

How useful is the Theory of Permanent Revolution Today?

Theory of Permanent Revolution

When Trotsky summarized his theory of Permanent Revolution in a book of the same title in 1929, he emphasized there are three aspects to this theory:

"To dispel the chaos that has been created around the theory of the permanent revolution, it is necessary to distinguish three lines of thought that are united in this theory"¹.

The first aspect - according to Trotsky himself, "the *central* idea of the theory" - deals with "the problem of *transition* from the democratic revolution to the socialist"².

"there is established between the democratic revolution and the socialist reconstruction of society a permanent state of revolutionary development"

and that

"the democratic tasks of the backward bourgeois nations lead directly, in our epoch, to the dictatorship of proletariat and that the dictatorship of proletariat puts socialist tasks on the order of the day"³.

In its general form this theory has been most helpful in explaining how in our epoch revolutionary movements in backward countries, even when seemingly beginning around democratic tasks, can grow over into socialist revolutions. It is this central aspect of the theory of permanent revolution that is our concern here. More precisely, the aim here is to investigate how useful is this theory *today* for formulating a revolutionary strategy for the periphery of the world capitalist system? Let us emphasize, the other two "lines of thought" within this theory, dealing with the revolutionary process of transition to socialism itself and the need for its extension internationally, are neither particularly specific to Trotsky nor in contention here.⁴

Furthermore, the superiority of this theory, when first expounded in 1904-06, in relation to both Menshevik and Bolshevik views of the impending Russian revolution has the proof of the October Revolution itself and is not being questioned here. Which ever way you look at it and despite all that has been written on the subject, what actually happened in the Russian revolution was closest to Trotsky's analysis. There was obviously some core insight in Trotsky's method which allowed him to point to the socialist character of the Russian revolution better than and before every body

¹ Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects*, Pathfinder Press, NY, 1976, p. 131. Unless indicated, emphasis not in the original.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p 132.

⁴ Marx's concept of "*revolutionary* dictatorship of proletariat" is based on the understanding that the transition to socialism is itself a revolutionary period in which the old social relations are constantly undergoing change. There are also numerous references in both Marx and Engels' writings as to why socialism requires combined efforts of a number of "civilized nations".

else.⁵ Equally obviously, the fact that we must extract and keep that core is not debatable either.

This core has been invariably linked with Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development of capitalism. Although this was a crucial analysis without which the concept of permanent revolution cannot be understood, in itself it cannot however be considered the main consideration behind Trotsky's revolutionary Strategy. After all, this theory was not exclusive to Trotsky. How come Kautsky who was probably the first to refer to it did not arrive at the same conclusions? A much more convincing approach is that of Hillel Ticktin, who argues that Trotsky's strategy cannot be understood without his implicit theory of capitalist decline.⁶ This is indeed the axis along which one must highlight the contemporary importance of Trotsky's theory for developing a revolutionary strategy. "The concept of permanent revolution itself is a statement that only the working class as the universal class can change society, and society is ripe for overthrow; but until it is overthrown the world is doomed to endure one struggle after another, one repression after another, until the final victory."⁷

It has to be added here that in relation to Lenin not enough attention has been paid to the question of how precisely did he arrive at the need for a socialist revolution after February 1917. Trotsky himself refers to a "convergence" of views. But the question of exactly how and along which lines did this convergence come about has not been fully explored. Trotsky himself in the above summarization of 1929 does not cover this crucial point. A closer examination of Lenin's writings of the period indicates it was not so much a convergence but rather like arriving at the same destination via different routes. Thus the route taken by Lenin must also be of interest to any Marxist study of revolutionary strategy today. Indeed it must be said that if we are to go beyond the historical debate in Russia over a century ago and try and summarize the key elements determining a particular strategy today, then some core ideas of Lenin must also be taken into account. In particular importance for the theory of revolutionary strategy must be Lenin's analysis of revolutionary class alliances and its changing dynamics in relation to changes in the class character of political power which Trotsky himself has praised on numerous occasions.⁸

Finally it must be said whatever the shortcomings of the theory of permanent revolution today, its revolutionary credentials as opposed to the class collaborationist and stagist apologies offered by the Stalinized Comintern during the Chinese Revolution cannot be over emphasized. We have also witnessed how this very same Stalinist "theory" has been utilized for a whole historical period to justify the most treacherous counter revolutionary alliances and how for that very same period there

⁵ Indeed Trotsky's Results and Prospects still remains one of the best applications of the theory of uneven and combined development of capitalism to the question of revolutionary strategy.

⁶ Hillel Ticktin, Trotsky, 1905, & The Anticipation of Concept of Decline, in the book, 100 Years of Permanent Revolution, Pluto Press, London, 2006. (Also very useful for a summary of the historical debate)

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Detailing Lenin's change of position is not the issue under discussion here but suffice it to say that since 1914, and increasingly with his understanding of the nature of the imperialist epoch, Lenin had on a number of occasions made the astute observation that because the war had sharpened the class conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie, whole sections of the petty bourgeoisie had now moved to the chauvinist camp. The change in the class character of the state after February revolution convinced him that this split was now complete.

has been nothing but the theory of permanent revolution which has allowed revolutionaries to see through such betrayals.

But we do still have to answer a simple question: can this "central" aspect of Trotsky's theory, i.e., "the problem of *transition* from the democratic revolution to the socialist", be applied to revolutions *today*, or does it require modifications or abandonment? A question which will inevitably also involve a re-examination of its original validity.

Permanent Revolution Today

Given the fact that this theory was developed for a specific period in history almost a century ago, it could very well be outdated and inadequate for the current situation.⁹ Of course this has to be investigated by a serious examination. The fundamental features of the epoch of decline have not changed, but a number of developments in the world capitalist system itself, especially during the last half a century or so, have dramatically altered the class structures within the periphery.

Although a faithful application of this theory today, even in the most developed capitalist countries for which it was not written, can be harmless in so far as it is still a revolutionary theory which proves the necessity of a *socialist* revolution, we have nevertheless seen time and time again how in the hands of some of its defenders it has also been turned into a tool for justifying exactly the same conclusions as the most zealot defenders of revolution by stages. True, in most cases this paradox dissolves when you dig deeper and realize the theory is actually being misunderstood, misused or blatantly misrepresented. There is no way any serious analysis could ever draw class collaborationist conclusions from Trotsky's theory, but given the increasing frequency of such misuse by the vast majority of today's "Trotskyists", the propensity of this theory to misuse also needs an examination.

The case of the Iranian revolution of 1977-79 is of particular importance here. Ever since the Chinese Revolution which forced the first major international debate around this theory, if there ever was an historical event in which we could have again fully tested the theory of permanent revolution in practice, it is indeed this revolution. Those who think it can be fully explained by this theory must also explain why the vast majority of the its followers actually stood on the same side of the barricades as the staunchly Stalinist Iranian Tudeh Party? We are not talking here about some odd sects. We are not talking of some small tactical mistakes either. In so far as the question of characterization of the capitalist regime (Feb 1979) and the attitude of the working class towards it were concerned, history offered a rare occasion for all the disparate 4th internationalist tendencies to come together in making the same fundamental mistake of tail-ending the counter revolution. The differences between the various currents jumping on the band wagon of class collaboration were simply quantitative: from calling for "co-operation" with this counter-revolution to giving it "critical support", and ending in descending degrees of support on the left wing which

⁹ Of course, Trotsky's occasional returns to this theory itself span a whole historical period in which a lot of changes within the world capitalist system were being absorbed and integrated into the original formulations, but the comparison being referred to here is one between the world roughly before and after the 2nd World War.

only gave it "material but not political" support (as if material support to a counter revolution is not the worst political treachery!)¹⁰. And all this was argued whilst swearing allegiance to the theory of permanent revolution.

Let us repeat, the only reason Trotsky revived the debate around this theory was to combat those using Lenin's formula of the democratic dictatorship to justify collaboration with Kumintang, whilst some of Trotsky's epigones today are parroting this theory of "transition" from democratic to socialist revolution to justify capitulation to a capitalist counter-revolution. Leaving the emotions aside for the moment, this fact alone should be a serious concern for defenders of a theory. Frankly, when say the American or the British SWP theoreticians - coming from such different traditions but both claiming to be defenders of the theory of permanent revolution - take exactly the same position towards the anti-imperialism of the Iranian regime as those still flying the Stalin flag in Iran (even worse, to the right of Stalinism), is it not time to wonder if there is still any value today in defending this division? In fact it was the Iranian Trotskyists who rightly said in 1981 "in the hands of a worrying number of sections of the FI today the theory of Permanent Revolution has in fact become the last refuge of the Stalinist revolution by stages".¹¹

One thing is obvious. Trotsky himself certainly linked this theory to a definite epoch, the epoch of imperialism, the epoch of capitalist decline and decay. Indeed the whole theory of uneven and combined development which underpins Trotsky's strategy was itself derived from a certain definition of this epoch and the particular way it combines backward pre-capitalist elements with modern capitalist ones. But "the imperialist epoch" itself has definitely changed now, and not by a short measure, but around a century of international capitalist development ending in what we call "globalization" today. It is not being proposed here that we must change our analysis of the epoch as one of capitalist decline but as emphasized above we are not concerned here with the permanency within the socialist revolution itself or the process of world revolution as such but the first aspect of Trotsky's theory or the starting point of this process in the countries of the periphery. Just taking one commonly accepted change within the world system on its own is fundamental enough to bring into question the usefulness of Trotsky's "transition" theory today. Reference here is to the change in the *class character of the state* within the backward countries which is of course crucial in any Marxist analysis of revolutionary strategy

Trotsky, both in 1904-06 when he developed the theory and in 1928-29 when he was defending it against the Stalinist attacks, was obviously referring to pre-capitalist countries ruled by non-bourgeois classes. Why else should he say in 1906 "Russia was approaching the bourgeois revolution"¹² if indeed the bourgeoisie had already achieved state power? Thus in the eyes of Trotsky himself the whole concept of *transition* depends on the starting point of a non-bourgeois state. But, in how many countries of the periphery today do we have similar conditions to Russia or China of the early 20th century? Who has seriously claimed that countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chili, Iran, India, Phillipine, Egypt, etc., are still dominated by pre-capitalist economies with pre-capitalist ruling classes?

¹⁰ a la Gerry Healy, Jack Barnes and Ernest Mandel, respectively.

¹¹ From a reply by the leadership of the Iranian SWP to a letter from Ernest Mandel.

¹² *ibid*, p. 126

Leaving aside important questions of how some countries got pushed to the periphery of the world economy or how backward they still are, one important fact is clear and must be our starting point and that is the transformation, invariably from above (and not via bourgeois democratic revolutions), that has taken place over the last century in the class nature of the state in these countries. It can clearly be said today that in more or less all the backward countries we have a *bourgeois* state. In the vast majority of the backward capitalist countries today, the vast majority of the democratic tasks have not been resolved - as the change was usually not a revolutionary change involving the masses but transformation from above - but nevertheless, the class nature of the state and the dominant relations of productions have been "bourgeoisified" precisely due to their further integration within the world capitalist economy - a process which in its international spread has been particularly noticeable since the 1960s. These societies as a whole may still be backward, call them "dependent", "really a neo colony" or whatever you like, but they are backward "dependent", "neo-colonial" *capitalist* economies. A ruling class which rules by reproducing backwardness must of course be even more backward than what it defends; it may even be created out of thin air with a combination of the most odd historical characters; but it is nevertheless a *bourgeois* ruling class which pays its dues, in lesser or larger degrees, to remain as a junior member of the capital's global club.

To cut a long story short, this fact alone is enough to claim therefore, there is hardly anywhere left in the world today where the first aspect of the theory of permanent revolution can be usefully applied. If you have a bourgeois state what you have ahead of you is called a *socialist* revolution and not a growing over or the transition of the democratic to socialist revolution.

Permanent or Combined Revolution?

The fact that we still have plenty of historically postponed democratic tasks facing backward countries today does not make the impending revolution democratic when the very state that the revolution will face is itself a bourgeois state. Whatever "bourgeois" democratic tasks remain, can only be resolved by the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. We do still have many unresolved democratic tasks facing many advanced capitalist countries too. Has for example, separation of religion from the state or the abolition of hereditary rule been achieved everywhere? Has the national question been resolved in "united" Europe? In any case to call all democratic tasks "bourgeois" is itself a historical confusion. For a start where and when did the bourgeoisie on its own initiative ever bring about democracy? Just because democratic demands by definition do not call into question bourgeois domination it does not mean they are bourgeois demands. Any proletarian revolution anywhere including the G7 countries today will face combined democratic and anti-capitalist tasks. The question is only the difference in degrees. The revolutionary strategy in backward capitalist countries with a bourgeois state can therefore be nothing but a proletarian revolution with combined tasks. What is then left of the need for a theory explaining the way a democratic revolution grows over into a socialist one?

Of course, it can be said that Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is in fact equivalent to calling for a proletarian revolution with combined tasks. Agreed. Indeed this is more or less what Trotsky himself has said in Results and Prospects. If we can

replace the concept of *transition* from democratic to socialist revolution with a proletarian revolution with *combined* tasks then all is fine and nothing more drastic is being proposed here. But part of the current confusion is precisely because of the concept of "transition" between two revolutions. Part of the problem with this same as most other theories is the fact that its core must be separated from the way the author arrives at it. When Trotsky chose to use this term rather than a straight forward proletarian revolution he probably had the same reason as Lenin or Martov. The starting point of all Russian Social Democrats at the time was the "fact" that Russia is facing a "bourgeois revolution". Of course Trotsky alone argued that to succeed it will grow over into a socialist one but his starting point cannot be taken out of the method he concluded this theory. He clearly states that in calling the Russian revolution a bourgeois revolution he meant that "the *immediate objective* tasks of the revolution|" consisted in the creation of "normal conditions for the development of bourgeois society as a whole".¹³ You can question if this was the only "fact" and if it alone was enough even then to call the impending revolution *bourgeois*, but at least Trotsky had a need for the term *permanent* to explain a "transition" from this bourgeois revolution to a socialist one. What need does it serve today when you face combined anti-capitalist and democratic tasks against a *bourgeois* state?

If you forget for a moment the first part of Trotsky's theory about the " transition" from the democratic to the socialist revolution and concentrate on the second part which states "the democratic tasks of backward nations lead *directly*, in our epoch, to the dictatorship of proletariat", this in fact is nothing but a proletarian revolution with combined tasks. Even if we agree that Trotsky's starting point of the "impending *bourgeois* revolution" is no longer relevant today, what in fact he is saying is still valid regardless of that starting point: only a proletarian leadership of the revolutionary movement and the establishment of the dictatorship of proletariat can solve the remaining democratic tasks of backward nations. Thus even if the revolutionary movement begins around bourgeois-democratic demands it will only succeed if it leads to a socialist revolution which will both solve the democratic tasks of the revolution and embark on the transition to socialism.

What needs to be said today is not dissimilar. In the backward countries today, any revolutionary struggle around any democratic or anti-capitalist demands, single or combined, can only be successful if it ends in a socialist revolution. Surely, if this is called just another interpretation of Trotsky's permanent revolution then it makes all the more sense to stick to this clearer formula and not muddy the waters with the insertions of the concept of "transition" into revolutionary strategy.

In fact, not only Trotsky's own original formulations but also his earlier defenses of his own position after the October revolution, or even his later returns to the subject when in exile, all point more to this "combined" character of the Russian Revolution rather than a "growing over" or a "transition" of a democratic revolution to a socialist one. So where and how does this "transition" referred to in 1929 as a "central" idea of the theory actually occur?

Here it has to be said that within the Russian Social Democratic literature of the period it seems the usage of the term "democratic revolution" is somehow broad. It is

¹³ *ibid*, p 36.

used to refer to three related but entirely different phenomena. It is used properly, i.e., as a reference to bourgeois-democratic revolutions *per se* (i.e., a revolution after which a bourgeois state is established), but also to describe a mass revolutionary movement around democratic demands (for example, the mass movement against autocracy or the peasant movement for land reform), or the actual activity of carrying out democratic tasks (for example, the solution of the agrarian question after the October revolution). So when Trotsky says in 1904 what we have in front of us is a "democratic revolution", what he really means is that the revolutionary movement in Russia is around democratic demands. Let us not forget in 1904 after a series of humiliating defeats in the war with Japan, an unprecedented revival of political activity was seen in Russia against the autocracy led mostly by Zemstvo (local elective bodies dominated by liberal landlords) which organized an open convention in November in St Petersburg demanding a democratic constitution.

The flexible meaning attached to democratic revolution is even more confusing in Lenin. For example, 3 years after the October *socialist* revolution, when talking about the first few months of the revolution, he says: "Was the revolution a bourgeois revolution at that time? Of course it was, insofar as our function was to complete the bourgeois revolution..."¹⁴ Obviously he does not mean Russia had a bourgeois revolution after a socialist revolution, he simply means the anti-feudal tasks of the revolution were carried out during the first few months of the dictatorship of proletariat.

Therefore, bearing in mind the above qualification, there is definitely a possible and one could say well backed interpretation of the Trotsky's idea of transition from one revolution to the other which will place it historically at the moment the dictatorship of proletariat is established. In this view Trotsky's permanent revolution becomes very close to a kind of democratic revolution with proletarian leadership. This is in fact exactly how Trotsky at first developed his theory in 1904.¹⁵ In this view he regarded the revolutionary process in Russia as essentially bourgeois-democratic with the bourgeois forces incapable of leading it. The revolutionary working class must therefore take the leadership of this movement and overthrow autocracy. The subsequent elaborations after the 1905 revolution in Results and Prospects do not go beyond this strategy except for one major shift and that is the introduction of the concept of transition to a socialist revolution. It was now clearly stated that the proletarian rule will not stop at the democratic stage or the minimum programme but grow over into a socialist revolution.

In the preface to the re-issue of Results and Prospects in 1919 this seems to be indeed exactly how Trotsky himself is formulating it:

"the revolution, having begun as a bourgeois revolution as regards its first task, will soon call forth powerful class conflicts and will gain final victory only by transferring power to the only class capable of standing at the head of the oppressed masses, namely, to the proletariat. Once in power, the proletariat not only will not want, but will not be able to limit itself to a

¹⁴ New Tasks and Old Mistakes in a New Guise, Lenin Collected Works, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, V 33, P. 22.

¹⁵ See The Proletariat and the Revolution (1904), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch02.htm>

*bourgeois democratic programme... It must adopt the tactics of permanent revolution, i.e., must destroy the barriers between the minimum and maximum programme of Social Democracy, go over to more and more radical social reforms and seek direct and immediate support in revolution in Western Europe.*¹⁶ (emphasis in the original)

But is this really a transition from one revolution to the next or just one revolution with a combination of tasks? Does for example "completing" the bourgeois revolution has to happen before socialist tasks are placed on the order of day? But obviously immediately after October both democratic and socialist tasks were being carried out simultaneously. Lenin, in the same passage quoted above says a few lines later: "...at the same time [i.e., at the same time as "completing the bourgeois revolution"], we accomplished a great deal *over and above* the bourgeois revolution *for* the socialist, proletarian revolution" (emphasis in the original). But here again this is nothing but a proletarian revolution with combined tasks. There are only *two* revolutions if you first equate revolutions with revolutionary movements or with measures in carrying them out, and there is only a *transition* if you think these tasks must be carried out separately or sequentially.

With hindsight, it is clear there was eventually in Russia only one revolution, only one which actually carried out any historical tasks, the October Socialist Revolution, which simultaneously abolished feudalism and expropriated the bourgeoisie. One set of tasks were more or less completed within the first few months but the rest, those related to the revolutionary transition to socialist society, which although eventually defeated by world capitalism did indeed open up an era of "permanent revolution" (reference to the two other aspects of Trotsky's theory).

Furthermore, the uneven and combined development of capitalism means by definition that the two sets of tasks facing backward countries must in fact themselves be historically "combined". In other words, you cannot separate them out into two historical sets and then claim like all the stagists that the first set must be completely resolved before history is ready for the second. In "the epoch of imperialism", the solution of postponed democratic tasks increasingly requires inroads into capitalist property relations. Kautsky, was the first to point this out, when for example in 1906 he was pointing out to the Russian Social Democrats that under modern conditions even a purely agrarian revolution in Russia requires first the nationalization of the banks. This combined character of tasks belonging to two different epochs is even more prevalent today. Indeed, when it is the growth of capitalism itself which is strengthening or reproducing backwardness and forcing into or maintaining whole sections of society under pre-capitalist forms of existence, how can one achieve democratic tasks without going beyond capitalism? Just for a start, to carry out any real historical demands, whatever their nature, you first have to overthrow a *bourgeois* state.

Secondly, the revolution "having begun" as a bourgeois revolution does not guaranty it will remain bourgeois until the establishment of the dictatorship of proletariat. If the transition lies in the act of destroying the "barrier between the minimum and maximum programme", how can the proletariat achieve state power without

¹⁶ Ibid, p 31.

destroying this barrier in the first place? What happens here to the proletariat's own class struggle? How can the proletariat remain within the bourgeois framework of a revolution but achieve state power? By confining its own class struggle against capitalism to democratic or minimum demands? Obviously not? Surely, if in the course of struggles the leadership of the movement for democratic demands passes to the proletariat, the "transition" to a socialist revolution has already commenced. But this second interpretation of the concept of transition is even closer to the concept of combined revolution than a permanent one. Even in a straight forward socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist country the revolutionary crisis may open up around some democratic issues. This in no way makes that a democratic revolution.

Trotsky himself in later years leans further towards this interpretation:

"In order for the Soviet State to come into existence, it was consequently necessary for two factors of a different historical nature to collaborate: the peasant war, that is to say, a movement which is characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development, and the proletarian insurrection or uprising which announces the decline of the bourgeois movement. There we have the combined character of the Russian Revolution."

"Once let the Bear – the peasant – stand up on his hind feet, he becomes terrible in his wrath. But he is unable to give conscious expression to his indignation. He needs a leader. For the first time in the history of the world, the insurrectionary peasants found a faithful leader in the person of the proletariat."

"Four million workers in industry and transport leading a hundred million peasants. That was the natural and inevitable reciprocal relations between proletariat and peasantry in the Revolution."¹⁷

But how can this description of the Russian revolution be called a transition from democratic to socialist revolution? Here there are *two* distinct revolutionary movements around two sets of demands belonging to two different historical stages alongside each other which combine under the leadership of the working class. This is of course the closest to what actually happened.

Dangers of Old Formulas

As the "Old Bolsheviks" learned by experience, sticking to old formulas or debates when events themselves have clarified the issues can be very dangerous for a revolutionary movement. Therefore, even if we accept Trotsky's (and Lenin's) insistence that the Russian revolution was bourgeois democratic in the beginning it was at the end nothing but a proletarian revolution with combined tasks. In fact, one

¹⁷ Leon Trotsky, "In Defence of October", 1932.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/11/oct.htm>

could even say their initial assumption was itself a mistake. In saying the Russian revolution is democratic, both Lenin and Trotsky were simply standing on social democratic orthodoxy of the time which falsely believed if a country has not gone through a bourgeois-democratic revolution then that is exactly what is next in the historical agenda for that country. But this is not even correct for the period before the epoch of imperialism. At least this is not how Marx's method worked. True, a Marxist starting point is the objective historical tasks facing a society, but then this must be linked to the concrete question of how these tasks can actually be resolved, and then which class with what kind of alliances is capable of solving them and which class with what kind of social base is standing against this revolution. The eventual labeling of the revolution must follow this analysis and not its starting point. Thus, even for Russia, even with a pre-bourgeois state, it did not follow automatically that the revolution is purely bourgeois-democratic, at first or otherwise. What logic is there in declaring the Russian revolution to be bourgeois and then prove it is however impossible?

Today we must abandon some of the confused or composite notions which have been branded about in the course of struggle to understand the Russian revolution and insist at all time that the impending revolution in backward countries is nothing but a socialist revolution which must also resolve many still remaining democratic tasks. All other formulations currently offered, including Trotsky's own formulations of the theory of permanent revolution, confuse this clear strategy and can become seriously dangerous especially in revolutionary situations. It is precisely in a revolutionary crisis where the wrong strategy will throw you on the wrong side of the barricade. The Iranian Revolution is the living proof of this claim. As a sort of litmus test, those who still insist on the theory of permanent revolution must first be challenged to explain in clear language what do they want to say other than the above clear strategy?

We have seen in the Iranian case how formulations emphasizing a growing over type of route invariably miss the main core of the above strategy and end up supporting a capitalist government. If the state is a bourgeois state, then obviously the fundamental question of the revolution is the destruction of that state and consequently the life or death question facing the ruling class is its protection. In this sense, any government of any shape or form, with whatever declared or secret intentions, which is in fact preserving the bourgeois state is utterly reactionary and must be overthrown. Put another way, in any revolutionary crisis in such countries you can bet your copy of Permanent Revolution that the counter revolutionary force is the one gathered around the common aim of safeguarding the bourgeois state. The bourgeoisie has shown it will even bring out the cave man to defend its rule.

The subterfuge of our epigones consists in hiding behind the concept of transition in Trotsky's theory to paint a totally false picture of some capitalist governments in backward countries. In this way a Marxist perspective based on a concrete analysis of class struggle can be abandoned to the objective forces of history. Any post revolutionary capitalist government in any backward country is then presented as objectively progressive or as a transient stage in the overall process of growing over to the socialist phase. What they were thus really singing in the Iranian revolution was the usual simple opportunist tune that yes we know the leadership of this revolution is the bourgeoisie, yes we know it is trying to preserve the bourgeois state, but if we just stay with the flow and if we just stick to being the most consistent defenders of the

immediate tasks, then the objective logic of history will eventually expose the inadequacy of bourgeois leadership and deliver the revolution to the working class and its leadership. With such romantic-opportunist spectacles blocking one's view it is easy to understand how on the day of reckoning one can end up regarding the hijacking of a revolution by theocratic fascism in Iran as objectively progressive because despite itself it is carrying out the anti imperialist tasks of the Iranian revolution. This is Stalinist sophistry pure and simple. But Stalinism is dead, long live latter day Trotskyists!

This should come as no surprise. If we cannot go beyond a formula developed for a revolutionary crisis in a pre-capitalist society with a pre-bourgeois state and apply it to another country that however similar in backwardness is nevertheless a backward capitalist country where the bourgeoisie is already in power, we will inevitably end up confusing a bourgeois counter revolution with an "objectively progressive" force. The process of rebuilding and reconsolidating the bourgeois state by the counter revolution is then viewed as an unfolding of the historical logic of permanent revolution. Giving such a process "critical" or "material" support is but the least we can do!!! When The Students Following Imam's Line took US Embassy personnel as hostages, even the bourgeois liberal politicians in Iran could see that the clerics were simply trying to consolidate their own position within this "post-revolutionary" regime at the expense of the more liberal wing, but our Trotskyist generals were in fact calling on the masses to abandon their own *real* anti-imperialist struggles and come in front of US Embassy and passively watch this charade.

The second danger in maintaining this outdated schema relates to the question of revolutionary class alliances prior or after the conquest of power. The expectation of a transition encourages the most opportunistic class alliances. If the class character of the state has already become bourgeois then it follows by definition that it has a social base within the bourgeoisie and is therefore also actively supported by at least the upper layers of the petty bourgeoisie. This is certainly not the case when the state is essentially pre-bourgeois in character and composition, say like the Tsarist state in Russia. However limited in their aspirations or however conservative in their actions, you can nevertheless expect to see in such situations the entire petty bourgeoisie or even whole sections of the big bourgeoisie in the camp of the opposition. But in any of the backward capitalist countries today, in the event of any revolutionary crisis which could threaten bourgeois class rule, you must expect to find in the camp of counter revolution not only the entire bourgeoisie, but also the upper layers of the petty bourgeoisie. This is precisely what happened in the Iranian revolution. The entire resources of the bourgeoisie, both nationally and internationally were mobilized to hijack the revolution and eventually transfer power to Khomeini's clerics to safeguard the bourgeois state. The shock troops of this counter revolution were made up of the petty bourgeoisie, whilst, our modern day Trotskyist interpretations of the theory of permanent revolution leaves the door open for alliances with the whole of the petty bourgeoisie.

Finally, there is also a the third danger even deadlier than the others. It seems defenders of this theory develop an amazing blind spot for another counter revolutionary force in backward societies today, which again as we have seen in Iran can be even more fatal than calling a capitalist government "objectively progressive" or trying to unite with reactionary petty bourgeoisie in the name of the "democratic

phase" of the revolution. In many backward countries today, especially in those with the oldest social institutions say in North Africa and Asia, the transformation from above of the class character of the state has also meant the decimation of the power of substantial sections of the old ruling elites (usually a combination of land owners and merchants in various traditional combinations). These layers can easily turn into a bitter opposition for the new state. Given their social roots, especially within the numerically strong petty bourgeois layers, they tend to have a relatively long life expectancy and given the right conditions, can grow into powerful and even leading oppositional forces within a revolutionary crisis. This scenario has already been witnessed in Iran¹⁸.

As the process of integration into the world capitalist economy is so concretely different for each nation, it is difficult to generalize this phenomenon, but surely it is a new issue to consider in any evaluation of a revolutionary strategy. Instead of such an analysis our epigones have followed their own opportunist nose all the way to the camp of the darkest counter revolution seen in recent history. Even today, wherever such forces raise their heads, even if no one takes them seriously in their own countries, they can rely on the support of permanent revolutionists every where who take them to their heart as part of "the people" because they invariably discover we are in the beginnings of the transition from a democratic to a socialist revolution. Of course, no formula on its own will stop opportunists from being opportunists, but why make life so easy for them? It is time we abandoned all such notions of a bourgeois revolution in backward countries. Even in its Permanent Revolution versions of it being just a starting point for a process of growing over into a socialist one, such notions can in practice lead even their honest practitioners into the tail end of bourgeois counter revolutions.

¹⁸ See Torab Saleth, Class Nature of the Iranian Regime, Critique 43, V35, No 3, December 2007.