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Marxism

The relevance of the theory of permanent revolution and its topicality

- Features -

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What is the theory of permanent revolution? How has been tested by reality? What is its relevance today?

I. Genesis of the theory of permanent revolution

The term “permanent revolution” comes from Marx and Engels. During the revolution of 1848-1849, and even more so as a result of its failure, they realized that, in Germany, the bourgeois (liberal-democratic) revolution and the proletarian revolution would not be historic stages separated by a period of capitalist development of several decades.

“Until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions”

In France, the bourgeoisie had led the Revolution of 1789, overthrowing feudalism and the Ancien Régime, and redistributing land to a large extent. In Germany, the bourgeoisie was both too weak politically, and too fearful of the emerging power of the proletariat: it would quickly side with reaction. As for the democratic petty bourgeoisie, if it could play an important role in initiating the revolutionary process, it would like to put an end to the latter prematurely. It was therefore necessary for the proletariat and the communists “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.” [1]. While it was essential for the proletarians to participate actively in the overthrow of the Anciens Régimes and the democratic revolution, they had to strive to intensify and radicalize this process, until it was transformed into a communist revolution. From the outset, they had to become aware of their class interests – which ultimately are identified with the abolition of all class domination – put forward their own demands and organize themselves autonomously, so as to establish the seeds of a dual power: “Alongside the new official governments they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers’ governments, either in the form of local executive committees and councils or through workers’ clubs or committees, so that the bourgeois-democratic governments not only immediately lost the support of the workers but find themselves from the very beginning supervised and threatened by authorities behind which stand the whole mass of the workers.” [2]. For Marx and Engels, “their war cry was to be: revolution at all times!” In Germany, the strategic hypothesis of Marx and Engels was not confirmed: there was no revolution until 1918, and it was “from above” that national unification was achieved, and very partial liberal reforms introduced, albeit under pressure from the labour movement. It was in Russia that the notion of permanent revolution would take on its full historical relevance.

Trotsky and “combined and uneven development”

Trotsky began to theorize permanent revolution as early as 1904 (with the text “Before 9 January”) and especially after the revolution of 1905 (in “Results and Prospects”, 1906). Like Marx and Engels for Germany, although he did not have direct knowledge of their texts on this issue at the time, Trotsky considered that the Russian bourgeoisie should not be expected to lead a true liberal and democratic revolution. It would be under the direction of the proletariat, relying on the peasant majority, that democratic tasks could be carried out, and would therefore not be separated from proletarian tasks (in the first place the socialization of the major means of production). This is related to his analysis of Russian capitalism. The late development of capitalism, the subordinate place of Russia in the imperialist hierarchy, the importance of the economic role of the state and the presence of foreign capital that directly

exploited Russian workers explained both the weakness of the national bourgeoisie, the relatively large development of a concentrated proletariat (even if it was a minority compared to the peasantry) and also the possibility of rapid economic development because of the level of existing techniques and productive forces. This is what he would later call (notably in his “History of the Russian Revolution”, 1930) “combined and uneven development”: there is an inequality of development between Russia and the advanced capitalist countries, which implies a “combined” development, in the sense that we see the combination of remarkably diverse levels of development (ranging from the extreme backwardness of the countryside to the state-of-the-art Petrograd factories). The link established by Trotsky between combined and uneven development and permanent revolution in the case of Russia was subsequently generalized to the various countries dominated within the framework of imperialism. [3] Here it remained to accomplish “bourgeois” revolutionary tasks, such as the abolition of feudal relations and radical agrarian reform, the conquest of real national independence and liberation from imperialism, or the establishment of democratic institutions.

Permanent revolution vs. “socialism in one country”

While the Russian Revolution largely confirmed Trotsky's conceptions, a debate resurfaced in the mid-1920s, pitting Stalin and Bukharin's socialism in one country against Trotsky's idea that it was necessary to make the revolution permanent, not only until the abolition of class domination and the complete socialist transformation of society, but until the triumph of socialism on a global scale. Following his defeat, Trotsky proposed his most complete theorization of the notion and strategy of permanent revolution, in a book written for the most part in 1929, “The Permanent Revolution”, and distinguished three aspects of it. The first (opposed to stageism) is the permanence of the revolutionary process or the “growing over” of the democratic revolution into a socialist revolution, for the so-called “backward” countries. The second aspect (as opposed to bureaucratic statism) is the permanence of the socialist revolution itself. The socialist revolution is in fact far from being completed with the seizure of power or the state decision to socialize the means of production: “During a period of indefinite duration, all social relations are transformed during a continuous internal struggle”, the upheavals also concerning “the economy, the technology, the science, the family, manners or customs”. The third aspect (as opposed to socialism in a single country) refers to the necessary extension (on pain of degeneration) of the revolution on an international scale because of the global nature of the economy: “The socialist revolution begins on the national ground, but it cannot stop there. [...] The international revolution, despite its temporary setbacks and ebbs, represents a permanent process”. The October Revolution thus appears as the “first stage of the world revolution, which necessarily extends over decades”.

We will not develop here the second and third aspects, which are perfectly current. The idea that the socialist revolution will go far beyond the time of the seizure of power and the need to internationalize the revolution are obvious. But to conceive more precisely what is involved in the articulation of the national and international scales and in the radical democratization of all social relations, would take us too far.

II. The permanent revolution as a tool for analysing imperialism and as an anti-imperialist strategy

Does the notion of permanent revolution make it possible to analyse the situations and revolutions of the revolutionary processes of the countries dominated within the framework of imperialism?

The case of national liberation struggles

Let us first recall that Trotsky's ideas were to a large extent confirmed by processes combining anti-imperialist revolution and socialist revolution: the Chinese revolution (the defeat of 1925-1927 and then the victory of 1949), the liberation of Vietnam or the revolution in Cuba.

Of course, various elements seem to refute permanent revolution understood as a historical forecast. Although the situations are diverse, the independence of the countries colonized between 1945 and 1975, particularly in Africa (with the exception of the former Portuguese colonies: Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau), was mostly won without leading to a socialist system, and without communist organizations having hegemony over the national liberation movement (although their influence and links with the USSR may have been significant). In Algeria, although partial socialist measures under the aegis of the state were initiated after independence, the process was not completed, as in Nasser's Egypt. Moreover, even when political forces claiming to be communist played an important role or even led the process of national liberation, they relied less on the working class than on the peasantry. Moreover, whether or not these anti-imperialist victories led to economic socialization (partial or complete), they did not lead to democratic regimes.

However, independent nations that did not attack capitalist structures did not free themselves from the shackles of imperialism. Subsequently, the international neoliberal offensive, the debt burden, structural adjustment plans and the Washington Consensus, and then the fall of the Soviet bloc, limited the room for manoeuvre that the dominated countries were capable of having until the 1970s. But it is this room for manoeuvre that makes possible certain self-centred national development policies aimed at changing the imperialist division of labour (what Samir Amin calls "delinking"), possibly forging new bonds of collaboration between third world countries.

Of course, some countries that were once dominated in imperialist terms are no longer so. But we can consider that they have experienced particular trajectories that cannot be generalized, based for example on strong support from the United States in the context of the Cold War (South Korea, Taiwan), or on the role of oil exports (the Gulf countries in the first place). The most complex case is that of China. Because of its economic growth, showing that it has escaped the logic of "development of underdevelopment" (André Gunder Frank), and because of its political power, China cannot be considered subject to imperialism, even if the question of whether it is destined to replace the global hegemony of the United States can be discussed. However, this does not imply rejecting the idea of permanent revolution, since it is indeed "the Chinese revolution [that] broke imperialist domination and endowed the country with an independent working class, skills, industry and technology", thus establishing the conditions for further capitalist development [4]

Despite certain exceptions, complex cases, and very diverse situations that prohibit the setting of a pattern in a mechanical way, the intuition that is at the heart of the notion and strategy of permanent revolution remains fundamentally correct: "As long as a genuine socialist/democratic revolution – in a 'permanent' process – has not taken place, it is unlikely that the countries of the South, the nations of peripheral capitalism can begin to provide a solution to the 'biblical' problems (the expression is that of Ernest Mandel) that afflict them: poverty, misery, unemployment, glaring social inequalities, ethnic discrimination, lack of water and bread, imperialist domination, oligarchic regimes, monopolization of the land by the latifundistas..." [5]

The "Arab Spring"

The vagaries of the revolutionary process in the Arab region, initiated in the winter of 2010-2011, thus show the extent to which democratic, economic and social tasks are particularly intertwined. The organization of elections in some countries affected by the wave of uprising, or even the establishment of a formal bourgeois-democratic regime as in Tunisia, has not fundamentally changed the structures of domination, and popular aspirations remain. As Gilbert Achcar points out, "the change that the region needs to overcome its chronic crisis requires leaderships or leading organs of the popular movement of a high level of revolutionary determination and loyalty to the popular interest. Such leaderships are indispensable to manage the revolutionary process and overcome the difficult tests and challenges that must be inevitably confronted in the drive to defeat the existing regimes by winning over their social base, both civilian and military. Leaderships are required, that can rise to the task of overseeing the transformation of the state from a machine of social extortion on behalf of the few into a tool that serves society and its toiling majority. As long as such leading organs have not emerged or prevailed, the revolutionary process will

inexorably carry on through phases of ebb and flow, revolutionary upsurges and counter-revolutionary backlashes.” [6]

In other countries of the region, we can see the extent to which the combined non-assumption of economic, social and democratic tasks may even have encouraged the return of the old regimes (which had never completely left). The most exemplary case is probably that of Egypt case where the Muslim Brotherhood, while claiming to be committed to the achievements of the 2011 revolution, rejected any break with neoliberal and predatory economic policies — even tending to deepen them — playing a de facto counter-revolutionary role and precipitating the return to power of the army. The idea that political democracy would be a step to be taken “initially”, by building political alliances with bourgeois forces, even if it meant giving up imposing social transformation, which was only envisaged following the consolidation of democratic structures, was short-lived: not only did social transformation never come about, but this separation of social and democratic tasks has encouraged the return of the dictatorships — and the destruction of the meagre spaces of political democracy.

III. Relevance of the theory of permanent revolution

In the dominated countries, therefore, the theory of permanent revolution remains relevant, provided that it is constantly updated in the light of new social and political experiences. As Michael Löwy wrote: “In the vast majority of countries of peripheral capitalism — be it in the Middle East, Asia, Africa or Latin America — the tasks of a genuine democratic revolution have not been accomplished: depending on the case, democratization — and secularization! — of the state, liberation from imperial control, the social exclusion of the poor majority, or the resolution of the agrarian question remain on the agenda. Dependency has taken on new forms, but these are no less brutal and restrictive than those of the past: the dictatorship of the IMF, the World Bank and soon the WTO — over the indebted countries, that is to say, of practically all the countries of the South — through the mechanism of neoliberal “adjustment” plans and draconian conditions for the payment of foreign debt. [...] The revolution in these countries can therefore only be a complex and articulated combination between these democratic requirements and the overthrow of capitalism. Today, as in the past, the revolutionary transformations that are on the agenda in the societies on the periphery of the system are not identical to those in the countries of the centre. A social revolution in India cannot be, from the point of view of its programme, its strategy and its driving forces, a pure “workers’ revolution” as in England. The decisive political role — admittedly, not foreseen by Trotsky! — played in many countries today by peasant and indigenous movements (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, the Brazilian Movement of Landless Agricultural Workers (MST), CONAIE in Ecuador) shows the importance and social explosiveness of the agrarian question, and its close link with national liberation” [7]

For Trotsky, in the advanced capitalist countries, where the bourgeois revolution was supposed to have been accomplished, the permanent revolution was relevant in only two senses: continuation of the socialist revolutionary process after the seizure of power, and the need to extend the revolution internationally.

Without of course being abolished, “the border between ‘proletarian revolution’ in the imperialist countries and ‘permanent revolution’ in the dominated countries seems more blurred today than yesterday both politically (the watchwords are increasingly similar at a time when illegitimate debt is at the heart of the European crisis!) and geographically, with countries “straddling” two worlds”, Greece for example. [8]

More generally, the permanent revolution as a combination of democratic and socialist tasks has a new relevance in the countries of the imperialist centre themselves. The long crisis of capitalism, the outbreak of which in 2008-2009 still having consequences — and aftershocks — has thus opened a phase of authoritarian development, within the “developed” capitalist countries, the culmination of which we are far from having reached. This authoritarian course is not an accident of course or a simple ideological “headlong rush”: it is the expression of a crisis of hegemony of bourgeois political domination, a corollary of its structural inability to obtain the consent of significant fractions of the

population, with adherence to policies that, far from cushioning the social consequences of the economic crisis, make them worse. Political instability exists, reflected in the end of the “peaceful” regimes of alternation, the spectacular development of the forces of the far right, events such as the election of Donald Trump or Brexit, the multiple brutal interventions, in recent years, of the European institutions on “national” political scenes (Italy, Greece and, to a lesser extent, Portugal) and so on.

Macronian authoritarianism is thus the French expression of a crisis of hegemony of the dominant classes on an international scale, which unfolds in various forms in most “bourgeois democracies”. When Macron was elected, the question was raised as to whether he represented a solution to this crisis of hegemony or whether he was a product of it that could, in the medium term, only deepen it. Today everything indicates that, even if his counter-reforms meet the wishes of the bourgeoisie, the crisis is far from being resolved: the reforms are voted through and applied, but the consent is not there, which is evidenced by the low popularity of Macron and the narrowing of his social base, already a minority during the 2017 presidential election. But nothing seems to indicate that Macron and his people are in search of the construction of a “new hegemony”, as their relations with the most traditional forms of mediation and therefore of the production of consent (parties, trade unions, associations and even, to a certain extent, the media) show a desire for the marginalization/circumvention, even absolute domination, of these structures.

The inseparability of democratic and social struggles is increasingly visible in the dominant capitalist countries, just as it is in the countries on the periphery. It is in this sense that we can understand the repeated popular uprisings, over the last ten years, as expressing a revolt against neoliberal-authoritarian capitalism, in which social and democratic demands are “naturally” combined. Iraq, Chile, Ecuador, Lebanon, Catalonia, Puerto Rico, Sudan, Colombia, Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Algeria, Haiti, Iran, India... almost all the popular movements of recent years, and this is also true for the Gilets jaunes movement in France, if they began in reaction to a specific government measure, have very quickly turned into global uprisings, calling into question all the neoliberal policies conducted in recent years, even decades, and questioning the very legitimacy of the powers that be and their anti-democratic, even authoritarian, practices.

In all these struggles, however, the absence of a common emancipatory horizon (communism, eco-socialism and so on) is sorely lacking, as are political forces that make it possible to synthesize past experiences and new radicalities, essential to envisage the revolutions of the twenty-first century by openly raising the question of power. This is also what the permanent revolution can and must contribute: feeding on contemporary social and political experiences while nourishing them, and constituting a theory and a practice which, far from the teleological or stageist visions of the fight for social emancipation “articulate the political time of the event and the historical time of the process , objective conditions and their subjective transformation, the tendential laws and the uncertainties of contingency, the constraint of circumstances and the freedom of decisions, the wisdom of accumulated experiences and the audacity of novelty, event and historicity.” [9]

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[1] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

[3] The case of China, discussed by Trotsky himself, is paradigmatic; see Pierre Rousset, “The Chinese Experience and the Theory of Permanent

Revolution" <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7216>

[4] Pierre Rousset, "Daniel Bensaïd, la révolution permanente: questions d'hier et d'aujourd'hui", January 2012:
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article24095>

[5] Michael Löwy, "Actualité de la révolution permanente", Inprecor, July-September 2000.

[6] Gilbert Achcar, "2010-2020: The first decade of the Arab revolutionary process".
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-first-decade-of-the-arab-revolutionary-process/>

[7] Michael Löwy, "Actualité de la révolution permanente", art. cit.

[8] Pierre Rousset, "Daniel Bensaïd, la révolution permanente", art. cit.

[9] Daniel Bensaïd, "Fragments pour une politique de l'opprimé: événement et historicité, 2003".