
Lecture four: Marxism, history and the science of perspective

By David North

Is a science of history possible?

There is no element of Marxism that has aroused so much opposition as its claim to have placed socialism on a scientific foundation. In one form or another, its critics find this assertion unacceptable, implausible and even impossible. Proceeding from the obvious fact that the laws of socio-economic development which Marxism claims to have uncovered lack the precision and specificity of the laws uncovered by physicists, chemists and mathematicians, the critics assert that Marxism cannot be considered a science.

If this criticism is valid, it means that no scientific theory of history and social development is possible—simply because by its very nature human society cannot be reduced to and encompassed by mathematical formulae.

But whether Marxism is a science depends, to a great extent, upon 1) whether the laws which it claims to have discovered reveal the real objective mechanisms of socio-economic development; 2) whether the discovery of those laws can adequately explain the preceding historical evolution of mankind; and 3) whether the understanding of these laws makes possible significant predictions about the future development of human society.

Among the fiercest critics of the possibility of a science of society which can make meaningful predictions about the future was the Austro-English philosopher Karl Popper. He rejected what he called “historicism,” by which he meant “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.” Popper wrote that he was “convinced that such historicist doctrines of method are at bottom responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the theoretical social sciences...”[1]

Popper claimed to have demonstrated that historical prediction is impossible, a conclusion that he based on the following interrelated axioms:

“The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.

“We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.

“We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.

“This means that we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.

“The fundamental aim of historicist methods is therefore

misconceived, and historicism collapses.”[2]

Popper’s criticism is thoroughly idealist: the basis of historical development, he argues, is thought and knowledge; and since we cannot know today what we will know in either a week, a month, a year or even longer, historical prediction is impossible.

Popper’s idealist conception of history fails to consider the question of the historical origins of thought and knowledge. Popper’s attempt to invoke the limits of knowledge as an absolute barrier to scientific history fails to the extent that it can be shown that the growth of human knowledge is itself a product of historical development and subject to its laws. The foundation of human history is to be found not in the growth of knowledge, but in the development of *labor*—the essential and primary ontological category of social being. I mean this in the sense indicated by Engels—that the emergence of the human species, the growth of the human brain, and the development of specifically human forms of consciousness are the outcome of the evolution of labor.

The establishment of the ontological primacy of labor served in the work of Marx as the foundation of the materialist conception of history, which provides an explanation of the process of social transformation that is not dependent upon—although, of course, never completely independent of—consciousness. Its identification of the interaction of the relations of production—into which men enter independently of their consciousness—and the material forces of production can be shown to retain validity over a significant expanse of historical time during which, one can safely assume, man’s knowledge grew.

What provides the essential impulse for historical change is not the scale or level of knowledge in itself, but the dialectical interaction of the productive forces and social relations of production, which constitute in their unity and conflict the economic foundations of society.

Returning to Popper, it is not clear what he means when he says that historical prediction is impossible because we do not know what we will know tomorrow. One interpretation of this axiom is that the acquisition of some new form or type of knowledge might so radically alter the human condition as to move mankind upon some new and previously unimagined trajectory of social development, throwing all predictions out the window.

But what could this be? Let us imagine something truly spectacular: the sudden discovery of a technology that increases overnight the productivity of mankind by a factor of 1,000. However, even in such an extraordinary case, the theoretical framework of Marxism would not be obliterated. The hitherto unimaginable growth in the power of the productive forces would in some massive way impact upon the existing property relations. Moreover, as always under capitalism, the uses and impact of the advances in knowledge and technique would be conditioned by

the needs and interests of the capitalist market.

Let us consider another possible meaning of Popper's axiom: that new knowledge will invalidate historical materialism as a theory of man's socio-economic development. If we admit the possibility that the subsequent growth of knowledge will demonstrate the inadequacy of historical materialism, that would imply that it had been superseded by a theory which made possible a more profound insight into the nature of historical development. If this new theory were to demonstrate that Marx's emphasis on the socio-economic foundations of society was inadequate or incorrect, it would do so by bringing into light another, previously undetected impulse of historical development.

In other words, the expansion of knowledge would not make historical prediction impossible. Rather, it should make predictions of an even more profound, exhaustive and precise character possible. The growth of knowledge—which Popper makes the touchstone of his case against Marx—is far more easily turned against Popper himself.

In the course of his argument, Popper is compelled to acknowledge that "historicism," i.e., Marxism, does establish that there are "trends or tendencies" in social change whose "existence can hardly be questioned..." But, he insists, "*trends are not laws.*" A law is timeless, universally valid for all times and conditions. A trend or tendency, on the other hand, though it may have persisted "for hundreds or thousands of years may change within a decade, or even more rapidly than that... It is important to point out that *laws and trends are radically different things.*"[3]

On the basis of this argument, it would be possible for Popper to argue that the unity and conflict between the productive forces and social relations, though it has persisted over several thousand years of human history, is merely a trend. The same could be said of the class struggle as a whole. Though it may well be true that the class struggle has played a key role in history for five thousand years, that may not be true in the future and so the class struggle is merely a tendency.

The positing of an absolute distinction between law and trend is an exercise in logical metaphysics, which violates the nature of a complex social reality. The vast heterogeneity of social phenomena, in which millions of individuals consciously pursue what they perceive, correctly or incorrectly, to be in their own interests, produces a situation in which laws "can only fulfill themselves in the real world as tendencies, and necessities only in the tangle of opposing forces, only in a mediation that takes place by way of endless accidents." [4]

The ultimate basis of Popper's rejection of Marxism (which, with all sorts of minor variations, is widely shared) is the conception that there are simply too many factors, too many interactions, too many unanticipated variables in human behavior. How can a deterministic view of human society be reconciled with the undeniable social fact that crazy things, coming in from way out of left field, do happen? There are just too many Texas Book Depositories and Dealey Plazas out there to allow us to make predictions with the degree of accuracy demanded by real science. That is why, to use the late Sir Popper's words, "the social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo." [5]

Putting aside for another day the complex problems of the relation between accident and necessity, it must be said that

history shares with many other sciences the impossibility of making *absolute* predictions about future events. Meteorology is a science, but its practitioners cannot guarantee the accuracy of their forecasts for tomorrow, let alone next week. While it is likely that forecasting capabilities will continue to improve, it is unlikely that absolute predictability will be achieved. Nevertheless, even if meteorologists cannot predict whether the barbecue we plan to hold in our garden next week will occur under cloudless skies as planned, their ability to analyze *weather patterns* and anticipate *climatic trends* plays a critical and indispensable role in innumerable aspects of socio-economic life. Predictability encounters limits as well in the sciences of biology, astronomy and geology. As explained by Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg:

"Even a very simple system can exhibit a phenomenon known as *chaos* that defeats our efforts to predict the system's future. A chaotic system is one in which nearly identical initial conditions can lead after a while to entirely different outcomes. The possibility of chaos in simple systems has actually been known since the beginning of the century; the mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré showed then that chaos can develop even in a system as simple as a solar system with only two planets. The dark gaps in the rings of Saturn have been understood for many years to occur at just those positions in the ring from which any orbiting particles would be ejected by their chaotic motion. What is new and exciting about the study of chaos is not the discovery that chaos exists but that certain kinds of chaos exhibit some nearly universal properties that can be analyzed mathematically.

"The existence of chaos does not mean that the behavior of a system like Saturn's rings is somehow not completely determined by the laws of motion and gravitation and its initial conditions, but only that as a practical matter we can not calculate how some things (such as particle orbits in the dark gaps in Saturn's rings) evolve. To put this a little more precisely: the presence of chaos in a system means that for any given accuracy with which we specify the initial conditions, there will eventually come a time at which we lose all ability to predict how the system will behave... In other words, the discovery of chaos did not abolish the determinism of pre-quantum physics, but it did force us to be a bit more careful in saying what we mean by this determinism. Quantum mechanics is not deterministic in the same sense as Newtonian mechanics; Heisenberg's uncertainty principle warns us that we cannot measure the position and velocity of a particle precisely at the same time, and, even if we make all the measurements that are possible at one time, we can predict only probabilities about the results of experiments at any later time. Nevertheless, we shall see that even in quantum physics there is still a sense in which the behavior of any physical system is completely determined by the initial conditions and the laws of nature." [6]

The scientific character of Marxism does not depend on its ability to predict tomorrow's headlines on the front page of the *New York Times*. Those who seek that type of prediction should consult an astrologer. Rather, Marxism, as a method of analysis and materialist world outlook, has uncovered laws that govern socio-economic and political processes. Knowledge of these laws discloses trends and tendencies upon which substantial historical

“predictions” can be based, and which allow the possibility of intervening consciously in a manner that may produce an outcome favorable to the working class.

Popper’s assault on the legitimacy of Marxism, and his rejection of the possibility of historical prediction, in this sense fails the most crucial test of all: that of concrete historical experience. The development of historical materialism marked a massive leap in the understanding of human society, an advance in scientific social theory that imparted to man’s social practice, first and foremost in the sphere of politics, an unprecedented level of historical self-consciousness. To a degree previously unattainable, the disclosure of the laws of socio-economic development allowed man to locate his own practice in an objective process of historical causality. Prophecy was replaced by the science of political perspective.

From the French Revolution to the *Communist Manifesto*

The events of 1789-1794 certainly provided an impulse for the development of a science of history. A Revolution which had begun under the banner of Reason developed in a manner that no one had planned or foreseen. The struggle of political factions, which assumed an increasingly bloody and fratricidal character, culminating in the Reign of Terror, seemed to unfold with a logic whose momentum was as mad as it was unstoppable. Moreover, the outcome of all the terrible struggles of the revolutionary era did not at all realize the ideals which had been proclaimed by the Revolution and for whose realization so much blood had been shed. Out of the struggle for “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” new forms of oppression had emerged.

In the decades that followed the Revolution, a number of French historians and social thinkers—principally St. Simon, Thierry, Mignet and Guizot—recognized that the cataclysmic events of the 1790s arose on the basis of a struggle between conflicting social forces. St. Simon wrote specifically of the conflict between propertied and non-propertied classes. In 1820, Guizot defined the struggle of the 1790s in the following terms: “for over thirteen centuries France contained two peoples: conquerors and vanquished. For over thirteen centuries, the vanquished people fought to throw off the yoke of their conquerors. Our history is one of that struggle. In our times, a decisive battle has taken place. The battle is called revolution.”[7]

Guizot wrote as an unabashed defender of the “people,” i.e., the Third Estate, against the aristocracy. But even as Guizot wrote, changes in the social structure of France, the development of capitalist industry, were revealing that the “people” were torn by inner social divisions. While industry developed at a far slower pace in France than in England, strikes had become sufficiently common in the former to be subjected by the Code Napoleon to harsh legal sanctions.

The smashing of machinery, the so-called Luddite movement in which the struggles of the working class first were manifested, appeared initially in England in the 1770s. The Luddite movement became sufficiently threatening to require the use of troops against rioters in 1811-1812, and the British Parliament decreed

the death penalty for machine-breaking in 1812. The first major recorded incidents of French Luddism began in 1817, and serious incidents continued for several decades. Similar developments occurred in other European countries and even in the United States.

More developed forms of working class struggle, such as mass strikes, became increasingly common in France during the 1830s and 1840s. It is during this period that the word “socialism” makes its first appearance in France. According to the historian G.D.H. Cole, “The ‘socialists’ were those who, in opposition to the prevailing stress on the claims of the individual, emphasized the social element in human relations and sought to bring the social question to the front in the great debate about the rights of man let loose by the French Revolution and by the accompanying revolution in the economic field.”[8]

The first major work on the subject of French socialism was written by the German Lorenz Stein in 1842. The author defined socialism as “the systematic science of equality realized in economic life, state and society, through the rule of labor.”[9]

It is not my intention to present here a lecture on the origins and history of socialism. Rather, I intend only to indicate the changing social and intellectual context in which Marx and Engels began their extraordinary collaboration, developed the materialist conception of history, and in 1847 wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. What I wish particularly to stress is that their work reflected and anticipated in advanced theoretical terms the emergence within the general democratic movement of “the people” the new social division between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

There is no more powerful refutation of the denial of the possibility of historical prediction than the text of the *Communist Manifesto*, the first truly scientific and still unsurpassed work of historical, socio-economic and political perspective. In a few pages, Marx and Engels identified in the class struggle an essential driving force of history, outlined the economic and political processes out of which the modern, bourgeois, world emerged, and explained the world-historical revolutionary implications of the development of capitalist industry and finance.

“The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has piteously torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by political and religious illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

“The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers.

“The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation...

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones...

“The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. National one-sidedness and narrow-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.”[10]

One must resist the urge to continue reading from this epochal work, to which nothing previously written can compare.

Lessons of 1848

The *Manifesto* was published on the eve of the revolutionary eruptions that were to shake much of Europe in 1848. As Marx was later to note, the principal political actors in the drama of that year, particularly the petty-bourgeois leaders of the democratic movement, sought to explain and justify their own actions by invoking the traditions of 1793. But in the half-century that had passed since Robespierre’s Jacobins waged their life and death struggle against feudal reaction, the economic structure and social physiognomy of Europe had changed.

Even as the advanced sections of the bourgeoisie sought to work out the forms of rule appropriate to the development of capitalism, the emergence of the working class as a significant social force fundamentally altered the political equation. However great the tensions between the rising bourgeoisie and the remnants of the aristocracy, with its roots in the feudal past, the discontent and demands of the new proletariat were perceived by the capitalist elite to be a more direct and potentially revolutionary threat to its interests. In France, the bourgeoisie reacted to the specter of socialist revolution by carrying out a massacre in Paris in June 1848.[11] In Germany, the bourgeoisie retreated from its own democratic program, and concluded an agreement with the old aristocracy, in opposition to the people, that left the old autocracy more or less intact.

The *Communist Manifesto* anticipated and predicted the irreconcilable conflict between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The Revolutions of 1848 substantiated the analysis made by Marx and Engels. In their contemporaneous writings on the

unfolding of the events of 1848 in France, in Germany and other parts of Europe, Marx and Engels—in the first practical application of the historical materialist method of analysis—disclosed the socio-economic and political logic that drove the bourgeoisie into the camp of reaction, and which produced the cowardly capitulation of the representatives of the democratic middle class before the offensive of aristocratic and bourgeois reaction.

The revolutions of 1848 did not produce from the ranks of the radical petty bourgeoisie, let alone of the bourgeoisie, new Robespierres, Dantons and Marats. Marx and Engels recognized that the cowardly role played by the democratic representatives of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie was the political expression of the profound change in the social structure of Western Europe since the days of the Jacobin Terror more than a half-century earlier. They analyzed this change and drew from it far-reaching political conclusions that were to influence debates on the character of the Russian Revolution fifty years later. This analysis brought into usage a phrase—*Die Revolution in Permanenz*—that would reverberate throughout the twentieth century, above all in the writings of Leon Trotsky.

In March 1850, Marx and Engels submitted to the Central Authority of the Communist League a report in which they summed up the major strategic lessons of the revolutionary struggles of 1848-49. They began by pointing out that the bourgeoisie utilized the state power that had fallen into its lap as a result of the uprising of the workers and popular masses against those very forces. It had even been prepared to share or return power to the representatives of the old autocracy in order to safeguard its position against the threat of social revolution from below.

While the representatives of the big bourgeoisie had turned decisively to the right, Marx and Engels warned that the working class could expect the same from the representatives of the democratic petty bourgeoisie. They stressed that there existed fundamental differences in the social position and interests of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the working class.

“Far from desiring to transform the whole of society for the revolutionary proletarians, the democratic petty bourgeois strive for a change in social conditions by means of which the existing society will be made as tolerable and comfortable as possible for them...

“... While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible, and with the achievement, at most, of the above demands, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians in these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians. For us the issue cannot be the alteration of private property but only its annihilation, not the smoothing over of class antagonisms but the abolition of classes, not the improvement of existing society but the foundations of a new one.”[12]

Marx and Engels emphasized the need for the working class

to maintain its political independence from the representatives of the democratic petty bourgeoisie, and not allow itself to be misled by their seductive rhetoric:

“At the present moment, when the democratic petty bourgeois are everywhere oppressed, they preach in general unity and reconciliation to the proletariat, they offer it their hand and strive for the establishment of a large opposition party which will embrace all shades of opinion in the democratic party, that is, they strive to entangle the workers in a party organization in which general social-democratic phrases predominate, and serve to conceal their special interests, and in which the definite demands of the proletariat must not be brought forward for the sake of beloved peace. Such a union would turn solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously achieved position and once more be reduced to an appendage of official bourgeois democracy. This union must, therefore, be decisively rejected.”[13]

Even after the passage of 155 years, these words retain extraordinary political relevance. What is the Democratic Party in the United States, not to mention the Greens, except the political means by which the working class is subordinated, through the good offices of the liberal and reform-minded middle class, to the interests of the capitalist ruling elites? Even when it came to discussing the electoral tactics of the working class party, Marx and Engels displayed astonishing political prescience:

“... Even where there is no prospect whatever of their being elected, the workers must put up their own candidates in order to preserve their independence, to count their forces and to lay before the public their revolutionary attitude and party standpoint. In this connection they must not allow themselves to be bribed by such arguments of the democrats as, for example, that by so doing they are splitting the democratic party and giving the reactionaries the possibility of victory. The ultimate purpose of such phrases is to dupe the proletariat.”[14]

Marx and Engels concluded their report by emphasizing that the workers themselves “must do the utmost for their final victory by making it clear to themselves what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an independent party as soon as possible and by not allowing themselves to be misled for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeois into refraining from the independent organization of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence.”[15]

The principal strategic and tactical issues that would confront the international revolutionary socialist movement during the next century—and even up to our own time—were anticipated in this extraordinary document: the relationship between the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class; the attitude of the working class to the democratic parties of the petty bourgeoisie; the significance of the struggle for the political independence of the working class; the essentially international character of the socialist revolution, and the universal liberating program of socialism—that is, the abolition of all forms of class oppression.

But in an even more profound sense, this document marks a new stage in the development of mankind. As it is through the

emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* that nature in general achieves consciousness of itself, it is with the development of Marxism that humankind arrives at the point of being, in the deepest sense of the term, historically self-conscious. The making of history by human beings, their conscious rearrangement of the social relations within which they exist, becomes a programmatic question. Having attained a scientific insight into the laws of his own economic, social, and political development, man is able to foresee and construct in his own mind (“teleologically posit”) a realistic image of the future, and adapt his own practice, as required by objective conditions, so that this future can be realized.

Marxism and the “Russian Question”

I believe it can be argued that it was within the Russian Social Democratic movement that Marxism as a science of historical and political perspective attained its highest development. In no other section of the international workers movement, including Germany, was there so persistent an effort to derive the appropriate forms of political practice from a detailed analysis of the socio-economic conditions. This is, perhaps, explained by the fact that Russia, on account of its backwardness, at least in comparison to Western Europe, presented to Marxism an exceptional challenge.

When Marxism first began to attract the attention of the radical democratic intelligentsia of Russia, none of the objective socio-economic conditions that were assumed to be essential for the development of a socialist movement existed in the country. Capitalist development was still in its most rudimentary stages. There existed little in the way of industry. The Russian proletariat had barely begun to emerge as a distinct social class, and the native bourgeoisie was politically amorphous and impotent.

What relevance, then, could Marxism, a movement of the urban proletariat, have for the political development of Russia? In his “Open Letter to Engels,” the populist Pyotr Tkachev argued that Marxism was not relevant to Russia, that socialism could never be achieved in Russia through the efforts of the working class, and that if there were to be a revolution it would arise on the basis of peasant struggles. He wrote:

“May it be known to you that we in Russia have not at our command a single one of the means of revolutionary struggle which you have at your disposal in the West in general and in Germany in particular. We have no urban proletariat, no freedom of the press, no representative assembly, nothing that could allow us to hope to unite (in the present economic situation) the downtrodden, ignorant masses of working people into a single, well-organized, disciplined workers’ association.” [16]

The refutation of such arguments required that Russian Marxists undertake an exhaustive analysis of what was often referred to as “our terrible Russian reality.” The almost endless debate over “perspectives” dealt with such essential questions as: (1) Whether there existed in Russia objective conditions for the building of a socialist party; (2) Assuming that such conditions did exist, on what class should that party base its revolutionary efforts? (3) What would be the class character, in objective socio-economic terms, of the future revolution in Russia—bourgeois-democratic or socialist? (4) What class would provide political

leadership to the mass popular struggle against the tsarist autocracy? (5) In the development of the revolutionary struggle against tsarism, what would be the relationship between the major classes opposed to tsarism—the bourgeoisie, peasantry and working class? (6) What would be the political outcome, the form of government and state, that would arise on the basis of the revolution?

It was Plekhanov who first tackled these questions in a systematic manner in the 1880s and provided the programmatic foundation for the development of the Russian Social Democratic movement. He answered emphatically, as was his wont, that the coming revolution in Russia would be of a bourgeois-democratic character. The task of this revolution would be the overthrow of the tsarist regime, the purging of state and society of Russia's feudal legacy, the democratization of political life, and the creation of the best conditions for the full development of a modern capitalist economy.

The political outcome of the revolution would be, and could be nothing other than, a bourgeois-democratic parliamentary regime, along the lines of what existed in the advanced bourgeois states of Western Europe. Political power in this state would rest in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Given the economic backwardness of Russia, the overwhelming majority of whose population consisted of illiterate or semi-literate peasants in the far-flung countryside, there could be no talk of an immediate transition to socialism. There simply did not exist within Russia the objective economic prerequisites for so radical a transformation.

The task of the working class was to conduct the fight against tsarist autocracy as the most militant social force within the democratic camp, while recognizing and accepting the objectively bourgeois-democratic limits imposed upon the revolution by the level of Russia's socio-economic development. This entailed, unavoidably, some form of political alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie in the struggle against tsarism. While maintaining its political independence, the Social Democratic party would not overstep its historically assigned role as the oppositional force within the framework of a bourgeois-ruled democracy. It would strive to move the bourgeois regime as far as possible toward the implementation of programs of a progressive character, without calling into question the capitalist character of the economy and the maintenance of bourgeois property.

Plekhanov's program did not represent an explicit disavowal of socialist objectives. The "Father of Russian Marxism" would have denied indignantly that any such inference could be drawn from his program. Rather, these objectives were transferred, in deference to the existing level of Russian socio-economic development, to the indefinite future. While Russia developed gradually along capitalist lines and toward a level of economic maturity that would make the transition to socialism possible, the Social Democratic movement would utilize the opportunities provided by bourgeois parliamentarism to continue the political education of the working class, preparing it for the eventual, though distant, conquest of power.

To sum up, Plekhanov developed in its most finished form a "two-stage" theory of revolution. First, the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the consolidation of capitalist rule. Second, after a more or less prolonged period of economic and political

development, the working class—having completed the necessarily protracted period of political apprenticeship—would carry through the second, socialist stage of the revolution.

For nearly two decades, Plekhanov's analysis of the driving forces and the socio-economic and political character of the coming revolution provided the imposing programmatic foundation upon which the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was built. However, by the turn of the twentieth century—and certainly as a consequence of the outbreak of revolution in January 1905—the weaknesses in Plekhanov's perspectives began to emerge. The historical framework employed by Plekhanov drew heavily on the revolutionary experience of Western Europe, beginning with the French Revolution of 1789-1794. The two-stage theory of revolution assumed that developments in Russia would proceed along the lines of the old and familiar pattern. The bourgeois revolution in Russia would, as in France, bring the bourgeoisie to power. No other outcome was possible.

Notwithstanding his often brilliant commentaries on the dialectic—which, as a matter of abstract logic Plekhanov could explain very well—there was a very definite element of formal logic in his analysis of the Russian Revolution. As $A = A$, a bourgeois revolution equals a bourgeois revolution. What Plekhanov failed to consider was the manner in which profound differences in the social structure of Russia, not to mention Europe and the world as a whole, affected his political equation and the political calculations that flowed from it. The question that had to be asked was whether the bourgeois revolution in the twentieth century could be considered identical to the bourgeois revolution in the eighteenth century, or even in the mid-nineteenth century? This required that the *category of bourgeois revolution* be examined not only from the standpoint of its outer political form, but from the broader and more profound standpoint of its socio-economic content.

Lenin and the democratic dictatorship

Lenin addressed this weakness in his analysis of the Russian Revolution. What were the historical tasks, Lenin asked, associated with the great bourgeois revolutions? That is, what were the critical problems of social and economic, as well as political, development that were tackled in the bourgeois revolutions in earlier historical periods?

The main tasks undertaken by these bourgeois revolutions were the liquidation of all remnants of feudal relations in the countryside and the achievement of national unity. In Russia, it was the first problem that loomed largest. The carrying through of the bourgeois-democratic revolution would entail a massive peasant uprising against the old landlords, and the expropriation and nationalization of their large estates.

Such measures, however, would not be welcomed by the Russian bourgeoisie, which, as a property-owning class, did not relish nor seek to encourage expropriation in any form. Though the nationalization of the land was, in an economic sense, a *bourgeois measure* that would in the long term facilitate the development of capitalism, the bourgeoisie was too deeply rooted in the defense of property to support such a measure. In other words, the Russian bourgeoisie was not to be relied on to carry

through the bourgeois revolution. In Russia, therefore, the bourgeois revolution of the early twentieth century would have a social dynamic and assume a political form fundamentally different from the earlier bourgeois revolutions. The tasks of the bourgeois and democratic revolutions could be carried through only in the face of a determined counterrevolutionary alliance of the tsarist autocracy and the big bourgeoisie, on the basis of an alliance between the Russian working class and the dispossessed and impoverished peasant masses.

The question remained: what was to be the political form of the state power that would emerge from this great worker-peasant upheaval? In what amounted to a clear break with Plekhanov's perspective of a more-or-less conventional bourgeois-democratic parliamentary regime, Lenin proposed a new and very different political outcome to the overthrow of the autocracy: *a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry*.

With this term, Lenin indicated that he foresaw a government of the most radical democratic character, formed on the basis of an alliance of the Russian Social Democracy and the most politically radical representatives of the peasantry. However, he denied explicitly that such a revolutionary democratic regime would attempt to carry out measures of a socialist character. He wrote in March 1905:

"If Social Democracy sought to make the socialist revolution its immediate aim, it would assuredly discredit itself. It is precisely such vague and hazy ideas of our 'Socialist-Revolutionaries' that Social Democracy has always combated. For this reason Social Democracy has constantly stressed the bourgeois nature of the impending revolution in Russia and insisted on a clear line of demarcation between the democratic minimum program and the socialist maximum program. Some Social Democrats, who are inclined to yield to spontaneity, might forget all this in time of revolution, but not the Party as a whole. The adherents of this erroneous view make an idol of spontaneity in their belief that the march of events will compel the Social Democratic Party in such a position to set about achieving the socialist revolution, despite itself. Were this so, our program would be incorrect, it would not be in keeping with the 'march of events,' which is exactly what the spontaneity worshippers fear; they fear for the correctness of our program. But this fear ... is entirely baseless. Our program is correct. And the march of events will assuredly confirm this more and more fully as time goes on. It is the march of events that will 'impose' upon us the imperative necessity of waging a furious struggle for the republic and, in practice, guide our forces, the forces of the politically active proletariat, in this direction. It is the march of events that will, in the democratic revolution, inevitably impose upon us such a host of allies from among the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, whose real needs will demand the implementation of our minimum program, that any concern over too rapid a transition to the maximum program is simply absurd." [17]

Trotsky and the Permanent Revolution

In late 1904, on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals of the approaching new year, the 25-year-old Leon Trotsky outlined a strikingly original analysis of the socio-economic and political

dynamic of the anti-tsarist struggle in Russia. He rejected any formalistic approach to the elaboration of Russian perspectives. The democratic revolution in the Russia of the early twentieth century could not simply repeat the forms taken by the anti-autocratic revolutions 50, let alone 100 years earlier. First of all, the development of capitalism on a European and world scale was on an incomparably higher level than in the earlier historical periods. Even Russian capitalism, though economically backward relative to the most advanced European states, possessed a capitalist industry infinitely more developed than that which had existed in the mid-nineteenth, let alone the late eighteenth century.

The development of Russian industry, financed by French, English and German capital, and highly concentrated in several strategic industries and key cities, had produced a working class that, though constituting a small percentage of the national population, occupied an immense role in its economic life. Moreover, since the mid-1890s, the Russian workers' movement had assumed a highly militant character, attained a high level of class consciousness, and played a far more prominent and consistent role in the struggle against the tsarist autocracy.

The objection raised by Trotsky to not only the two-stage revolution perspective of Plekhanov but also the democratic dictatorship hypothesized by Lenin was that both concepts imposed upon the working class a self-limiting ordinance that would prove, in the course of the actual development of the revolution, entirely unrealistic. The assumption that there existed a Chinese wall between the democratic and socialist stages of the revolution, and that the working class, once it had overthrown the tsar, would then proceed to confine its social struggles to that which was acceptable within the framework of the capitalist system, was highly dubious. As the working class sought to defend and extend the gains of the democratic revolution, and fought to realize its own social interests, it would inevitably come into conflict with the economic interests of the employers and the capitalist system as a whole. In such a situation—i.e., a bitter strike by workers against a reactionary and recalcitrant employer—what attitude would be taken by the working class deputies or ministers holding responsible posts within a "democratic dictatorship"? Would they side with the employers, tell the workers that their demands exceeded what was permissible within the framework of capitalism, and instruct them to bring their struggle to a conclusion?

The position taken by Plekhanov and (in the aftermath of the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party—RSDLP) the Mensheviks was that socialists would avoid this political dilemma by refusing to participate in a post-tsarist bourgeois government. The demands of their two-stage perspective required, as a matter of principle, political abstention.

This meant, in effect, that all political power was being ceded, as a matter of historical and political necessity, to the bourgeoisie. Aside from the schematic and formalistic character of this argument, it actually ignored the political reality that the policy that arose from the two-stage perspective would in all likelihood lead to the shipwreck of the democratic revolution itself. Given the cowardly character of the Russian bourgeoisie, its morbid fear of the working class, its two-faced and essentially capitulatory

attitude toward the tsarist autocracy, there was no reason to believe, Trotsky argued, that the Russian liberal bourgeoisie would behave any less treacherously when confronted with revolution than the German bourgeoisie in 1848-1849.

As for the formulation employed by Lenin, it envisaged a revolutionary dictatorship in which the socialists wielded power alongside the representatives of the peasantry. But it failed to indicate which class would predominate in this governmental arrangement, or how it would negotiate the inner tension between the socialistic strivings of the working class and the bourgeois-capitalist limitations of the democratic dictatorship. Trotsky insisted that no way could be found out of this dilemma on the basis of capitalism or within the framework of the democratic dictatorship advanced by Lenin.

The only viable political program for the working class was one that accepted that the social and political dynamic of the Russian revolution led inexorably to the conquest of power by the working class. The democratic revolution in Russia (and, more generally, in countries with a belated bourgeois development) could only be completed, defended and consolidated through the assumption of state power by the working class, with the support of the peasantry. In such a situation, severe encroachments on bourgeois property would be inevitable. The democratic revolution would assume an increasingly socialistic character.

It is difficult to appreciate, especially 100 years later, the impact of Trotsky's argument upon Russian and, more broadly, European socialists. To argue that the working class in backward Russia should strive to conquer political power, that the coming revolution would assume a socialistic character, seemed to fly in the face of every assumption held by Marxists about the objective economic prerequisites for socialism. Economically advanced Britain was ripe for socialism (although its working class was among the most conservative in Europe). Perhaps France and Germany. But backward Russia? Impossible! Madness!

Trotsky's anticipation of a proletarian socialist revolution in Russia was certainly an intellectual *tour de force*. But even more extraordinary was the theoretical insight that enabled Trotsky to refute what had been universally accepted as the unanswerable objection to the conquest of power by the working class and the development of the revolution along socialistic, rather than simply bourgeois-democratic lines—that is, the absence of the economic prerequisites within Russia for socialism.

This objection could not be answered if the prospects for socialism in Russia were considered within the framework of the national development of that country. It could not be denied that the national development of the Russian economy had not attained a level necessary for the development of socialism. But what if Russia was analyzed not simply as a national entity, but as an integral part of world economy? Indeed, inasmuch as the expansion of Russian capitalism was bound up with the inflow of international capital, the Russian developments could be understood only as the expression of a complex and unified world process.

As the Russian Revolution unfolded in 1905, Trotsky argued that “capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism.... This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a

wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, which will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions.”[18]

Permit me to quote from an assessment that I made several years ago of Trotsky's analysis of the driving forces of Russian and international revolutionary processes:

“Trotsky's approach represented an astonishing theoretical breakthrough. As Einstein's relativity theory—another gift of 1905 to mankind—fundamentally and irrevocably altered the conceptual framework within which man viewed the universe and provided a means of tackling problems for which no answers could be found within the straitjacket of classical Newtonian physics, Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution fundamentally shifted the analytical perspective from which revolutionary processes were viewed. Prior to 1905, the development of revolutions was seen as a progression of national events, whose outcome was determined by the logic of the nation's internal socio-economic structure and relations. Trotsky proposed another approach: to understand revolution, in the modern epoch, as essentially a world-historic process of social transition from class society, rooted politically in nation-states, to a classless society developing on the basis of a globally integrated economy and internationally unified mankind.

“I do not believe that the analogy to Einstein is far-fetched. From an intellectual standpoint, the problems facing revolutionary theorists at the turn of the twentieth century were similar to those confronting physicists. Experimental data was accumulating throughout Europe that could not be reconciled with the established formulae of Newtonian classical physics. Matter, at least at the level of sub-atomic particles, was refusing to behave as Mr. Newton had said it should. Einstein's relativity theory provided the new conceptual framework for understanding the material universe.

“In a similar sense, the socialist movement was being confronted with a flood of socio-economic and political data that could not be adequately processed within the existing theoretical framework. The sheer complexity of the modern world economy defied simplistic definitions. The impact of world economic development manifested itself, to a heretofore unprecedented extent, in the contours of each national economy. Within even backward economies there could be found—as a result of international foreign investment—certain highly advanced features. There existed feudalist or semi-feudalist regimes, whose political structures were encrusted with the remnants of the Middle Ages, that presided over a capitalist economy in which heavy industry played a major role. Nor was it unusual to find in countries with a belated capitalist development a bourgeoisie that showed less interest in the success of 'its' democratic revolution than the indigenous working class. Such anomalies could not be reconciled with formal strategical precepts whose calculations assumed the existence of social phenomena less riven by internal contradictions.

“Trotsky's great achievement consisted in elaborating a new theoretical structure that was equal to the new social, economic and political complexities. There was nothing utopian in Trotsky's

approach. It represented, rather, a profound insight into the impact of world economy on social and political life. A realistic approach to politics and the elaboration of effective revolutionary strategy was possible only to the extent that socialist parties took as their objective starting point the predominance of the international over the national. This did not simply mean the promotion of international proletarian solidarity. Without understanding its essential objective foundation in world economy, and without making the objective reality of world economy the basis of strategical thought, proletarian internationalism would remain a utopian ideal, essentially unrelated to the program and practice of nationally based socialist parties.

“Proceeding from the reality of world capitalism, and recognizing the objective dependence of Russian events on the international economic and political environment, Trotsky foresaw the inevitability of a socialist development of Russia’s revolution. The Russian working class would be compelled to take power and adopt, to one extent or another, measures of a socialist character. Yet, in proceeding along socialist lines, the working class in Russia would inevitably come up against the limitations of the national environment. How would it find a way out of its dilemma? By linking its fate to the European and world revolution of which its own struggle was, in the final analysis, a manifestation.

“This was the insight of a man who, like Einstein, had just reached his 26th birthday. Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution made possible a realistic conception of world revolution. The age of national revolutions had come to an end—or, to put it more precisely, national revolutions could be understood only within the framework of the international socialist revolution.”[19]

Let me sum up Trotsky’s perspective of Permanent Revolution: Whether the economic prerequisites existed for socialism in Russia or any other country, he argued, depended ultimately not upon its own national level of economic development, but, rather, on the general level attained by the growth of the productive forces and the depth of capitalist contradictions on a world scale. In countries such as Russia, with a belated capitalist development, where the bourgeoisie was unable and unwilling to carry through its own democratic revolution, the working class would be compelled to come forward as the revolutionary force, rally behind it the peasantry and all other progressive elements within society, take power into its own hands and establish its revolutionary dictatorship, and proceed, as conditions might require, to encroach upon bourgeois property and embark upon tasks of a socialist character. Thus, the democratic revolution would grow into a socialist revolution, and in this way acquire the character of a “Revolution in Permanence,” breaking down and overcoming all obstacles that stood in the way of the liberation of the working class. However, lacking within the national framework the economic resources necessary for socialism, the working class would be obliged to seek support for its revolution on an international scale.

But this reliance would not be based on utopian hopes. Rather, the unfolding revolution, though it began on a national basis, would reverberate internationally, escalating international class tensions and contributing to the radicalization of workers throughout the world. Thus, Trotsky maintained:

“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable.... The socialist revolution begins on a national arena, it unfolds on an international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word: it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”[20]

Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which argued that the democratic revolution could be carried through only on the basis of the conquest of political power by the working class, supported by the peasantry, overthrew the most basic assumptions of Russian Social Democracy. Even in 1905, as the revolution unfolded with an energy that astonished all Europe, the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP derided Trotsky’s perspective as a dangerous, adventurist exaggeration of the political alternatives open to the working class. The Menshevik position was summed up in a pamphlet by Martynov:

“Which form might this struggle for revolutionary hegemony between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat take? We should not fool ourselves. The coming Russian revolution shall be a bourgeois revolution: this means that whatever its vicissitudes, even if the proletariat were momentarily to find itself in power, in the final analysis it will secure to greater or smaller extent the rule of all or some of the bourgeois classes, and even if it were most successful, even if it replaced tsarist autocracy with the democratic republic, even in that case it would secure the complete political rule of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat can get neither complete nor assume partial political power in the state until it makes the socialist revolution. This is the undisputed postulate which separates us from the opportunism of the Jauresists. But if that is so, then the coming revolution cannot realize any political forms *against the will of the whole bourgeoisie*, since it is this last which is destined to rule tomorrow. If that is so, then by simply *frightening* the majority of the bourgeois elements the revolutionary proletarian struggle could lead to only one result—to the re-establishment of absolutism in its initial form. The proletariat will not, of course, hold back in light of this possible result, it will not refrain from frightening the bourgeoisie *at the very worst*, if the matter is leading decisively to a situation where a feigned constitutional compromise would revive and strengthen the decaying autocracy. But when coming into struggle, the proletariat does not, of course, have in mind such an unfortunate outcome.”

Martynov’s pamphlet expressed with almost embarrassing frankness the political psychology of the Mensheviks—which not only insisted on the bourgeois character of the revolution, but which also considered a misfortune the prospect of an open clash with the bourgeoisie. Such a clash was to be regretted because it pressed against the inviolable bourgeois limits of the revolution. In opposition to Trotsky, the Mensheviks insisted that the Russian Social-Democratic movement “has no right to become tempted by the illusion of power...”

It is not possible within the framework of this lecture to review the extended controversy—spanning more than a decade—provoked by Trotsky’s perspective. I will confine myself to only the most critical points. The Mensheviks categorically rejected the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia, and the

Bolsheviks, while rejecting any form of political adaptation to the liberal bourgeoisie, insisted as well on the objectively bourgeois character of the revolution.

What, then, accounted for the shift in the political line of the Bolsheviks that made possible the conquest of power in 1917? I believe that the answer to this question must be found in the impact of the outbreak of World War I on Lenin's appraisal of the dynamic of the Russian Revolution. His recognition that the war represented a turning point in the development and crisis of capitalism as a world system compelled Lenin to reconsider his perspective of the democratic dictatorship in Russia. The involvement of Russia in the imperialist war expressed the dominance of international over national conditions. The Russian bourgeoisie, inextricably implicated in the reactionary network of imperialist economic and political relations, was organically hostile to democracy. The carrying through of the unresolved democratic tasks confronting Russia fell upon the working class, which would mobilize behind it the peasantry. And even though there did not exist within an isolated Russia the economic prerequisites for socialism, the crisis of European capitalism—the existence of a maturing revolutionary crisis of which the war itself was a distorted and reactionary expression—would create an international political environment that would make possible the linking up of the Russian and European-wide revolution.

The revolutionary upheavals in Russia would provide a massive impulse for the eruption of world socialist revolution. Upon returning to Russia in April 1917, Lenin carried through a political struggle to reorient the Bolshevik Party on the basis of an internationalist political perspective that was based, in all essentials, upon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. This shift laid the political basis for the alliance of Lenin and Trotsky, and for the victory of the October 1917 Revolution.

Despite Mr. Popper's objection that it is impossible to predict the future, the events of 1905, 1917 and subsequent revolutions throughout the twentieth century tended stubbornly to unfold very much as Trotsky had said they would. In countries with a belated bourgeois development, the national capitalist class would prove time again that it was incapable of carrying through its own democratic revolution. The working class would be confronted with the task of conquering state power, accepting responsibility for the completion of the democratic revolution, and, in so doing, it would attack the foundations of capitalist society and initiate the socialist transformation of the economy. Again and again, in one or another country—in Russia in 1917, in Spain in 1936-1937, in China, Indochina and India in the 1940s, in Indonesia in the 1960s, in Chile and throughout Latin America in the 1970s, in Iran in 1979, and in innumerable Middle Eastern and Africa countries during the protracted post-colonial era—the fate of the working class depended on the extent to which it recognized and acted in accordance with the logic of socio-economic and political developments as analyzed by Trotsky early in the twentieth century. Tragically, in most cases, this analysis was opposed by the bureaucracies that dominated the working class in these countries. The result was not only the defeat of socialism, but the failure of the democratic revolution itself.

But these experiences, however tragic, testify to the extraordinary prescience of Trotsky's analysis, its enduring

relevance, and, finally, to the critical life-and-death importance of Marxism as the science of revolutionary perspective.

Notes:

- [1] "Historicism," in *Popper, Selections*, ed. David Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 290.
- [2] *The Poverty of Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xii.
- [3] *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 106.
- [4] Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, Volume 2: Marx (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 103.
- [5] *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 1.
- [6] *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Scientist's Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 36-37.
- [7] Quoted by Plekhanov, in "The Initial Phases in the Class Struggle Theory," *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume II (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 439.
- [8] *A History of Socialist Thought: Volume I: The Forerunners 1789-1850*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1953), p. 2.
- [9] Quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume IV: Critique of Other Socialisms* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), p. 8.
- [10] *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 57-59.
- [11] In the writings of Alexander Herzen, a brilliant account is given of the reaction of the liberal bourgeoisie to the emergence of the working class as a political force during the upheavals of 1848: "Since the Restoration, liberals of all countries have called the people to the destruction of the monarchic and feudal order, in the name of equality, of the tears of the unfortunate, of the suffering of the oppressed, of the hunger of the poor. They have enjoyed hounding down various ministers with a series of impossible demands; they rejoiced when one feudal prop collapsed after another, and in the end became so excited that they outstripped their own desires. They came to their senses when, from behind the half-demolished walls, there emerged the proletarian, the worker with his axe and his blackened hands, hungry and half-naked in rags—not as he appears in books or in parliamentary chatter or in philanthropic verbiage, but in reality. This 'unfortunate brother' about whom so much has been said, on whom so much pity has been lavished, finally asked what were his freedom, his equality, his fraternity? The liberals were aghast at the impudence and ingratitude of the worker. They took the streets of Paris by assault, they littered them with corpses, and then they hid from their brother behind the bayonets of martial law in their effort to save *civilization and order!*" [*From the Other Shore* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1956), pp. 59-60.]
- [12] *Collected Works*, Volume 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), pp. 280-81.
- [13] *Ibid*, p. 281.
- [14] *Ibid*, p. 284.
- [15] *Ibid*, p. 287.
- [16] Quoted in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 157.
- [17] *Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 240.
- [18] *Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park, 1971), p. 240.
- [19] "Toward a Reconsideration of Trotsky's Legacy and His Place in the History of the 20th Century," *World Socialist Web Site*, June 29, 2001, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jun2001/dn-j29.shtml>
- [20] *Permanent Revolution*, p. 155.