"VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY TROTSKY"

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Introduction

This is not a research paper in the conventional sense. It is not based on exhaustive analysis either of Trotsky's writings, or of theories of revolution in general. It is very much a workshop paper, an attempt to pose a problem rather than to solve it. What it does do is to explore some of the implications of Trotsky's theory of revolution, for our approach to the general problem of 'Revolution as History'.[1]

Briefly, I will argue that an examination of Trotsky's theories of revolution shows how difficult it is to avoid broadening our concept of revolution. Indeed, it suggests that it may be necessary to collapse it into the much broader notion of a 'revolution epoch'. This is indeed an inflationary interpretation of the concept of 'revolution', for it means abandoning the conceptual 'gold standard' which allowed historians to exchange the term only against a few familiar, and clearly definable national revolutions, of which the best known were the English, French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. In a workshop paper one can legitimately leave the task of restoring conceptual soundness to others. Indeed, a conceptual Keynesian may hope that inflation will offer the best path out of a conceptual slump!

Trotsky offers a good starting point for a discussion of 'Revolution and History'. He was both a revolutionary and a historian. And that meant that, unlike most historians, he tested his interpretations in practice--sometimes, literally, in battle. Indeed, the testing of ideas in political practice was, to him, an essential aspect of a scientific account of the past, and he despised the interpretation of objectivity which equated it with 'neutrality'. In 1930, he wrote in the Preface to his own *History of the Russian Revolution:*

> One of the reactionary and therefore fashionable historians of contemporary France, L. Madelin, slandering in his drawing-room fashion the great revolution - that is, the birth of his own nation - asserts that 'the historian ought to stand upon the wall of a threatened city and behold at the same time the besiegers and the besieged': only in this way, it seems, can he achieve a 'conciliatory justice'.... It is well that he is concerned only with war camps of the past: in a time of revolution standing on the wall involves great danger. Moreover, in times of alarm the priests of 'conciliatory justice' are usually found sitting on the inside of four walls waiting to see which side will win.[2]

Trotsky was also an immensely creative thinker, and his ideas kept developing throughout a long career which led him from the revolutionary underground, to military leadership in the civil war, to deep and complex discussions about the building of socialism during the 1920s, and eventually to a prolonged exile in which he had (as Lenin did not) the time to contemplate what had gone wrong and right with the Bolshevik revolution.

In the course of his career, Trotsky began with a conventional interpretation of 'revolution' which he slowly enriched until he arrived at a much more complex

interpretation which broke down the conceptual walls surrounding the original concept. In what follows, I will trace this evolution, and suggest what seem to me the implications of Trotsky's ideas for our use of the term, 'Revolution', At the risk of seeming overly schematic, I will pick out the points at which Trotsky's ideas seem to have implied a broadening of traditional concepts of revolution.

Trotsky's Starting Point

Like most young socialists at the turn of the century, Trotsky started out with a conventional, Social Democratic understanding of Revolution, one which would not seem out of place in most modern history textbooks. Revolutions entailed the more or less violent overthrow of the traditional social, economic and political ruling elite of a nation, and the social system on which their power and position had rested. As a Marxist, he analyzed both the victims and the victors of revolutions as 'classes'. He also saw revolutions as the key events in the transition from one mode of production to another. So the adjectives 'bourgeois' and 'socialist' gravitated naturally towards the noun 'revolution'. And the analysis of particular revolutions inevitably turned, to a large extent, on whether they were 'bourgeois' or 'socialist' in nature.

This view reflected a periodization of European revolutions which still persists in textbook accounts of modern European history. First, there came the great bourgeois revolutions, led by the English, then the French, and followed by the revolutions of 1848. These had overthrown old feudal elites and replaced them by a bourgeois ruling class able and willing to build capitalism, with all that that entailed. It was to be expected, in this scheme, that similar revolutions would, in time, occur in other countries, such as the Russian Empire. But this, the 'bourgeois' stage of revolution would also lay the foundations for a new series of 'socialist' revolutions. These would overthrow capitalism and the bourgeoisie, and start the building of a new, socialist, order, in which the 'ruling class' consisted of the working majority of the population. In the more advanced capitalist countries, rumblings of this next stage could already be heard; indeed, this was how Marx himself explained the significance of the Paris commune in his pamphlet on 'The Civil War in France'.

1905--"Results & Prospects"

But Trotsky, like all Russian Marxists of his generation, was soon forced by practical necessity to scrutinise this scheme more closely. The trouble was that it did not yield a very promising political programme when applied to a relatively backward country, such as Tsarist Russia, in a world system dominated by the more developed capitalism of an Imperialist Europe. "The 19th century had not passed in vain;" and both Russia and the world had changed.[3] Russia, in Trotsky's analysis, was characterised by a strong autocracy; a weak, cowardly bourgeoisie; a small, but powerful and radical proletariat; a vast, disorganized peasantry; and industrial and economic backwardness.[4] It did not fit the conventional view of a country on the verge of bourgeois or socialist revolution. But a socialist revolution seemed equally unlikely where capitalism itself was only a recent development. So a Russian Marxist could not realistically offer a political programme based on the imminence of socialist revolution. What role did this leave for a Marxist revolutionary such as Trotsky? Not much. When applied to backward Russia, the conventional scheme led to a dead end. And the same dilemma was later to be faced by Marxists in China, India, and many other countries in which capitalism developed in a world already dominated by a capitalist, and imperialist Europe.

Both Trotsky and Lenin reacted to the problem by rethinking the conventional scheme of Revolution, and what it implied of the nature and scope of Revolution. Trotsky's reexamination of the problem began just before and during the 1905 Revolution, in which he played an important role. His first solution developed from the idea of a friend and colleague, the maverick revolutionary-cum-entrepreneur Helphand/Parvus. It began by breaking down the neat separation between 'bourgeois' and 'socialist' revolutions which was a central feature of the conventional scheme (though not, it should be noted, of Marx's own studies of revolution).

Helphand suggested, in effect, that in a world where different societies had evolved at different speeds, it was quite possible to conceive of hybrid revolutions, bourgeois in content but socialist in form. The two stages might well run into each other in what Trotsky soon began to call a 'permanent revolution'. Accordingly, in his analysis of the 1905 revolution, Trotsky revised the whole traditional periodization of revolutions. He argued that the bourgeoisie, which had aggressively attacked the feudal order in 1789, had come to realize that there were dangers to the left as well as to the right. Indeed, it was the hesitations of the bourgeoisie during the 1848 revolutions that explained their ultimate failure. By 1905, the Russian bourgeoisie was, politically speaking, conservative. It relied on government contracts and depended on a strong, autocratic government to maintain order and help it control labour and enforce work discipline in the factories. It was small in numbers, and was used to living in the shadow of the autocracy.

But what others might see as a sign of hopeless backwardness, Trotsky saw as an opportunity. He saw that the very weakness of the bourgeoisie might itself make revolution more likely, particularly where there existed other classes which were so hostile to the existing order that they had no fear of being outflanked to their left. In Russia, these classes were the proletariat, who needed greater freedom to organize in an emerging capitalist society; and the peasantry, who suffered from desperate land hunger and had their eyes on the land of both aristocratic and bourgeois landowners. It was these groups which would provide the political punch needed to break down a still semi-feudal political structure. A weak bourgeoisie, a powerful and radical proletariat, and a large poverty-stricken peasantry, might well provide the ingredients for a successful anti-feudal revolution, carried out despite the hostility of the bourgeoisie. In other words: "It is possible for the workers to come to power in an economically backward country sooner than in an advanced country".[5]

Despite the oddity of this scenario, there is much to be said for it as an analysis of what actually happened in Russia in 1905.[6] But it led immediately to new conceptual and political problems. Trotsky accepted that the preconditions for building socialism did not yet exist in Russia; and, as Marx had always argued, the attempt to build socialism prematurely was a dangerous Utopian illusion. At best, it could merely clear the ground for a more rapid development of capitalism; at worst it might lead to new forms of tyranny. So Trotsky's revised analysis seemed, at first sight, to lead to a new impasse--a working class government in a society not yet ripe for socialism. It was at this point that Parvus offered his key idea. The idea should really have been seen by Marxists before; indeed Plekhanov and Kautsky had both approached it. But they had resisted some of its more curious implications. Parvus and Trotsky did not.

Parvus insisted that revolutions cannot be analyzed purely in national terms. A revolution of bourgeois content led by the working classes was, of course, a grotesque absurdity considered in purely Russian terms, and it inevitably led to terrible political and conceptual difficulties. But viewed in a European or a world-wide perspective these

difficulties became more manageable. In this perspective, Russia appeared merely as a backward province of a world system in which the preconditions for building socialism *did* exist. Parvus added that the real consequence of a Russian revolution led by the working classes might be to stimulate a similar revolution in Europe (through repudiating debts owed to European capitalists, as well as through a sort of revolutionary 'demonstration effect'). Europe, of course, *was* ripe for socialism. A socialist Europe would then be in a position to solve the dilemmas of its backward, Russian provinces.[7] QED!

Such an approach justified a Marxist programme in backward Russia. It led Trotsky to argue that a working class government which seized power in a successful revolution would be bound to press on with socialist goals not merely to retain working class support, but also to encourage the foreign revolution which would be its eventual saviour. The idea of a revolution that overflowed national boundaries and triggered off a chain of revolutions elsewhere was the second sense in which Trotsky used the phrase 'permanent revolution'. And this leads to the first significant modification of the conventional concept of revolution, which is implied by Trotsky's theory.

> Modification 1: His analysis implied that single Revolutions must be seen as constituents of a larger, international revolution if their full significance is to be understood. The concept of 'Revolution' must be divorced from that other conventional concept of 'Nation'.[8] This modification also suggests the need to expand the term 'Revolution' to include national wars of liberation, revolutions in which the revolutionaries and those they overthrow happen to belong to different nations.

'Permanent Revolution' in practice--1917-40

As Trotsky himself wrote: the final test of a theory is experience".[9] Did Trotsky's scheme survive the test of 'experience? It did so better than most historical predictions, partly because it was extremely flexible and open-ended. Trotsky himself certainly believed that his analysis was proved correct by later events.

(i) 1905. The 1905 revolution offered a clear example of a revolution in a relatively backward country in which the real revolutionary muscle was supplied by proletarians and peasants. To this extent it conformed to Trotsky's analysis. But the Petrograd Soviet did not retain power; and the revolution did not spread to Europe. However, no one could doubt that there had been a revolution. And this suggested the need for another modification to the conventional notion of 'revolution'.

> Modification 2: The term, 'Revolution', must be allowed to include failed revolutions, as well as those that succeed. The revolution of 1905, like the events of the Paris Commune, belonged essentially to the same type of event as the great European revolutions, despite their failure. And this meant, effect, that there was no reason to exclude what Lenin was to call 'revolutionary crises' from the category. It was the near collapse of a whole social and political order that was vital, whether the outcome was complete collapse or the restoration of a new equilibrium.

(ii) 1917. Again, proletarian and peasant insurrections played a vital role. But this time, Trotsky's scenario was played out more fully. After the October coup, a government

emerged claiming to represent Russia's working classes, and it retained power, and pressed on with radical social reform. It also inspired socialist uprisings in Europe. This was enough to prove the plausibility of Trotsky's revised scheme of modern revolutions, as embodied both in his own theory of 'permanent revolution', and also (so he claimed) in Lenin's theory of Imperialism.

But at this point the predictions failed. The European socialist revolutions occurred; but they did not succeed. And for those who continued to believe in the plausibility of the notion of 'permanent revolution', this fact required a further modification.

> Modification 3: Though permanent, the international revolution may also have its periods of quiescence. As the period of quiescence lengthened it became increasingly clear that what was being discussed was not a single revolution, even if its scale was world-wide, but rather a prolonged historical period of instability, a 'revolutionary epoch'. By now, 'revolutionary epochs' are the real focus of Trotsky's analysis, rather than specific revolutions.[10]

(iii) The 1920s. During the 1920s, Trotsky and his colleagues in the 'Left Opposition' to Stalin argued consistently on the basis of the theory of permanent revolution. First, they insisted that a socialist government in a backward country had no choice but to press on with the building of socialism, despite its backwardness, if only to retain the support of its working class followers. However, they continued to insist that the final building of socialism was impossible in Russia alone; that Stalin's notion of 'Socialism in One Country' was chimerical. So, it was equally vital to do whatever could be done to revive the world revolution which had been temporarily halted at the borders of the newly created Soviet Union. The dilemmas of the USSR in the 1920s had to be understood against the wider background of a continuing world revolution.

(iv) The 1930s. In the 1930s, there were counter-revolutions in Germany, Italy and Japan and (in Trotsky's analysis at least) in the Soviet Union itself under the Stalinist bureaucracy. This implied one more pessimistic modification to the theory of permanent revolution:

> Modification 4: The revolutionary epoch would include periods not merely of quiescence, but also of retrogression - of counter-revolutions, of what can best be described as 'pre-emptive strikes from above' to check incipient revolutions.

Both the Nazi seizure of power, and the brutality of dekulakization could be viewed in this light, though Trotsky remained ambivalent about the real meaning of collectivization.[11]

(v) Finally, in the late 1930s, Trotsky was forced to concede the modification to which this line of argument seemed inexorably to lead. This was that there was not even any guarantee of final success.

> Modification 5: The revolutionary epoch might lead to clashes so violent and destructive that a new period of barbarism would result, rather than socialism.

What Trotsky never believed was that a progressive capitalism could survive. The outcome of the revolutionary epoch had to be either socialism or barbarism, progress on a world scale, or retrogression on a world scale.

From 'Revolution to Revolutionary Epoch'

What, then, has become of the concept of 'revolution'? I have suggested that in the course of his career, Trotsky was forced to broaden the category of revolution until, eventually, it merged into the broader and more nebulous category of an entire revolutionary epoch. He had been forced to include in his analysis of revolution successful revolutions, failed revolutions, revolutionary crises, national wars of liberation, revolutions from above, counter-revolutions, and anti-colonial wars. None, it seemed, could be fully understood alone; they were linked phenomena, parts of a larger period of transition. They had in common not merely the fact of violence, but also the fact that they could be seen in Trotsky's analysis as parts of a larger process, the painful birth of one type of society out of another. This, of course, resembles the historian's traditional, though informal, category of 'Ages of Revolution', as in the title of Hobsbawm's study of the period from 1789 to 1848, or in R.R. Palmer's notion of a European-wide 'Democratic Revolution'. The focus of Trotsky's attention had shifted from the successful national revolution to a prolonged period of international turbulence in which one could identify many distinct forms of violent social conflict.

Clearly, the object of analysis had changed. The question that remains is whether historians should resist this inflationary interpretation of a useful, neat, and familiar concept; or whether they should accept what I have argued is the unavoidable implication of Trotsky's argument - that the broader and more diffuse category of a 'revolutionary epoch' is the more productive object of study for historians of the modern era. Has Trotsky led us to another conceptual dead end? Or towards a deeper insight into the nature of social and political change in general in the modern era?

My own preference is for the inflationary approach. It seems to me that the clear implication of Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' is that the traditional concept of 'Revolution' is a rather arbitrary one. It limits the object of analysis in ways which may be convenient for the historian, but which do nothing to advance historical understanding of revolutions. If we take Trotsky's reasoning seriously, we must conclude that, in the modern world at least, it is simply wrong to treat revolutions as isolated events in the national history of particular countries. On the contrary, they must be seen as stages in a far larger process stretching over considerable periods of time and extending to the whole world. Only in this way can the full significance of revolutions be grasped.

And this means that historians interested in the nature of revolutions should consider broadening their field of vision to include whole 'revolutionary epochs' rather than single revolutions. I will conclude by offering several reasons for preferring the broader category.

First, it retains the sense that violent social changes involving political and social breakdown, are intrinsically worthy of study.

Second, it rejects as essentially arbitrary the traditional concentration on a particular group of revolutionary breakdowns, based on a definition including only national revolutions, successful revolutions, and 'progressive' revolutions. It implies that these elements are superficial - that the traditional revolutions are best thought of as members of a larger family of historical objects.

Third, the broader category forces historians to look deeper for common elements. In particular, it suggests that, rather than examining particular revolutions, historians should concentrate on examining the underlying instabilities of whole historical epochs. To borrow a metaphor, they should explore the fault lines rather than the earthquake. It is the fault line which is, after all, the more important phenomenon, and the one you have to understand if you are to make scientific sense of seismic movements in both history and geology.

Finally, the broad category, because of its very breadth, forces us to examine the opposite of revolution. Though it seems natural to suppose that 'revolution' is a reasonable object of study, it is slightly harder to see that 'non-revolution' is also worth historical study. Indeed, the two categories of 'revolutionary epoch' and 'non-revolutionary epoch' are clearly complementary, and one would expect that analysis of one family of objects would reveal much about the other. So, to the question: "what explains social and political breakdowns"? we should add the equally important question: "what explains prolonged political and social stability?" The two questions are really the same, and both ought to interest those historians who have been traditionally fascinated by the study of revolutions. They point to the question which is behind most studies of revolution: "what are the preconditions for social and political order, and under what general conditions are they likely to break down?"

Bibliography

The clearest exposition of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is to be found in his early work, "Results & Prospects", written in jail while he was awaiting trial for his role in the activities of the St. Petersburg Soviet. This, and other, relevant writings, are available in *Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects,* Pathfinder Press, N.Y., 1969. There is a sympathetic account of Trotsky's thought in Ernest Mandel's *Trotsky: A Study in the Dynamic of His Thought,* New Left Books, London, 1979; and a less sympathetic account in Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky,* Oxford, OUP, 1978. The best biography is, of course, Isaac Deutscher's trilogy, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921,* (OUP, 1954), *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929,* (OUP, 1959), and *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940,* (OUP, 1963). A good, recent biography is Ronald Segal, *The Tragedy of Leon Trotsky,* London, Peregrine Books, 1983.

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[1] This paper is a modified version of an earlier paper: "Trotsky's Theory of 'Permanent Revolution' and the Nature of Twentieth Century Revolution", *Teaching History,* 19, pt. 2 (July 1985), 7-23.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution,* 3 vols., Sphere Books ed., London, 1967, 1:18-19.

[3] "Results & Prospects", in *Permanent Revolution,* p.52.

[4] Ch. 1 of "Results & Prospects", in *Permanent Revolution,* p. 52.

[5] "Results & Prospects", in *Permanent Revolution,* p. 63.

[6] I have explored these aspects of 1905 in David Christian, *Power & Privilege: Russia and the Soviet Union in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,* Pitman, Melbourne, 1986, Ch. 5.

[7] "Results & Prospects", p.105.

[8] "Results & Prospects", p. 133.

[9] Preface to the 1919 reissue of "Results & Prospects", p.32.

[10] See *Permanent Revolution,* p. 132.

[11] Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism is developed in *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?,* Pathfinder Press, 1972.