and oppression in village and factory, improve the conditions of the workers and carry the revolution to Germany and the rest of Europe. On this basis – crucially with economic aid from a socialist Germany – the revolution could rapidly move on to a socialist stage in Russia.

Trotsky, in the cauldron of the 1905 revolution itself, advanced a third alternative to the two strategies of the principal factions of Russian Social Democracy. He argued that the Russian revolution would start as a proletarian revolution, with a workers' government carrying out not only bourgeois democratic tasks but 'socialistic tasks' as well. It was Trotsky's strategy that, in the end proved right.

Trotsky confronted the weakest point of Lenin's strategy: how could two different classes share power together? The peasantry as a class was not intrinsically socialist, as Lenin knew well. 'We support the peasant movement,' wrote Lenin in 1905 'in so far as it is revolutionary democratic. We are preparing to fight against it in so far as it asserts itself as a reactionary anti-proletarian movement. The whole essence of Marxism is in that two fold task.'

In so far as the dictatorship remained on the ground of democracy, Trotsky argued, it implied that the workers would be obliged to postpone socialist measures – for example the modernisation of agriculture into big farms and co-operatives. As he described it later in *Three Concepts of the Russian Revolution*, Lenin's strategy could have led to a 'dictatorship of the peasantry' with the workers participating.

But as Trotsky pointed out, the peasantry, especially in Russia, was incapable of assuming the reins of power. Only the working class had the coherence and the class interest to do that. This was the lesson of the struggles of 1905, with their massive general strikes and their workers' councils: these embryonic workers' governments came into existence before any liberal democratic government. Indeed their appearance was one of the reasons the liberals stopped fighting the Tsar.

Trotsky did not underestimate the importance of the peasantry in the revolution, nor did he disagree with Lenin's programme for winning the peasants to the side of the workers. But for Trotsky the dictatorship had to be one of 'the proletariat leaning on the peasantry', a workers' government committed to carrying out both democratic and socialist tasks in the context of turning the Russian revolution into a European one.

Trotsky was to develop this third perspective for the Russian revolution in jail after the defeat of the 1905 revolution, writing the pamphlet *Result and Prospects*. He called the strategy 'Permanent Revolution'. It was not until April 1917 when the living revolution exploded the contradictions within the 'democratic dictatorship' slogan that Lenin finally abandoned his old concept of the Russian revolution.

In his characteristically forthright way Lenin took to task the Bolsheviks who still clung to the old slogan. 'Whoever speaks now of a 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' only, is behind the times, has consequently in effect gone over to the side of the petty bourgeoisie and is against the proletarian class struggle. He deserves to be consigned to the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques.'

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