

Chapter Thirteen

‘Social Democracy and Revolution’ (25 November [12 November], 1905)

Leon Trotsky

In 1929, Leon Trotsky published *The Permanent Revolution* in response to Stalinist attacks on his book *Results and Prospects*, written in 1906. According to Stalinist propaganda of the 1920s, Lenin condemned Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution at the time of the 1905 revolution for ‘under-estimating’ the peasantry. In this volume, we have pointed out in several places that Trotsky did indeed reject Lenin’s slogan of ‘the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’ on the grounds that the peasants would be unable to produce a coherent political party to serve as a reliable ally of Social Democracy. In terms of the historical evidence, Trotsky showed greater foresight on this matter than Lenin. After the Bolsheviks signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in 1918, only a handful of Left SRs continued to support the revolutionary government, and, in August 1918, it was a Socialist Revolutionary, Fanya Kaplan, who attempted to assassinate Lenin.

The debate over *permanent revolution* only resurfaced after Lenin’s death in 1924 because Stalin wrapped his claim to succession in the slogan of ‘Socialism in One Country’. Trotsky was said to lack confidence in the revolution’s long-

run survival because a) he had *always* premised success on an international revolution, and b) he was *still* under-estimating the need for support from the peasantry, whom he allegedly proposed to tax excessively in order to finance industrialisation. Countless volumes have been written on the debate over socialism in one country, and this is not the place to review them.¹ In the fourth chapter of *Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky summarised the position he had taken in 1905 by quoting the final lines of the article we have translated here:

The complete victory of the revolution signifies the victory of the proletariat. The latter, in turn, means further uninterrupted revolution. The proletariat is accomplishing the basic tasks of democracy, and at some moment the very logic of its struggle to consolidate its political rule places before it purely socialist problems. Revolutionary continuity [*nepreryvnost'*] is being established between the minimum and the maximum programme. It is not a question of a single 'blow', a day, or a month, but of an entire historical epoch. It would be absurd to try to fix its duration in advance.

'This one reference,' Trotsky declared in 1929, 'in a way exhausts the subject...'.² To settle the point, he added that in November 1905 the Bolshevik newspaper *Novaya Zhizn'*, edited by Lenin himself, dismissed any significant differences between the two men:

This gratuitous assumption is of course sheer nonsense. Comrade Trotsky said that the proletarian revolution can, without halting at the first stage, continue on its road, elbowing the exploiters aside; Lenin, on the other hand, pointed out that the political revolution is only the first step. The publicist of *Nasha Zhizn'* [a liberal newspaper] would like to see a contradiction here... The whole misunderstanding comes, first, from the fear with which the name alone of the social revolution fills *Nasha Zhizn'*; secondly, out of the desire of... [*Nasha Zhizn'*] to discover some sort of sharp and piquant difference of opinion among the Social Democrats; and thirdly, in the figure

¹ Insofar as the dispute involved something more than propaganda and personal vendettas among Lenin's potential successors, the salient issue for Trotsky really concerned economic policy in general, and industrialisation strategy in particular. This argument was first made in 1973 by one of the editors of this volume. See Day 1973.

² L. Trotsky 1969, p. 210.

of speech used by Comrade Trotsky: 'at a single blow.' In No. 10 of *Nachalo*, Comrade Trotsky explains his idea quite unambiguously...³

Lenin obviously believed in November 1905 that his theoretical differences with Trotsky were of little immediate or practical significance. In fact, in 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement', published in another Bolshevik newspaper (*Proletarii*) in mid-September 1905, Lenin also wrote of the need for *uninterrupted revolution*:

from the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for *uninterrupted revolution*. We shall not stop half-way.⁴

In the 1920s, however, Stalinists insisted that there was a fundamental difference between the words 'uninterrupted' and 'permanent'. Bertram Wolfe, a respected historian and author of *Three Who Made A Revolution*, magnified the claim by declaring that Stalinist editors actually forged translations of Lenin's article 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement'. Wolfe wrote that Lenin had actually used the very same words as Trotsky; in other words, Lenin's statement was: 'We stand for *permanent* revolution. We shall not stop half-way.'⁵ Wolfe added that this was 'Much as if some translator of Einstein would try to conceal his relation to Newton by substituting for the technical term "force of gravity" the words "force of heaviness"'.

How is sense to be made of this? The answer is simply that, in Russian, the words 'permanent revolution [*permanentnaya revolyutsiya*]' and 'uninterrupted revolution [*nepreryvnaya revolyutsiya*]' are semantic equivalents and completely interchangeable. The single difference is that *nepreryvnaya* is a more authentically Russian word, the word that native speakers would typically use in everyday speech. The most compelling evidence of this equivalence is the fact that Trotsky himself, as editor of the newspaper *Nachalo*, translated the title of the next article in this volume, by Franz Mehring, in exactly this

³ L. Trotsky, p. 209

⁴ Lenin 1905f, p. ????) .

⁵ Wolfe 1966, p. 336. Wolfe was mistaken in this assertion: in *Proletarii* No 16, on 14 (1) September 1905, Lenin did use the term 'uninterrupted revolution', not 'permanent' revolution as Wolfe claimed.

way. Mehring's original title in German was 'Die Revolution in Permanenz', which *Nachalo* translated as 'Neprieryvnaya revolyutsiya'. Near the end of the article translated here, Trotsky likewise expressed the concept of permanent revolution by using the words 'neprieryvnaya revolyutsiya'. In his foreword to Marx's essay on the Paris Commune, he again spoke of 'a revolution *in Permanenz*, or an *uninterrupted* revolution'.⁶

That this use of words was no quirk on Trotsky's part can further be seen in the fact that Ryazanov, writing at about the same time, declared in 'The Next Questions of our Movement' that 'Our motto must be the revolution *in Permanenz* (uninterrupted revolution) – not "order" in place of revolution, but revolution in place of order.'⁷ Parvus, in another essay published late in 1905, followed the exact same practice, referring to political tactics 'from the point of view of an organisation of the social-revolutionary army of the proletariat that would make the revolution uninterrupted (permanent)'.⁸

There would be no need to clarify this terminology in such detail were it not for the fact that a vast literature has made a shibboleth out of the word 'uninterrupted' as distinct from 'permanent', as if they implied a basic difference of political tactics and prognoses. The salient question did not concern words: it involved the issue of whether the revolution would come to a halt once bourgeois liberals took power (as Plekhanov and his supporters expected), in which case the proletarian party should reconcile itself merely to a supportive role, or whether, instead, to follow the tactics of permanent revolution outlined by Marx in the 1850 'Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League'.⁹ This is the question addressed by Trotsky in 'Social Democracy and Revolution'; and this question alone, as he said in 1929, effectively 'exhausts the subject'.¹⁰

* * *

⁶ [Document number 17 in this volume.]

⁷ [Document number 15 in this volume.]

⁸ Parvus 1905b, p. 18.

⁹ (Marx and Engels 1850.)

¹⁰ L. Trotsky 1969, p. 210.

'Social Democracy and Revolution'

Russian Social Democracy is presently at the centre of society's attention, and with good reason. Liberalism sees in our activities a threat to 'freedom' and 'order'. The reaction sees a threat to its own existence. They are both correct. Yesterday we were merely underground circles. The police, it is true, paid a great deal more attention to us than we would have liked, but the work of the police was aimed essentially at eliminating underground 'conspirators'. The democratic intelligentsia, who did not believe in the proletariat's revolutionary future, fought against us only because they saw a hostile ideology. Today things have changed dramatically. Social Democracy has matured and is leading the proletariat, which stands at the centre of revolutionary events. This means that Social Democracy is the focus of hostile attention from the entire press, whether reactionary, conservative or liberal.

Just yesterday, we were being accused from all sides of applying a European doctrine and European tactics to unique Russian circumstances. Today hundreds of voices are claiming that we are not worthy of our honourable name because our tactics have nothing in common with those of European Social Democracy.

Mr. Struve, who is regarded as an authority on such questions in bourgeois circles because he is a deserter from the Marxist camp, is categorically declaring that Russian Social Democracy is simply 'a blend of anarchism and Jacobinism'.

Citing Mr. Struve, *Novoe Vremya*, which currently sides with him on all the basic political questions, is confidently declaring that Social Democracy, 'in its genuine German form, is not only tolerable, but is possibly the most respectable of all the German parties'. According to this newspaper, even in Russia there is such a group of 'honest and peaceable Social Democrats', but they are being brushed aside by a group of anarchists 'who have dressed themselves up in respectable German clothes'.

Some mysterious 'Marxists', who have hitched a ride on the carriage of *Nasha Zhizn'*, the Cadet newspaper, are joining the general chorus and accusing us of Social-Revolutionary adventurism. This bourgeois newspaper believes that the entire doctrine of 'evolutionary' Marxism stands in opposition to our attempt 'to put an end both to autocracy and to capitalism at a single blow'. In the opinion of *Nasha Zhizn'*, Social Democrats could be playing an enormous role. 'The proletariat has placed its confidence in them and is willing to put

its fate in their hands.' The intelligentsia sympathises with Social-Democratic ideals. The democratic bourgeoisie would follow the intelligentsia. Social Democracy could stand at their head and lead the nation to victory. But that would require a tactic of 'concentrating' all democratic forces, as in the case of German Social Democracy. Instead, Russian Social Democracy is isolating the proletariat and making it stand alone, thereby digging the grave of democracy.

There is nothing surprising for us in the fact that the nationalistic *Novoe Vremya* is indignant over our departure from the 'respectable' German pattern. Feeble-minded reaction has never done more than contrast the 'anarchic' socialists of its own country with the 'patriotic' socialists of other countries. Whenever the government of a bourgeois republic has to resort to repression of anti-militarist agitation by socialists, it invariably justifies itself by referring to the 'patriotic' socialists of Germany, who are devoted to their fatherland.

Although Prince Bülow¹¹ prevents Jaurès¹² from visiting Berlin for the purpose of agitation, he nevertheless considers it his duty as a wise chancellor to compare Bebel and other Social Democrats, who 'take no responsibility for their fatherland', to French socialists of the most 'stately' type such as Jaurès. Why would it surprise us if a reptile who has served the tsarist government for decades by preventing a single word of European Social Democracy from crossing the border, now, in order to destroy our party, compares our Jacobinism to the wisdom and political piety of our European comrades? Why would it surprise us if the entire reactionary press simultaneously sympathises with the penitent psalms of Mr. Gapon, who, with the self-confidence of an ignoramus accuses us of transplanting European theories into the foreign and unique soil of Russia while at the same time applauding the liberal-prosecutorial speeches of Struve concerning our anarchistic renunciation of the European pattern?

It is perfectly understandable that Mr. Struve, having lost all sense of decency in his quest for an honourable official position, openly anticipates the repression of Social Democracy – or that the Petersburg prosecutor only

¹¹ [Prince Bernhard von Bülow (1849–1929) was German imperial chancellor and Prussian prime minister from 1900–1909.]

¹² [Jean Jaurès (1859–1914) was French socialist leader and member of the Chamber of Deputies.]

expresses official thinking when he respectfully cites his future boss in his speech of accusation in the matter of a 'militant organisation'.

For that reason, we will ignore the foul sorties of reaction and concentrate only on the bewilderment expressed by the 'evolutionary' Marxists of *Nasha Zhizn'*.

The final goal of German Social Democracy is seizure of state power by the proletariat. That is our goal. The path taken by our fraternal party in Germany is development of the class consciousness of the working masses and their unification as a single social-revolutionary force. That is our path. As the party of the proletariat, which is fighting for class dictatorship, we neither resemble nor have anything in common with any of the bourgeois parties either on the Right or on their far Left – but at the same time we are of the same flesh and blood as international Social Democracy. Nevertheless, our tactics differ from those of German Social Democracy during a period of reaction. For forty years, the proletarian party in Germany has been developing in an epoch of intensive bourgeois reaction, which is different from a period of revolution. In 1871, the proletarian commune of Paris was crushed; the red flag was torn up by bourgeois vandals; the Prussian helmet, a symbol of blind and conceited militarism, prevailed everywhere; and the Third Republic in France, covered with the blood of the communards and humiliated by Prussia, entered into an alliance with tsarist Russia. The bourgeoisie, with the Great Revolution in its past, undertook to preserve Asiatic absolutism, in which it quite correctly saw an appropriate figure to play the role of gendarme of world reaction. Capitalism achieved its 'peaceful' conquest on the bones of its countless victims; bourgeois democracy no longer worried about its own existence; revolutionary traditions, which prematurely died in 1848, were betrayed and forgotten – and the fumes of capitalist oppression and bourgeois chauvinism hung like dense clouds in the political atmosphere of Europe.

It was in this suffocating and impenetrable atmosphere of reaction that German Social Democracy emerged and developed. Lacking both previous experience of the politically organised class struggle of the proletariat and direct revolutionary traditions, it advanced with amazing persistence and constructed, stone by stone, the superb edifice of party democracy that is now such a source of pride to international socialism.

The Russian proletariat has taken each political step 'outside the law'. In the political school that it has experienced, the fetishism of 'legality' was the last thing to command its devotion.

Indeed, the autocracy stood before the proletariat as the embodiment of a stupid and openly oppressive state, directly convincing the proletariat that codified 'laws' are nothing but fetters that the ruling powers forcibly impose in the interest of their own domination. Revolutionary methods of struggle demonstrated to the proletariat all the advantages of a direct, 'extra-legal' and revolutionary test of strength.

While the Social Democracy of red, proletarian Saxony vainly protested year after year, within the constraints of parliamentary tactics, against the three-class system of elections, the proletariat of 'peasant' Russia, with a single revolutionary blow, threw the fundamental law concerning the State Duma onto the rubbish heap. Thanks to the revolutionary character of the times, the Russian proletariat is quite possibly closer to realising an eight-hour working day than the proletariat of England with all its powerful trade unions.

The workers have mastered the revolutionary method, and they will not voluntarily give it up. Social Democracy has transformed the fundamental demand of the working class into a slogan of the revolution and thereby enriched the revolution with all the class energy of the proletariat.

In these circumstances, what can the tactic of 'concentrating' the democratic forces mean? Either the proletariat must abandon its class demands, or – and this means essentially the same thing – it must repudiate its independent tactics. If democratic 'concentration' is more than simply a turn of phrase, what it means is adapting proletarian tactics to the behaviour of bourgeois democracy. But this would throw us back by half a century.

In the Prussian and Austrian revolutions there was a political 'concentration' in the spirit proposed by democrats from *Nasha Zhizn'*. Defying the logic of class struggle, revolutionary democracy attempted to unite the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In the name of unity, Lassalle called upon the workers to renounce republican demands. But democracy, having attempted to unite the divided nation with a democratic ideology, proved unable either to drag the liberal bourgeoisie forward or to prohibit the class instinct of the proletariat. Amorphous class tensions weakened the tactic of 'concentration'; at the same time, the proletariat's political dependence deprived it of the possibility of using its class strength for independently organising the revolution. The

heroic proletariat of Vienna defeated the monarchy in open battle. But the bourgeoisie had no desire for the republican fruits of this victory or to shoulder the cause of democracy, and the proletariat, on its own, was not sufficiently prepared to pluck the fruits for itself.

The class dismemberment of a bourgeois nation has gone much further in our country than in Prussia and Austria in 1848. Our liberal bourgeoisie turned out to be counter-revolutionary even before the revolution reached its culmination. At every critical moment, our intelligentsia democrats displayed their impotence. The peasantry as a whole represents spontaneous insurrection – but it can be put into service of the revolution only by a force that will take state power into its own hands.

That leaves the proletariat.

The terrible resistance of absolutism is still further strengthening our revolutionary development, which is more systematic than ever before in history. Overcoming the mighty resistance of the autocratic state and the conscious inactivity of the bourgeoisie, the working class of Russia has developed into an organised fighting force without precedent. There is no stage of the bourgeois revolution at which this fighting force, driven forward by the steel logic of class interests, could be appeased. Uninterrupted revolution¹³ is becoming the law of self-preservation for the proletariat.

The vanguard position of the working class in the revolutionary struggle; the direct link it is establishing with the revolutionary countryside; the skill with which it is subordinating the army to itself – all of these factors are inevitably driving it to power. The complete victory of the revolution signifies the victory of the proletariat.

The latter, in turn, means further uninterrupted revolution. The proletariat is accomplishing the basic tasks of democracy, and at some moment the very logic of its struggle to consolidate its political rule places before it purely socialist problems. Revolutionary continuity is being established between the minimum and the maximum programme. It is not a question of a single 'blow', a day, or a month, but of an entire historical epoch. It would be absurd to try to fix its duration in advance.

¹³ [*nepreryvnaya revolyutsiya*].

