Vicissitudes of a Theory

written by Dan La Botz | July 3, 2011

DURING THE 1970S, Michael Löwy, a leading intellectual of the Trotskyist Fourth International, attempted to generalize Leon Trotsky's "theory of permanent revolution" into a general theory that could explain not only the Russian, but also the Yugoslavian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions. He believed his version of the theory could explain recent and still unfolding events in the colonies and developing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His theory suggested that revolutionary movements, sometimes influenced by Stalin's Communism and with only indirect and vague connections to the working clas s, could nevertheless carry out revolutions which created new, if profoundly distorted, socialist states. While Löwy's attempt now seems rather dated and convoluted, and riven by contradictions, the ideas and values it wrestles with remain important, and the reissue of this book, originally published in 1981, will be of interest to those on the revolutionary left.

Löwy argued that Trotsky's theory could be used to explain the twentieth century revolutions in developing countries, revolutions which, he believed, had given indirect expression to workers' power, creating new if imperfect socialist societies. This edition excises Löwy's various case studies of the twentieth century revolutions, leaving the bare bones of his theory. It also adds a new chapter which is a 2010 interview in which Löwy suggests ways that Trotsky's theory, if no longer applicable to contemporary events, might still illuminate them. Löwy seems now to be less enthusiastic about the direct application of his version of Trotsky's theory. But the ideas of substitutes for the working class and alternatives to democracy upon which it is predicated remain fundamentally wrong and need to be contested.

The Origins of the Theory

IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY socialist ideas spread from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Americas, raising questions about the applicability of Marxist theory to countries where capitalism or at least industrialization had only recently begun. Czarist Russia, bestriding Europe and Asia, the "land of the knout" and "prison house of nations" as it was known, particularly preoccupied socialist intellectuals. What were the possibilities of revolution and of socialism in Russia?

While Russia had undergone a series of capitalist reforms in the mid-nineteenth century, it remained Europe's most backward major power. The Czarist monarchy ruled through an aristocracy which had been largely transformed into a bureaucracy; much of industry was owned by foreign investors; most working people were peasants; and the industrial working class represented a very small percentage of the population. What, Marxists wondered, would happen in the event of a revolution in Russia — and what would be the role of the working class and the socialists?

Trotsky's Theory

LEON TROTSKY, a young Russian socialist revolutionary, leader of the 1905 Petrograd Soviet, and an outstanding journalist and intellectual of the time, believed that these conditions would necessarily lead to something he called the "permanent revolution." Karl Marx had used the term back in the 1850s, but now Trotsky gave it an economic underpinning. Trotsky argued that the "combined and uneven development" of capitalism could sometimes thrust backward states forward as they adopted the most advanced industrial systems, thus creating a modern industrial working class in the midst

of a backward peasant nation. When the Russian state invited foreign capitalists or employed foreign engineers to build modern plants in Petersburg and Moscow it created the working class that, Trotsky argued, would be its gravedigger.

At the same time, Trotsky suggested that, given the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie, workers in Russia would be forced to carry out the usual tasks of the bourgeois revolution —overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a republic — but then once ensconced in power would find it imperative to begin to carry out a working class agenda. The industrial proletariat would thus transform the struggle for democracy into socialist revolution. However, because of the backwardness of Russia, revolution there would have to take on an international character and become linked to the more economically developed nations of Europe, above all Germany. The small Russian working class could be successful only when united with the large and powerful German working class.

Trotsky's theory thus unified three fundamental Marxist ideas: 1) the working class as the agent of revolution; 2) working class revolution as based fundamentally on an expansion of democracy as it proceeded from the republic to socialism; and 3) the internationalist character of a working class revolution faced with the threat of capitalist encirclement and strangulation if it did not find allies in other nations. These three ideas — the centrality of the working class, the democratic essence of socialism, and proletarian internationalism — represent the core values of revolutionary socialism from Trotsky's time to our own.

October 1917: The Theory Vindicated

WHEN IN FACT the Russian revolution occurred, Trotsky's prediction was by-and-large proven correct. After a popular rebellion among the troops, the peasantry and the working class overthrew the Czarist government. Then the liberal Kadet party and the reformist socialists who headed the capitalist government failed to carry out the tasks facing them, above all ending the war and overseeing an agrarian reform. The working class, led by Lenin's Bolsehvik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, then proceeded to lead an insurrection, overthrow the capitalist government, and tackle those problems.

At once workers — contrary to the desires of the Bolshevik party — began to seize factories and demand that the government take them over. Revolution, civil war, and foreign intervention led the government to adopt a policy of "war communism," that is, government direction of all available resources to defend the revolution. So, in a sense, the revolution became "permanent" as the working class carried out first the overthrow of czarism and then began the construction of a workers' state with some socialist characteristics.

The Experiment Fails:
The Theory in Question

THE EXPERIMENT SOON FAILED, throwing into question the idea that workers could successfully carry out a permanent revolution in a backward nation. Russia's economic underdevelopment was exacerbated by the civil war and the foreign military intervention that caused enormous destruction and diverted resources from the development to the mere defense of the incipient socialist state. Famine followed. Lenin's party attempted to revive the society through the New Economic Policy which gave encouragement to petty capitalism and commerce within the context of what had become a state-run economy. That attempt led to some economic improvement but by itself and on that scale clearly could not resolve the country's problems.

With Lenin's death in 1924, his successors differed on the way forward. Bukharin and the right

looked toward a continuation of the NEP and a rapprochement with European socialism. Trotsky and the left proposed a combination of rapid industrialization with a revolutionary international perspective. Stalin, however, succeeded in gaining control of the party and uniting it around a nationalist program — socialism in one country, he called it — adapting Trotsky's industrialization program for his own end. Above all, Stalin adopted the notion that the one-party state would take charge of this massive experiment in social engineering.

Stalin's Counter-Revolution

Between 1929 and 1939, Stalin succeeded in carrying out a counter-revolution in which all of the institutions of workers' power in Soviet Russia were transformed into state-controlled apparatuses: the Communist Party, the labor unions, and the Soviets or workers' councils which formed the basis of the state. Hundreds of thousands were imprisoned or killed in the process and eventually millions died in the struggles with the Russian peasantry which followed. Counter-revolution, however, took a unique form. Capitalism was not restored, but rather a new bureaucratic ruling group emerged which controlled the state and the means of production. What was one to make of it? Thus permanent revolution was interrupted by the emergence from within the socialist workers' movement of a new force committed to neither democracy nor socialism.

Trotsky, however, did not understand the nature of the process taking place. While he believed that Stalin and his group were absolutely counter-revolutionary, Trotsky could only envision counter-revolution as capitalist restoration. And clearly Stalin was not promoting private property, the market, or any of the other elements of capitalism. So Trotsky argued that Soviet Russia remained a "workers' state" ruled by a counter-revolutionary bureaucratic "caste." Others, however, argued that counter-revolution had come in an unforeseen form. They called Stalin's Soviet Union "industrial feudalism," or a highly centralized "state capitalism" or a new "bureaucratic collectivist" ruling class. During the prelude leading up to World War II, Trotsky would argue for the defense of the bureaucratized workers' state, though both he and those revolutionaries who differed with him on the question of the class character of the Soviet Union argued that workers would have to make or remake a democratic socialist revolution and recreate the institutions of workers' power.

Permanent Revolution — Or Permanent Counter-Revolution?

Trotsky, assassinated by Stalin's agents in 1940, did not live to see the expansion of the Soviet Union's power into Eastern Europe through the occupation of the Red Army at the end of World War II, nor the spread of the Soviet Union's model in quite different ways to China, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia by way of Communist-led national revolutions. His followers, however, seeing the process of the virtual structural assimilation of the Eastern European states — Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc. — to the political and economic system of the Soviet Union, drew what seemed to them the logical conclusion that, if the Soviet Union was a workers' state with bureaucratic problems, then so too were the Eastern European states. Apparently then it did not take workers to create a workers' state; the Communists and the Red Army could carry out the revolution on their behalf.

Somehow, the orthodox Trotskyists argued, the original workers' revolution of 1917 found a distorted expression in the totalitarian Eastern European states where in fact workers had no power. Thus Trotsky's initial mistake — failing to understand the radical character of Stalin's counter-revolution — was compounded by his followers. Eastern Europe, they argued, had been "revolutionized" and transformed into proto-socialist workers' states without a workers' revolution, without democracy, and without an international revolutionary movement. What then was the purpose of a socialist movement and what the role of socialists?

Löwy's Theory: Revolution Without Workers or Socialist Ideals

THE REVOLUTIONS IN CHINA in 1949, in Vietnam from 1945 through 1974, the Algerian Revolution from 1954 to 1962, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 posed new problems for Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. While it was true that in most of these countries the national bourgeoisie was weak, so too was the working class — and, almost everywhere, because of the spread of Stalinism, devoid of democratic socialist ideals. With the capitalists and the workers unable to lead a democratic socialist, permanent revolution — the Communists, or sometimes the radical petty bourgeoisie, stepped up and took charge.

In China, Mao Tse Tung transformed the Communist Party into a bureaucratic Communist military organization on the march, leading a vast peasant army to conquer first the countryside and then to seize the cities. Workers, told to remain in their factories and await orders, clearly had no role, much less the leading role, in this revolution. The Chinese Communist-led national revolution revealed that the new bureaucratic communist class could place itself at head of a national revolution when both the capitalist and the working class failed to do so. In fact, similar developments had already taken place: Tito in Yugoslavia and Enver Hoxa in Albania and their Communist parties had led popular forces in national revolutions that created new Communist states. Vietnam's long revolutionary struggle against France and the United States represented another example, though it would only finally succeed in the mid-1970s.

Combined and Uneven Bureaucratic Revolution

WITHOUT A DOUBT, all of these revolutions shared some progressive tendencies: national liberation from imperialism, agrarian reform, economic development, and the creation of systems of social welfare. Yet, these revolutions were hostile not only to capitalism but also to democratic socialism.

These new regimes demonstrated that national liberation from imperialist domination could be carried out by a bureaucratic Communist party-army, though the cost was in some cases enormous. In China in particular, the ruling Communist elite's various development programs —from the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the early 1960s — wasted tremendous material resources as well as labor and eventually took millions of lives.

Cuba and the Third World: Permanent Involution

CUBA REPRESENTS A DIFFERENT CASE in many ways more similar to the revolutionary developments in a number of other Latin American, Asian, and African nations. A radical, petty bourgeois leadership — Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement — succeeded by 1959 in inspiring and leading a national revolutionary movement that encompassed radical students, peasants, and urban workers to overthrow the hated government of Fulgencio Batista. By 1961 Castro had declared his government's goal to be socialism, by which he meant his program of nationalization of industry, agrarian reform, and social welfare programs in health, education, and housing. At no point did the idea of workers' power enter into the group's real program, however, even though it formed part of their rhetoric.

Embargoed and threatened by the United States, by the 1970s Castro soon turned to the Soviet Union for support, and Cuba too subsequently underwent a process of structural assimilation similar to the process in Eastern Europe. Castro borrowed from the Soviet Union and Eastern European Communist states models everything from industrial organization to internal security. Castro's Cuba was not Stalin's Russia or Mao's China — while there were kangaroo courts and a number of

executions of Batista's henchmen early on, there was no mass murder in Cuba. As in Asia, there was no denying the initial progressive strands of the anti-imperialist revolution — and also no denying the bureaucratic and authoritarian character of the revolutionary government. The theoretical problem was that the two aspects — national liberation and Communist totalitarianism — were completely enmeshed and the former subordinated to the latter.

In various African states from Algeria to Southern Africa, petty bourgeois groups, sometimes with Communist politics and sometimes not, led national revolutions, though without the sort of support that the Soviet Union had given Cuba they proved unstable. Some became bizarre and macabre caricatures of the Communist state while others degenerated into capitalist dictatorships, often manipulated by the former colonial powers or transnational corporate interests. The revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s could not navigate the straights of the political Scylla and Charybdis — capitalism and Communism — and were either dashed upon the rocks of imperialism or dragged down into the maelstrom of Communist revolution. Nowhere was there the revolutionary breakthrough that might have provided both a model and real leadership.

Löwy's Theory and Its Contradictions

DURING THE 1960S AND 1970S as the revolutions discussed here broke out in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the Fourth International rushed to embrace them, but often all too uncritically. Some of its factions combined Trotskyism with varying currents of Third World revolutionary theory and practice. Che Guevera with his theory of the guerrilla foco as a substitute for working class revolution was particularly influential. It was in this context that Löwy's *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* originally appeared in 1981. In that earlier edition, Löwy gushed over the various Communist revolutionary movements in Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and Cuba. Even in the current revised edition he writes in the book's conclusion: "What occurred in Russia, Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, and Cuba corresponded closely to Trotksy's central thesis: the possibility of an uninterrupted and combined (democratic/socialist) revolution in a 'backward,' dependent or colonial country."

To his credit, Löwy recognized from the beginning the deep contradictions in his theory as revealed by his conclusion's tortuous explanation of the character of these states and societies. There he writes, "… these parties were not directly proletarian in the sense of the Bolshevik Party, but only through certain political and ideological mediations. They are proletarian in an indirect sense not merely because of the predominance of non-proletarian layers (peasants, intellectuals, etc.), but especially because of the presence of a bureaucracy which, whatever its specific social origins, constitutes a 'separate body' with characteristics and interests distinct from the proletariat." They are for Löwy "'proletarian' only indirectly" and he calls them "bureaucratic states of proletarian origin." The contradictions in his own theory become only too clear when he writes: "…while they are the products of socialist revolutions under the leadership of proletarian-socialist parties, the real power in these states is monopolized by the bureaucratic layer with specific social and economic interest." So much for "democratic/socialist revolution."

Such a "theory of permanent revolution," even with Löwy's caveats, seems to me to have little to do with Trotky's ideas of working class agency, democracy, and internationalism. Little in the experience of these countries has anything to do with democratic or socialist revolution, at least if we mean by that Marx's idea of the conscious and humanistic transformation of capitalism into socialism by the working class's continuous expansion of democratic spaces. The overthrow of capitalism by the Red Army, by Communist party-armies, or by petty bourgeois radicals who became bureaucratic Communists brought virtually no democratic institutions or rights to the countries that underwent those experiences.

What Then of This Theory?

TROTSKY'S THEORY OF PERMANENT revolution fit remarkably the conditions of Russia in the early twentieth century and could no doubt have been relevant for the entire era, had it not been for the rise of Stalinism. The presence of an alternative revolutionary leadership — anti-capitalist but also anti-socialist — changed the entire outlook.

Since then a series of developments — the end of formal colonialism in most of the world, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the transformation of China and Vietnam into Communist capitalist states, followed by the growing industrialization of much of the former Third World — have changed radically the picture. Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution will not directly explain contemporary developments.

What remains useful about the theory is the attempt to understand the dynamic interplay between world economic developments, the changes in national class relations, and politics, that is, the struggle for power. The notion of combined and uneven development and the theory of permanent revolution might be used fruitfully today to think about the impact of the world crisis on the national and international dynamics of the upheavals taking place in Europe. We might see how Trotsky's theory applies today to the revolutionary wave sweeping over Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and perhaps some other Arab nations as well. We should do so not by attempting to press the theory like a knife into the dough of events, but rather by watching the dough rise and attempting to understand the interactions between the water, the flour, and the yeast. We should return to Trotsky's own method, which was to bring a critical intelligence to bear upon a profound command of the economic, social, and political life of the region and its peoples. No doubt it will be an Arab Trotsky or Luxemburg who will create the theory to explain these events.

Whatever we do with these theories, we should keep in the forefront of our minds Trotsky's original triad: working class agency, democracy, and internationalism. There is no substitute.