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Marxism

# The Chinese Experience and the Theory of Permanent Revolution

- Features -

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**The Chinese revolution is one of the major events of the twentieth century. Taken as a whole, it covers the entire period from the aftermath of the Russian Revolution to the end of the 1960s, when the People's Republic descended into the conflicts of the ill-named “Cultural Revolution”. Revolutionary processes that constitute links between such distant periods in this manner are rare. [1]**

The history of revolutions and counter-revolutions is thus played out to a large extent in the Far East, beyond the Western sphere. China stands out as a case study to validate, invalidate or complicate the theory of permanent revolution and its geographical field of extension.

This case study obviously applies to all theories of revolution, but I will confine myself here to that developed by Leon Trotsky, since the reference text of this dossier is an extract from his Introduction to “The Permanent Revolution” (see below). Let us say from the outset that this theory is validated in its “three aspects”.

## Three characteristics of the Chinese Revolution

1. The primary objectives of the Second Chinese Revolution (1925-1927) were national independence and the reunification of the country, in addition to agrarian reform (all major tasks falling under the so-called democratic stage). It took the form of a vast military offensive initiated, with the help of Moscow, by the progressive figure of Sun Yatsen and supported by urban and rural mass uprisings (the March to the North). As early as 1926, the Chinese bourgeoisie felt that it was better to betray these objectives than to risk a popular revolution, which was drowned in blood in 1927 by General Chiang Kai-shek – note in passing that the latter was not the representative of the collective interests of the Chinese dominant classes: having taken control of the Guomindang (the National Party), after the death of Sun Yatsen (March 1925), he aimed to impose the dictatorship of his clan on the country.

The Chinese Communist Party then became the main organization continuing the national and social struggle until the victory of 1949. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the so-called democratic and socialist stages (in fact the entry into a period of transition in rupture with capitalism) were not separated by a long period of (capitalist) social development supposedly lasting decades in line with the views of the theorists with whom Trotsky polemicalised.

2. Trotsky's description of the second aspect of the theory of revolution seems to be written for China: “For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo transformation. Society keeps on changing its skin. Each stage of transformation stems directly from the preceding. This process necessarily retains a political character, that is, it develops through collisions between various groups in the society which is in transformation. Outbreaks of civil war and foreign wars alternate with periods of ‘peaceful’ reform. Revolutions in economy, technique, science, the family, morals and everyday life develop in complex reciprocal action and do not allow society to achieve equilibrium. Therein lies the permanent character of the socialist revolution as such.”

3. Third aspect: “The maintenance of the proletarian revolution within a national framework can only be a provisional state of affairs, even though, as the experience of the Soviet Union shows, one of long duration. In an isolated proletarian dictatorship, the internal and external contradictions grow inevitably along with the successes achieved. If

it remains isolated, the proletarian state must finally fall victim to these contradictions. The way out for it lies only in the victory of the proletariat of the advanced countries.” This question is indeed a major element of the strategic equation that the People’s Republic has faced.

It should be noted, however, that Trotsky’s text, which emphasizes the limits of the Russian Revolution, was written before the victory of the Chinese Revolution and before the immense international revolutionary wave that followed the Second World War. Today, we must also highlight the enormous contribution of “third world” revolutions in keeping “open” anti-capitalist perspectives, including in the developed countries, until the 1980s (a decade during which my activist generation was decisively defeated internationally). What would the world be like if the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Vietnamese revolutions... hadn’t happened? Without, therefore, the French May 68 or its Italian counterpart? Without the global Marxist renaissance that they fostered?

The permanent revolution of which Trotsky speaks here is clearly a process, “democracy” was “a direct prelude to the socialist revolution. Each is bound to the other by an unbroken chain. Thus there is established between the democratic revolution and the socialist reconstruction of society a permanent state of revolutionary development.”

## From purity to complexity of real history

What is written above is “true”, the concept of the permanent revolution is validated by the Chinese experience, but real history poses many other problems. A theory is only one of the many factors that make it possible to define a concrete strategy (which also depends on the period, the balance of power, the articulation of social forces, the forms of struggle inherited from previous periods and so on). It is even more mute when it comes to tactics.

In the early 1920s, the Guomindang was disorganized. Sun Yat-sen asked Moscow (which responded favourably) to help him strengthen his organization and provide him with financial support, training and military aid. The Whampoa Military Academy (Huangpu) was established in 1924. Among his cadres were Zhou Enlai, a Communist leader, and Chiang Kai-shek, who three years later would be the butcher of Shanghai. Envoys from the Communist International (CI) went there and their advice became orders for the CCP. When it was founded in 1921, the young Chinese Communist Party had only 57 members. Its leading figures were Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu. Some envoys were close to Stalin, others opposed him when the “Chinese question” divided the Russian leadership. The Dutchman Henk Sneevliet (Maring), a future oppositionist, proposed, against the advice of Chen Duxiu and faced with the reluctance of CCP members, that the party (420 members in 1923) enter the Guomindang (50,000 members) – it was inspired by a previous (successful) experience in Indonesia and received support from Adolf Joffé (a friend of Trotsky). Although controversial, this tactic of the “united front from within” or “bloc from within” initially favored the rapid development of the party, but the situation changed abruptly.

After the death of Sun Yatsen, General Chiang Kai-shek announced a series of anti-Communist measures in 1926. It was clear that the CCP must immediately regain its independence. Chen Duxiu alerted the leadership of the CI to demand this, receiving the support of Trotsky who was placed in a minority. The fate of the CCP depended on the internal logic of factional struggles in Moscow. The Stalinists were strengthening themselves in the apparatus. The exit was refused. In 1927, the anticipated disaster came, with the massacre of the workers’ movement in Shanghai (April) and Changsha (May), repression in Wuhan in the center of the country (June) and the crushing of the Canton Commune (December). The Communist movement was being hunted down everywhere with urban networks dismantled. The Chinese people were the first to pay such a bloody price for the Stalinization of the Soviet state and the CI. Another lesson.

There was nothing inevitable about this defeat. It is not clear that the revolution could have prevailed throughout

China – we can even doubt it. However, with a different policy, it would have been possible to create important bases in the south of the country, including urban centres. This situation of dual territorial power could have been maintained until the Japanese invasion of 1937, which would have changed many things.

How did this process come into being in China after the defeat of 1927?

## Prolonged Revolutionary War

The survival of the Communist movement was at stake – and to survive, armed forces were needed. They existed, in the form of divisions of the National Army led by CCP cadres and guerrillas from peasant uprisings. They formed the Red Army, largely grouped in mountain ranges in southern China. Despite the defeat, they numbered a few hundred thousand soldiers. In 1935, they had to flee their southern strongholds to retreat to the northern reaches of the country, in Yanan. The Long March was a long retreat during which a new leadership took over the CCP, around Mao Zedong. It included some weighty political and military leaders, as well as historical cadres from urban or rural work. Representatives of the Stalinist faction (including Wang Ming) were marginalized, but not eliminated.

These years saw direct class conflict between the Red Army and Chiang Kai-shek's forces. The situation changed with the Japanese invasion of 1937. China was a semi-colony, Balkanized by competing imperialisms and warlords. It was becoming a direct colony of Japan. The two protagonists of the civil war, the Guomindang of Chiang Kai-shek and the Maoist Red Army could not ignore the urgent appeals from the people to stand together in the face of the invader. The question of the united front arose again, albeit in a context radically different from the 1920s.

From now on, the class struggle would continue within the framework of the Anti-Japanese United Front, with two different ways of waging war. Chiang Kai-shek slowed down the Japanese offensive, but gradually retreated to the south: his priority was to preserve his military forces so that he could go on the offensive against the CCP as soon as Tokyo had been defeated by Washington in the Pacific theatre of operations. The CCP, on the other hand, decided to abandon Yanan, the red capital, to concentrate forces in the Japanese rear in the north (while maintaining significant guerrilla bases elsewhere). It thus gained immense political prestige (facing the enemy, instead of retreating) and established itself socially without risking being attacked by the Guomindang. It established liberated areas with 100 million inhabitants.

The theory of prolonged revolutionary war (people's war) constitutes a significant contribution to revolutionary military theory, combining military know-how (articulating guerrilla operations and movement of divisions), rules of conduct in relations with the population, realization of agrarian reforms, mobilization of women, literacy, health systems and so on.

## The People's Republic of China

As soon as the People's Republic was proclaimed on 1 October 1949, two emblematic laws were adopted, on agrarian reform and marriage reform. Both laws benefited women of the popular classes (peasant women were involved in the agrarian reform, not just men).

The CCP was now at the heart of power. This party had been immersed in the rural world for more than 20 years, and "should have" become a "peasant party", unable, according to Trotsky, to offer direction to the democratic revolution. Following the victory, however, it refocused in the cities. Having lost its working-class presence, it

reattached itself to it.

The status of the working class said a lot about the specificities of the process of revolution and counter-revolution in the People's Republic. It was both politically subordinate and socially privileged. Workers were assigned to production units and were under the supervision of the party. However, they enjoyed undeniable advantages: guarantee of employment for life, acceptable work rhythms, official housing, access to health services and education for children (who would be hired in turn).

When the post-Maoist government tried to impose intensive production standards, social resistance was such that the regime finally decided to withdraw the bulk of the working class from production en bloc (while continuing to pay it) to replace it with new salaried workers resulting from the illegal rural exodus (it was not possible to freely change places of residence in China), made up of internal undocumented migrants, the large majority of them women. A salariat suitable to the primitive accumulation of capital.

In the aftermath of the conquest of power, China became a complex transitional society whose future was by no means guaranteed. The Communist Party had deep roots in society and undeniable prestige. The former dominant classes, urban and rural, had disintegrated, and the CCP secured a monopoly on power. The party-state then became the framework within which a new bureaucracy became the dominant layer of society. This type of bureaucracy was the product of an historic process. During this process, from crisis to crisis, Maoism broke with its social bases: students and intelligentsia (Hundred Flowers), peasantry (Great Leap Forward) and finally the proletariat. At the same time, the crisis of leadership deepened until Mao's team was shattered in bloody torments. All the tensions and social contradictions accumulated over the years exploded during the Cultural Revolution.

Before its agonized crisis, however, the Chinese revolution ensured the country's independence and unity, its industrialization and the development of its own technology (it was, for example, at the forefront of semiconductor manufacturing before the obscurantist rule of the Gang of Four brought education and research to a halt). The bureaucratic counter-revolution that ended during the Cultural Revolution created the preconditions for a bourgeois counter-revolution, giving rise to a new bourgeoisie. The latter was able to embark on the conquest of the world, because China is no longer a country subject to imperialist domination.

PS.

*This article does not do justice to the wealth of experience of the Chinese revolution or its originality. A catch-all formula such as "agrarian reform", for example, covers very different realities in different countries and regions. Rural structures in China are different from in Europe and they are not identical in southern china and northern china. Neither the general theory of permanent revolution nor the general orientation of the CCP can account for this. We have never finished learning from a revolution as long as we focus on its complexity.*

**For more information:**

Pierre Rousset ["XXth Century Chinese revolutions – I – Chinese Communist Revolution, 1925–1949"](#).

Pierre Rousset ["XXth Century Chinese revolutions – II – China, Maoism and popular power, 1949–1969"](#).

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**Leon Trotsky**

# The Permanent Revolution

### *Introduction to the First (Russian) Edition*

Vulgar 'Marxism' has worked out a pattern of historical development according to which every bourgeois society sooner or later secures a democratic regime, after which the proletariat, under conditions of democracy, is gradually organized and educated for socialism. The actual transition to socialism has been variously conceived: the avowed reformists pictured this transition as the reformist filling of democracy with a socialist content (Jaurès); the formal revolutionists acknowledged the inevitability of applying revolutionary violence in the transition to socialism (Guesde). But both the former and the latter considered democracy and socialism, for all peoples and countries, as two stages in the development of society which are not only entirely distinct but also separated by great distances of time from each other. This view was predominant also among those Russian Marxists who, in the period of 1905, belonged to the Left Wing of the Second International. Plekhanov, the brilliant progenitor of Russian Marxism, considered the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat a delusion in contemporary Russia. The same standpoint was defended not only by the Mensheviks but also by the overwhelming majority of the leading Bolsheviks, in particular by those present party leaders, without exception, who in their day were resolute revolutionary democrats but for whom the problems of the socialist revolution, not only in 1905 but also on the eve of 1917, still signified the vague music of a distant future.

The theory of the permanent revolution, which originated in 1905, declared war upon these ideas and moods. It pointed out that the democratic tasks of the backward bourgeois nations lead directly, in our epoch, to the dictatorship of the proletariat and that the dictatorship of the proletariat puts socialist tasks on the order of the day. Therein lay the central idea of the theory. While the traditional view was that the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat led through a long period of democracy, the theory of the permanent revolution established the fact that for backward countries the road to democracy passed through the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus democracy is not a regime that remains self-sufficient for decades, but is only a direct prelude to the socialist revolution. Each is bound to the other by an unbroken chain. Thus there is established between the democratic revolution and the socialist reconstruction of society a permanent state of revolutionary development.

The second aspect of the 'permanent' theory has to do with the socialist revolution as such. For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo transformation. Society keeps on changing its skin. Each stage of transformation stems directly from the preceding. This process necessarily retains a political character, that is, it develops through collisions between various groups in the society which is in transformation. Outbreaks of civil war and foreign wars alternate with periods of 'peaceful' reform. Revolutions in economy, technique, science, the family, morals and everyday life develop in complex reciprocal action and do not allow society to achieve equilibrium. Therein lies the permanent character of the socialist revolution as such.

The international character of the socialist revolution, which constitutes the third aspect of the theory of the permanent revolution, flows from the present state of economy and the social structure of humanity. Internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and political reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of productive forces and the world scale of the class struggle. The socialist revolution begins on national foundations – but it cannot be completed within these foundations. The maintenance of the proletarian revolution within a national framework can only be a provisional state of affairs, even though, as the experience of the Soviet Union shows, one of long duration. In an isolated proletarian dictatorship, the internal and external contradictions grow inevitably along with the successes achieved. If it remains isolated, the proletarian state must finally fall victim to these contradictions. The way out for it lies only in the victory of the proletariat of the advanced countries. Viewed from this standpoint, a national revolution is not a self-contained whole; it is only a link in the international chain. The international revolution constitutes a permanent process, despite temporary declines and ebbs.

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[1] It is also the case, even more so, for Vietnam, from the 1920s to the late 1970s.