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# The Marxism of Leon Trotsky's "Results and Prospects"

A decisive break with the mechanical Marxism of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International

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**"Results and Prospects", from Leon Trotsky, was published for the first time in 1906 after the major experiment of the 1905 Russian revolution [ESSF].**

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## The historical context

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, as sketched for the first time in his essay *Results and Prospects* (1906), was one of the most astonishing political breakthroughs in Marxist thinking at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By rejecting the idea of separate historical stages - the first one being a 'bourgeois democratic' one - in the future Russian Revolution, and raising the possibility of transforming the democratic into a proletarian/socialist revolution in a 'permanent' (i.e. uninterrupted) process, it not only predicted the general strategy of the October revolution, but also provided key insights into the other revolutionary processes which would take place later on, in China, Indochina, Cuba, etc. Of course, it is not without its problems and shortcomings, but it was incomparably more relevant to the real revolutionary processes in the periphery of the capitalist system than anything produced by 'orthodox Marxism' from the death of Engels until 1917.

In fact, the idea of permanent revolution appeared already in Marx and Engels, notably in their *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, written in March 1850, while the German Revolution of 1848-50 - in an absolutist and backward country - still seemed to unfold. Against the unholy alliance of the liberal bourgeoisie and absolutism, they championed the common action of the workers with the democratic parties of the petty bourgeoisie. But they insisted on the need for an independent proletarian perspective:

*"while the democratic petty bourgeoisie want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible...it is 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, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far - not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world - that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers."* (Marx & Engels 1973 [1850]: 323-4)

This striking passage contains three of the fundamental themes that Trotsky would later develop in *Results and Prospects*: 1) the uninterrupted development of the revolution in a semi-feudal country, leading to the conquest of power by the working class; 2) the need for the proletarian forces in power to take anti-capitalist and socialist measures; 3) the necessarily international character of the revolutionary process and of the new socialist society, without classes or private property.

The idea of a socialist revolution in the backward periphery of capitalism - although not the term 'permanent revolution' - is also present in Marx's late writings on Russia: the letter to Vera Zasulich of 1881 and, together with Engels, the preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'If the Russian revolution sounds the signal of a proletarian revolution in the West so that each complements the other, the prevailing form of communal ownership of land in Russia may form the starting point for a communist course of development' (Marx & Engels 1953 [1882]: 217).

With the exception of Trotsky, these ideas seem to have been lost to Russian Marxism in the years between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1917. If we leave aside the semi-Marxists in the populist camp, such as Nicolaion, or the 'legal marxists' such as Piotr Struve, there remain four clearly delimited positions inside Russian social-democracy :

1. The Menshevik view, which considered the future Russian revolution as bourgeois by its nature and that its driving force would be an alliance of the proletariat with the liberal bourgeoisie. Plekhanov and his friends believed that Russia was a backward, 'Asiatic' and barbarous country requiring a long stage of industrialism and 'Europeanisation' before the proletariat could aspire to power. Only after Russia has developed its productive forces, and passed into the historical stage of advanced capitalism and parliamentary democracy, would the requisite material and political conditions be available for a socialist transformation.
2. The Bolshevik conception also recognized the inevitably bourgeois-democratic character of the revolution, but it excluded the bourgeoisie from the revolutionary bloc. According to Lenin, only the proletariat and the peasantry were authentically revolutionary forces, bound to establish through their alliance a common democratic revolutionary dictatorship. Of course, as we know, Lenin changed radically his approach after the April Theses of 1917.
3. Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg, while acknowledging the bourgeois character of the revolution in the last instance, insisted on the hegemonic revolutionary role of the proletariat supported by the peasantry. The destruction of Czarist absolutism could not be achieved short of the establishment of a workers' power led by social-democracy. However, such a proletarian government could not yet transcend in its programmatic aims the fixed limits of bourgeois democracy.
4. Finally, Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution, which envisaged not only the hegemonic role of the proletariat and the necessity of its seizure of power, but also the possibility of a 'growing over' of the democratic into the socialist revolution.

Curiously enough, Trotsky does not mention, in *Results and Prospects*, any of the above-mentioned pieces by Marx and Engels. He probably ignored the *Address* of March 1850: the re-edition of 1885 in Zurich, in German, was not well known in Russia. His immediate source for the term 'permanent revolution' in 1905 seems to have been an article by Franz Mehring (1905) on the events in Russia, 'Die Revolution in Permanenz', published in the *Neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of German Social-Democracy. Mehring's article was immediately translated in 1905 in Trotsky's paper *Nachalo* in Petrograd, and in the same issue there appeared also the first article in which Lev Davidovitch used the term 'permanent revolution': 'Between the immediate goal and the final goal there should be a permanent revolutionary chain'. However, a close reading of Mehring's piece shows that the German Marxist used the words, but was not really a partisan of permanent revolution in the same sense as

Trotsky in 1905-1906. The vital kernel of the theory, its concept of the uninterrupted going-over of the democratic towards the socialist revolution, was denied by Mehring. This was well understood by Martov, the great Menshevik leader, who, in a work written many years later, recalled Trotsky's piece as a disturbing 'deviation from the theoretical foundations of the programme of Russian Social-Democracy'. He clearly distinguished between Mehring's article, which he considered acceptable, and Trotsky's essay, which he repudiated as 'utopian', since it transcended 'the historical task which flows from the existent level of productive forces' (Martov 1926: 164-5).

The ideas suggested in various of Trotsky's articles in 1905 - particularly in his preface for the Russian translation of Marx's writings on the Paris Commune - were then developed, in a more systematic and coherent way, in *Results and Prospects* (1906). However, this bold piece of writing remained for a long time a forgotten book. It seems that Lenin did not read it - at least not before 1917 - and its influence over contemporary Russian Marxism was desultory at best. Like all forerunners, Trotsky was in advance of his time, and his ideas were too novel and heterodox to be accepted, or even studied, by his party comrades.

### **Dialectics and revolution**

How was it possible for Trotsky to cut the gordian knot of Second International Marxism - the economistic definition of the nature of a future revolution by 'the level of productive forces' - and to grasp the revolutionary possibilities that lay beyond the dogmatic construction of a bourgeois democratic Russian revolution which was the unquestioned problematic of *all* other Marxist propositions?

There seems to exist an intimate link between the dialectical method and revolutionary theory: not by chance, the high period of revolutionary thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the years 1905-1925, are also those of some of the most interesting attempts to use Hegelo-Marxist dialectics as an instrument of knowledge and action. Let me try to illustrate the connexion between dialectics and revolution in Trotsky's early work.

A careful study of the roots of Trotsky's political boldness, and of the whole theory of permanent revolution, reveals that his views were informed by a specific understanding of Marxism, an interpretation of the dialectical materialist method distinct from the dominant orthodoxy of the Second International and of Russian Marxism. The young Trotsky did not read Hegel, but his understanding of Marxist theory owes much to his first readings in historical materialism, namely the works of Antonio Labriola. In his autobiography he recalled the 'delight' with which he first devoured Labriola's essays during his imprisonment in Odessa in 1893. His initiation into dialectics thus took place through an encounter with perhaps the least orthodox of the major figures of the Second International. Formed in the Hegelian school, Labriola fought relentlessly against the neo-positivist and vulgar-materialist trends that proliferated in Italian Marxism, for example Turati. He was one of the first to reject the economistic interpretations of Marxism by attempting to restore the dialectical concepts of *totality* and *historical process*. Labriola defended historical materialism as a self-sufficient and independent theoretical system, irreducible to other currents; he also rejected scholastic dogmatism and the cult of the textbook, insisting on the need for a critical development of Marxism (Labriola 1970[1897]: 115, 243).

Trotsky's starting-point, therefore, was this critical, dialectical and anti-dogmatical understanding that Labriola had inspired. 'Marxism', he wrote in 1906, 'is above all a method of analysis - not analysis of texts, but analysis of social relations' (Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, p. 196). Let us focus on five of the most important and distinctive features of the methodology that underlies

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, in distinction from the other Russian Marxists, from Plekhanov to Lenin and from the Mensheviks to the Bolsheviks (before 1917).

1. From the vantage point of the dialectical comprehension of the unity of the opposites, Trotsky criticized the Bolsheviks' rigid division between the socialist power of the proletariat and the 'democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants', as a 'logical, purely formal operation'. This abstract logic is even more sharply attacked in his polemic against Plekhanov, whose whole reasoning can be reduced to an 'empty syllogism': our revolution is bourgeois, therefore we should support the Cadets, the constitutionalist bourgeois party. Moreover, in an astonishing passage from a critique against the Menshevik Tcherevanin, he explicitly condemned the *analytical* - i.e. abstract-formal, pre-dialectical - character of Menshevik politics: 'Tcherevanin constructs his tactics as Spinoza did his ethics, that is to say, geometrically' (Trotsky 1971[1906]: 289, 306-312). Of course, Trotsky was not a philosopher and almost never wrote specifically philosophical texts, but this makes his clear-sighted grasp of the methodological dimension of his controversy with stagist conceptions all the more remarkable.

2. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács insisted that the dialectical category of totality was the essence of Marx's method, indeed the very principle of revolution within the domain of knowledge (Lukacs 1971[1923]: ch.1). Trotsky's theory, written twenty years earlier, is an exceptionally significant illustration of this Lukacsian thesis. Indeed, one of the essential sources of the superiority of Trotsky's revolutionary thought is the fact that he adopted *the viewpoint of totality*, perceiving capitalism and the class struggle as a world process. In the preface to a 1905 Russian edition of Lassalle's articles about the revolution of 1848, he argues:

*"Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism (...) This immediately gives the events now unfolding and international character, and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class (...) will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created the objective condition"* (Trotsky, 1962[1906]: 240).

Only by posing the problem in these terms - at the level of 'maturity' of the capitalist system in its *totality* - was it possible to transcend the traditional perspective of the Russian Marxists, who defined the socialist-revolutionary 'unripeness' of Russia exclusively in terms of a national economic determinism.

3. Trotsky explicitly rejected the undialectical economism - the tendency to reduce, in a non-mediated and one-sided way, all social, political and ideological contradictions to the economic infrastructure - which was one of the hallmarks of Plekhanov's vulgar materialist interpretation of Marxism. Indeed, Trotsky's break with economism was one of the decisive steps towards the theory of permanent revolution. A key paragraph in *Results and Prospects* defined with precision the political stakes implied in this rupture: 'To imagine that the dictatorship of the proletariat is in some way automatically dependent on the technical development and resources of a country is a prejudice of "economic" materialism simplified to absurdity. This point of view has nothing in common with Marxism' (*ibid.*: 195).

4. Trotsky's method refused the undialectical conception of history as a pre-determined evolution, typical of Menshevik arguments. He had a rich and dialectical understanding of historical development as a contradictory process, where at every moment alternatives are posed. The task of Marxism, he wrote, was precisely to 'discover the "possibilities" of the developing revolution' (*ibid.*: 168). In *Results and Prospects*, as well as in later essays - for instance, his polemic against the Mensheviks, *The Proletariat and the Russian Revolution* (1908) - he analyzes the process of permanent revolution towards socialist transformation through the dialectical concept of *objective*

*possibility*, whose outcome depended on innumerable subjective factors as well as unforeseeable events - and not as an inevitable necessity whose triumph (or defeat) was already assured. It was this recognition of the open character of social historicity that gave revolutionary praxis its decisive place in the architecture of Trotsky's theoretical-political ideas from 1905 on.

5. While the Populists insisted on the peculiarities of Russia and the Mensheviks believed that their country would necessarily follow the 'general laws' of capitalist development, Trotsky was able to achieve a dialectical synthesis between the universal and the particular, the specificity of the Russian social formation and the world capitalist process. In a remarkable passage from the *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930) he explicitly formulated the viewpoint that was already implicit in his 1906 essays :

*"In the essence of the matter the Slavophile conception, with all its reactionary fantasticness, and also Narodnikism, with all its democratic illusions, were by no means mere speculations, but rested upon indubitable and moreover deep peculiarities of Russia's development, understood one-sidedly however and incorrectly evaluated. In its struggle with Narodnikism, Russian Marxism, demonstrating the identity of the laws of development for all countries, not infrequently fell into a dogmatic mechanisation discovering a tendency to pour out the baby with the bath"* (Trotsky 1930/1965, vol.I: 427).

Trotsky's historical perspective was, therefore, a dialectical *Aufhebung*, able to simultaneously negate-preserve-transcend the contradiction between the Populists and the Russian Marxists.

It was the combination of all these methodological innovations that made *Results and Prospects* so unique in the landscape of Russian Marxism before 1917; dialectics was at the heart of the theory of permanent revolution. As Isaac Deutscher wrote in his biography, if one reads again this pamphlet from 1906, 'one cannot but be impressed by the sweep and boldness of this vision. He reconnoitred the future as one who surveys from a towering mountain top a new and immense horizon and point to vast, uncharted landmarks in the distance' (Deutscher 1954: 161).

## The road to 1917

A similar link between dialectics and revolutionary politics can be found in Lenin's evolution. Vladimir Ilich remained faithful to the orthodox views of Russian Marxism till 1914, when the beginning of the war led him to discover dialectics: the study of Hegelian logic was the instrument by means of which he cleared the theoretical road leading to the Finland Station in Petrograd, where he first announced "All power to the soviets!". In March-April 1917, liberated from the obstacle represented by predialectical Marxism, Lenin could, under the pressure of events, rid himself in good time of its political corollary: the abstract and rigid principle according to which 'The Russian revolution could only be bourgeois, since Russia was not economically ripe for a socialist revolution'. Once he crossed the Rubicon, he applied himself to studying the problem from a practical, concrete, and realistic angle and came to conclusions very similar to those announced by Trotsky in 1906: what are the measures, constituting in fact the transition towards socialism, that could be made acceptable to the majority of the people, that is, the masses of workers and peasants? This is the road which led to the October Revolution...

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