

# TWO APPROACHES TO SOCIALIST REVOLUTION: MARX *VERSUS* LENIN-TROTSKY. RUSSIA 1917

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25 FEBRERO 2003

1. A socialist revolution, as a social revolution, is according to Marx, the “dissolution of the old society” (1976: 409) or “a change in (society's) economic foundation,” “constituted by the totality of the (social) relations of production” (1980: 100-109). It is not the so-called ‘seizure of power’ by the oppressed, least of all by a group (party) in the latter's name. Secondly, the dissolution of the old social relations of production cannot be a momentary event (epitomized, for example, in the often-used phrase ‘victory of the October socialist revolution’), it is secular, *epochal*. In this sense Marx speaks of the “beginning” of the “epoch of social revolution” (1980: 101). A socialist revolution issues in a society of free and associated producers or a “union of free individuals” (Marx 1962a: 92), that is, socialism. This latter is a product of history, not of nature or individuals' arbitrary will. Individuals cannot bring their own social relations under their proper control before having created them (Marx 1953: 79). Speaking of the socialist revolution, Marx writes in his Bakunin critique: “A radical social revolution is bound up with certain historical conditions of economic development. The latter are its pre-conditions. It is therefore only possible where, with capitalist development, the industrial proletariat occupies at least a significant position.” Then he adds “Bakunin understands absolutely nothing of the social revolution, excepting its political phrases. For him, its *economic conditions* do not exist” (Marx 1973c: 633; our emphasis). Indeed, “new higher relations of production do not appear before its material conditions of existence have (already) been hatched within the womb of the old society itself” (Marx 1980: 101). These “historical conditions” of socialist revolution —and correspondingly, of building a society of free and associated individuals— are not only the proletariat, “the greatest productive power,” occupying a “significant position” in society, but also the universal development of productive forces along with socialization of labour and production. And it is only capital which creates them. Indeed, socialism “comes out of the womb of the capitalist society.” (Marx 1953: 635-36; 1962a: 790-91; 1962b: 321; 1965: 135; 1966: 178). Given these conditions, socialist revolution begins when capital has reached a situation where the productive powers it has generated —including its “greater productive power”— can no longer advance on the basis of the existing relations of production. Socialist revolution itself is seen as an immense emancipatory project —based on workers' self-emancipation leading to the emancipation of the whole humanity— whose very “first step” is the “conquest of democracy,” as the *Communist Manifesto*, affirms, the rule of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority.

2. Corresponding exactly to this emancipatory perspective is Marx's idea of the role of the working class in the socialist revolution. He already wrote in the 1840s that the “proletariat can and must liberate itself (1972a: 38) and that “the consciousness of a profound revolution, the communist consciousness, arises from this class (itself)” (1973a: 69). Again in the “Provisional Rules” of the International (1864) he famously affirmed: “The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves” (General Council 1964: 288). Marx put the matter succinctly in a letter (February 2, 1865) to Schweitzer: “The working class is either revolutionary or it is nothing” (1973b: 446). Years later, in the Preface to the fourth German edition of

the *Manifesto*, Engels neatly summed up Marx's ideas: "For the final victory of the ideas laid down in the *Manifesto* Marx counted *only and singularly (einzig und allein) on the intellectual development of the working class* as it necessarily had to come out of the united action and discussion (1972: 57; our emphasis).

3. Against Marx's profound materialist perspective Lenin (and Trotsky) advanced the thesis that socialist revolution could (would) break out where the chain of world capitalism—subject to the law of uneven (and combined) development—has its weakest link, that is, its productive powers are least developed.

4. In January 1918, Lenin asserted, against the earlier prognostication by Marx and Engels, that with "a different combination of the forces of socialism prevailing now" it was "easier to start the (socialist) movement" in a backward country unsullied by the vices of imperialism. "Things have worked differently than what Marx and Engels had expected." Two months earlier he had, denounced any talk of the "impossibility of a socialist revolution in Russia "as "profoundly un-Marxist." (In line with many other of his utterances no demonstration was needed here). Trotsky, in his turn, trying to preserve his own Marxist credentials, affirmed that the Russian revolution conformed to Marx's position. Referring to Marx's statement that no social formation disappears without having exhausted all its potential, he wrote that the imperialist war had shown that the "capitalist system had exhausted itself on a world scale" and that "the revolution in Russia was a breaking of the weakest link in the system of world wide capitalism" (1987, vol. 3: 176).

5. As regards the role of capitalism's "grave diggers" in the socialist revolution, the Leninist (Trotskyist) approach is again, very different from, if not the exact opposite of that of Marx (and Engels). With the LT approach, the workers' emancipation through socialist revolution is not so much the result of the "self-activity" (*Selbsbetätigung*) of the workers themselves (given the appropriate material conditions) as the outcome of the seizure of (state) power by a party (called 'communist') of whole time devoted revolutionaries claiming to be the leaders, the "advanced section" (*peredovoi otryad*), of the working class (supposed to be incapable of developing revolutionary consciousness *on its own*), acting in its name, and relying on the *support* of the mass of workers. As Lenin affirms in 1904: "We are the party of the class, therefore *almost the whole class* (during war, in the epoch of the civil war, the whole class) must (*dolzhen*) act under the leadership of our party" (the emphasized English expression is so in the text). This was Lenin's consistent stand—a couple statements to the contrary, made for the occasion, notwithstanding—throughout. Indeed, Lenin saw the party "as the repository of revolutionary theory and revolutionary consciousness leading and guiding" the workers (Carr 1964: 19). This is clearly seen in Lenin's *practice* during the period from April to October, 1917. During this period, while loudly proclaiming publicly "all power to the soviets" (except for a while in summer) Lenin in his private communication with the party leaders showed utter distrust if not disdain for the soviet power—this vehicle of "formal" democracy—and persevered in his attempt to persuade the leadership that the party must "alone" (*v svoi ruki*), ignoring the soviets, seize power. Ultimately, Lenin, by the threat of resignation from the leadership, succeeded in rallying the majority in the central committee for an immediate seizure of power, independently of and in fact behind the back of the workers' already established organs of self-rule. Always identifying working class power with the Bolshevik power, Lenin asserted, six months after October, 1912: "We, the party of the Bolsheviks . . . conquered (*otvoevali*) Russia from the rich for the poor . . . we must now govern Russia." A few months later he added: "We have not till now reached the stage where the labouring masses could participate in government." (A *socialist revolution* indeed!). Trotsky, who in his youth (1904) had, in the name of the "self activity of the proletariat," denounced Lenin's "political substitutionism" of the party for the proletariat, completely reversed his position after his conversion to Leninism *circa* 1917. I Deutscher, referring to Trotsky's 1904 Lenin-critique, wrote: "Trotsky could have no inkling that one day he himself would go much farther than Lenin in preaching and glorifying that substitutionism" (1963: 96). This is seen in Trotsky's position in the early

1920s. For example, in 1920 he wrote that “revolutionary domination of the proletariat presupposes the same domination of the party in the proletariat” and that “in the substitution of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is in fact no substitution.” Writing in 1930 in his famous *History* he affirmed: “The Bolsheviks saw it their mission to stand at the head of the people . . . the Bolsheviks were the people.”

6. Lenin's ‘weakest link’ argument became a canon of the dominant Left as well as of those sympathetic to the Bolshevik régime. Just to give a few outstanding examples, Antonio Gramsci observed, shortly after the Bolshevik victory, that as opposed to *Capital's* “demonstration of the fatal necessity of the formation of a bourgeoisie and the inauguration of a capitalist era” before the proletariat could have its own revolution, “facts have left behind the ideologies, the canons of historical materialism” (1973: 130). I. Deutscher wrote: “It was the Russian Marxists, and not Marx and Engels whom (the events in Russia) proved to be right” (1980: 184). Later E.H. Carr wrote: “Marxist scheme of revolution was bound to break down when the proletarian revolution occurred in the most backward capitalist country,” which thus showed “an error of prognostication in the original Marxist scheme” (1964: 43-44). Much later P.M. Sweezy expressed the same idea: “The revolutions that put socialism on history's agenda took place not in economically developed countries, as Marx and Engels thought they would, but in countries where capitalism was still in early stages” (1993: 6).

7. However, these individuals, under the spell of the spectacular political event of the time and carried away by the *ideological* discourses of its principal actors and ignoring the real “contradictions of material life” (Marx 1859) and thereby “*sharing the illusion of the epoch*” —in Marx's penetrating phrase (1973a: 39; emphasis in original)— dismissed Marx's materialism too rapidly. As Lenin quickly realized, given Russia's backwardness, there was no other way to go forward, but to “catch up and surpass” the advanced capitalist countries —which implied a rapid growth of the productive forces and an advanced working class, and this necessitated precisely the development of capitalism in a largely pre-capitalist country where the inauguration of socialism was an impossible project.<sup>1</sup> In more than one text of the period Lenin affirmed the *desirability* of the development of capitalism in Russia at least “to some extent and for some time,” of course, under the ‘proletarian’ state. The reality of the period 1917-1928 vindicated Lenin's position. A government decree of September 10, 1921, described the *wages system* as a “fundamental factor of industrial development, wages and employment being considered as a matter of relation based on freely consented contract between the workers and the concerned enterprise.” “In less than a year NEP had reproduced the characteristic essentials of a capitalist economy” (Carr 1963: 320, 321, 323). The data also support this. Thus while the share of independent commodity producers —in handicrafts and agriculture— in the total population (including non working dependents) remained constant at 75 per cent level between 1924 and 1928, the share of ‘workers and employees’ —that is, wage and salary earners— rose from 15 percent to 18 percent between the two dates (*Narkhoz* 1987: 11). As a particular indicator of the early phase of capitalist development we could note

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<sup>1</sup>The ‘Preface’ to the Russian edition (1882) of the *Manifesto* did posit the possibility of Russia — with still more than half of its land under communal ownership - to go over to communism skipping the capitalist stage, provided a “revolution” took place in the country complemented by a “proletarian revolution” in the West. Now, the “revolution” in Russia hoped for by Marx and Engels was clearly *not* a proletarian revolution, but a revolution by the Russian people (basically the peasantry) against the Tsarist state, principally to prevent the process of “decomposition” already appearing in the communal system (as noted by Marx in his correspondence with Kovalevsky and Zassulitch in 1877 and 1881). However, the Russia of 1917 was not exactly the Russia of 1882. By the First, World War capitalism, though in its initial stage and far from dominating the country, had made non-negligible inroads in society. In fact in his correspondence with the Russians (written in French) Marx affirmed (1877, 1881) with astonishing clairvoyance that, given the gradual decomposition of Russia's rural communes — following the tsarist legislation of 1861 (on the ‘emancipation’ of serfs) — Russia would be compelled to traverse “all the vicissitudes of the capitalist regime” before its social transformation.

that in metallurgy and coal mining the share of workers originating from the *peasant* families increased from an average of 43.4 percent for 1918-1925 to 53.5 percent in 1926-1927. Taking the industrial production as a whole, its index rose from 39.5 in 1922-23 to 119.6 in 1927-28 (1913: 100) The number of industrial workers doubled, increasing from 1.4 million to 2.8 million during the same period (Prokopovich 1952: 279, 283). The total value of output of large scale industry, at 1926-27 prices, grew from 1.9 milliard in 1921 to 15.7 milliard in 1928 (Baykov 1970; 121; *Narkoz 1922-82*: 152). The development of the industrial economy was of course based on wage labour. Quite appropriately accompanying the whole process was the methodical liquidation of the factory committees as centers of workers' self-administration as well as the "transformation of the soviets from the organs of proletarian self-rule and vehicles of radical democracy into organs allowing the party elite to read the masses" (Anweiler 1998: 303). In April, 1918, Lenin discovered that the "Russian is a bad worker in comparison with the workers of the advanced nations." Therefore, instead of collectively administering the affairs of the work place, through their own elected organs —a practice which earlier the Bolsheviks were the foremost to champion but now denounced as "petty bourgeois spontaneity"— the masses must, show the "unquestioning obedience to the single will of the leaders of the labour process" and must accept "unquestioning subordination during working time to the one-person decision of the soviet directors, of the soviet dictators, elected or nominated by soviet institutions (and) provided with dictatorial powers (*diktatorskimi polnomochiyani*)." Two years later, at the 9th party congress, Lenin denounced the still "surviving notorious democratism" and characterized the "outcry against appointees" as pernicious trash (*vrednyi khlam*)."

8. The beginning 'moment' of the Russian Revolution in February 1917, initiated and dominated entirely by Russia's toilers without any party guidance, had all the basic features of the great popular revolutions of the past such as those of 1789-93 and 1871 in France. Targeting mainly the pre-capitalist social order, this revolution started out as an immense democratic mass movement in an open-ended, plural revolutionary process which the different political parties increasingly tried to bring under control advancing their own agenda as the agenda of the toilers. As Trotsky writes in his monumental history: "The February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organizations, the initiative being taken on their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat, . . . nobody summoned the masses from above to insurrection" (1987, vol. 1: 102).

9. Contentwise a bourgeois democratic revolution in process, the February upsurge, given its spontaneous mass character marked by open-ended plurality, had, it appears, the potential to go over, at a later date — given appropriate material conditions— to an authentic socialist revolution (in Marx's sense) if the involved toiling masses had been allowed unfettered freedom —through their (own) self-administering organs— to continue their march forward. The Bolshevik seizure of power, putting a brake on the process, destroyed the democratic part of the revolution —derogatively called "notorious democratism" (Lenin)— and accelerated the bourgeois part, the pace of which would of course be dwarfed under Lenin's successor with an unprecedented accumulation drive under the slogan —textually taken over from Lenin (September 1917)— of "catching up and surpassing" (*dognat'i peregnat'*) the advanced capitalist countries (*Resheniya I* 1967: 539).

10. Following the capitalist path by the new regime<sup>2</sup> —the proclamation of having inaugurated a 'socialist revolution' notwithstanding— only demonstrated that a "society's natural development phases can neither be

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<sup>2</sup>Outside of Russia, within the Leninist tendency, A. Bordiga seems to have been about the only one — at least among the front rankers — who understood this. In the period immediately following the Bolshevik victory, Bordiga wrote: "The stateization of factories, enterprises, banks and agricultural farms are already revolutionary measures, but of the *capitalist* revolution" (1980: 144;

jumped over nor legislated away” (Marx 1962a: 16). In fact the so (mis)called `socialist revolutions in the twentieth century have only confirmed Marx's profound materialist position: “Individuals build a new world from the historical conquests of their foundering world. They must first, in course of their development, produce the material conditions of a new society, and no effort of mind or will can free them from this destiny” (1972b: 339). Indeed, history, this “greatest of all Marxists,” as Hilfeding used to say, has shown that “if in the society as it is we do not find in a latent (*verhüllt*) form the material conditions of production and corresponding relations of circulation for a classless society, all attempts at exploding it would be don Quixotism” (Marx 1953: 77). And Marx had the last laugh.

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