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From Sri Lanka - Leon Trotsky: The Prophet Armed, Unarmed and Outcast

Friday 20 August 2021, by [LIYANAGE Sumanasiri](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2021).

Exactly eighty-one years ago, on 20 August 1940, an ice axe was plunged into Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky's skull at his residence in Coyoacan, Mexico by Jaime Ramón Mercader del Río who was a Spanish communist and a Soviet agent of Joseph Stalin. Trotsky succumbed to his injuries the following day. I have borrowed with due acknowledgement the title of Isaac Deutscher's three volume biography of Leon Trotsky as the title of this piece.

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His life is a legendary story of a success and a failure. The prophet armed was suddenly unarmed; and after long years of exile was assassinated as an outcast. Does his legendary life give us a lesson of importance? To what extent do the theories he had articulated provide guidance to cognise the current global political landscape? These questions are pertinent especially to Sri Lanka because it was the only country where the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP), led by Trotsky followers became a mass movement.

From 1879 to 1940

Trotsky entered revolutionary politics at his teens. At the age of 19 in 1898, Trotsky was arrested by Tsarist authorities and sent to Siberia. He escaped in 1902 and moved to Europe linking with the Russian revolutionaries in exile. A landmark in his meteoric rebellious life was 1905, the first Russian revolution, when he was elected at the age of 26 as the Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet that was formed by the struggling masses.

Trotsky was once again arrested and sent to Siberia but escaped on his way and spent time in Europe and America until May 1917. He developed close links with two Marxists, Antonio Labriola and Alexander Lvovich Parvus, who may be described as more creative thinkers compared to orthodox Marxists of the Second International. With their influence, Trotsky had articulated his famous theory of permanent revolution to which we will turn presently.

Theory of Permanent Revolution (TPR)

At the third-quarter of the nineteenth century, there were signs the revolutionary upheaval might begin not in an industrially developed capitalist West but in Russia, a country that was semi-imperialist, feudal and capitalistically backward. Marx was positive about the potential of the Russian village communes and sympathetic towards the views and perceptions of the Narodnik (friends of the people). What would be the trajectory that the revolution would take in a semi-feudal and capitalistically backward country was the problematic that both Lenin and Trotsky had to grapple with.

The point of departure of all the Marxists was exactly the same since they all identified the main task of the revolution as bourgeois democratic. What did it mean? With regard to Russia, it meant three things. The revolution was meant to resolve three fundamental issues that were required to ensure capitalistic development in Russia, the process of which had already begun. Michael Lowy in an attempt to systematise Trotsky's scattered remarks on the question identifies these tasks in the following words:

1. The agrarian democratic revolution: The bold and definitive abolition of all residues of slavery, feudalism and Asiatic despotism; the liquidation of all pre-capitalist forms of exploitation; and the expropriation of the great landowners and the distribution of the land to the peasantry.
2. Resolving the national question: The unification of the nation and its emancipation from imperialist domination; the creation of a unified national market and its protection from cheaper foreign goods; the control of certain strategic natural resources.
3. Democratisation of the State: The establishment of democratic freedom, a domestic republic and the end of military rule; the creation of the social and cultural conditions for popular participation in political life. Lenin and Trotsky differed from and refuted the dominant position that posited that the class of bourgeoisie would take the leadership in the struggle to win the above three tasks. According to them, Unlike in the West, in Russia the capitalist class was not in a position to play that leadership role.

Hence, the first thesis of the theory of permanent revolution is the bourgeoisie could not perform the democratic task in Russia so that fulfilling those tasks would fall on the shoulders of the working class supported by the peasantry. The second thesis that stems from the first posits that the dictatorship of the proletariat as the new State power will go beyond fulfilling the democratic tasks to entail socialist tasks in its immediate agenda. The third thesis refers to the international dimension of the revolution. It says that building socialism in 'one country' is impossible so that in order to defend the victories of the revolution, it should go beyond the boundaries of Russia.

A Critical Appraisal

Many changes have taken place in the last hundred years, and among them two are critical. First is the change that has happened in the global economy especially after the World War 2. The third technological revolution has given rise to new international division of labour so that a space was newly created for the peripheral countries to enter into light industrial production that was transferred from the centre countries as they concentrate on heavy industries based on automation and computerisation. Ernest Mandel noted that countries like Brazil, Iran, South Korea, Taiwan and many others in varying degree had transformed their economies from agricultural economies to industrial economies.

Secondly, the peripheral bourgeoisie in many countries by controlling the State played a leading role

in this structural transformation. Hence, in my opinion the first thesis of the TPR, that the countries in the Global South are semi-feudal so that the bourgeois democratic tasks are yet to be completed does not hold today, especially after the 1970s.

Almost all the countries in the Global South with a very few exceptions are capitalist. Of course, one may argue that the bourgeois democratic tasks are not completely resolved, and some residues exist. It is true. Nonetheless, the presence of pre-capitalist residues should not be viewed as a consequence of non-completion of the bourgeoisie democratic revolution but as a rejuvenation of archaic mode of production for the needs of capital accumulation. Hence, the tasks of socialist transformation come to the fore not just because of the nature of the State that was formed after mass struggle but due to the fact that tasks are essentially socialist.

Further Contributions to Marxist Theory

Trotsky's contribution to the development of Marxist theory is not confined to TPR. His three volume History of the Russian Revolution may be treated as one of the rare additions to Marxist historiography. His analysis of fascism and the form the anti-fascist struggle should take is another major contribution to Marxism. One of the big mistakes to which Marxist and left parties often fall is the formation of programmatic fronts with the class enemy. These popular front politics has so far produced disastrous results and debacles in China in the late 1920s, Germany and Spain in the 1930s, Indonesia in the 1960s. The same may be said about the decision of the LSSP to form a governmental alliance with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party ignoring those historical experiences and the warning by the world Trotskyist movement.

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