DID TROTSKY CHANGE HIS VIEWS ABOUT THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION?

In a supplement in the Weekly Worker, Lars T Lih maintains that in a situation of political pressure, Trotsky changed his opinion in 1924 about the class character of the October revolution. (1) Lih contends that in 1917 Trotsky agreed with Lenin that the primary task of realising Soviet power was in order to complete the bourgeois revolution. In this context the Menshevik perspective of establishing support for the Provisional government meant accommodating to the interests of the bourgeoisie, but this was not the principled manner in which the task of the bourgeois revolution could be realised. It is argued that both Lenin and Trotsky agreed: “The two leaders make the same basic points: we do not have to affirm the socialist character of the revolution in order to justify soviet power. We do not have to deny that the Russian revolution taken by itself is a 'bourgeois democratic' one. Basic democratic principles justify soviet power.”(2) But in 1924 in order to defend his role in 1917, Trotsky apparently revises his previous position and instead maintains that the perspective of the Bolsheviks was that of socialist revolution. The call to complete the bourgeois and democratic revolution within the Bolsheviks became interpreted an opportunist view that was against a genuinely principled strategy. Lih maintains that in 1917 Trotsky maintained that the only intransigent interpretation of the view that the revolutionary process was primarily defined by the dynamics of bourgeois democracy was to strive for soviet power. In 1924 he argued that this perspective logically meant support for the role of the bourgeoisie within the Provisional government. But in 1917 he interpreted this approach as being the view of Plekhanov. Lih concludes his article with the question: “Who is more likely to have understood the dynamics of the Russian revolution, Trotsky in 1917 or Trotsky in 1924? Anyone interested in the Russian Revolution will have to confront this question.”(3)

In reply to this article we will argue that Trotsky did not change his mind. His approach in both 1917 and 1924 was defined by his strategy of permanent revolution. (We will discuss the standpoint of Lenin in an appendix) The most systematic and elaborated outline of Trotsky's view in 1917 was his article: 'What Next'(4). In this article, Trotsky introduces it with an analysis of the opportunist support of the leadership of the Soviets, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, for the most reactionary policy of the Provisional government. He outlines how the support of these forces for class compromise undermines the revolutionary possibilities of the Soviet which is defined in the following terms: “Behind the Soviets stood the workers organizations, which were displacing in every factory, the autocracy of the capitalists, and establishing a republican regime in industry, which was incompatible with the capitalist anarchy and demanded an irrevocable state control of production. In defence of their property rights the capitalists sought assistance from above, from the government, pushed it with ever-increasing energy against the Soviets, and compelled it to accept the conclusion that it did not possess an independent apparatus, i.e., instruments of repression against the working masses. Hence the lamentations over “dual power”. “(5) In other words, Trotsky is outlining that one important aspect of the situation in which Soviets have been created with popular support is that they have promoted the striving to realise workers control of production. This development has resulted in the capitalists exerting pressure on the provisional government to act against this activity of the local Soviets. The leadership of the Soviets are being forced to oppose the actual revolutionary actions of the workers, who are spontaneously attempting to overcome the domination of the capitalists. Thus the intensification of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the workers is an inherent aspect of the generation of the influence of the Soviets. The only resolution of this situation is either the consolidation of the economic and political power of the bourgeoisie, or the realisation of Soviet hegemony. Consequently, the activity of the Soviets has led to the dynamic of challenging the domination of the capitalists within the relations of production. The only conclusion that can be made from this analysis is that the revolution is integrally connected to the aim of transforming the relations of production. This process is not the same as creating socialism, but it is obviously an expression of progress towards this possibility in the form of the advance of workers control of production. Trotsky is suggesting that the intensification of class struggle caused by the influence of the Soviets must mean that the revolutionary process acquires important proletarian influences and aims. In this context the Bolsheviks would be disappointing its working class supporters if socialism, in terms of the consolidation of workers control, was not one of its objectives, even if this aim could not be realised in the short term, or in the immediate period after another act of revolution.

Trotsky clarifies his implicit perspective with the following long, detailed and emphatic outline of his understanding of what should be the Bolshevik strategy: “The further development of the Revolution resolved itself into the necessity of all power passing into the hands of the Soviet, and the use of this power in the interests of the workers against the property owners. And the deepening of the struggle against the capitalist classes makes it absolutely necessary to assign the leading role among the toiling masses to their most resolute section, namely, to the industrial proletariat. For the introduction of control over production and distribution the proletariat could appeal to very valuable precedents in Western Europe, particularly in the so-called “War Socialism” of Germany. But, as in Russia, this labour of organization could only be accomplished on the basis of an agrarian revolution and under the supervision of an actually revolutionary power, the control over production and the gradual organization of the latter would necessarily assume a direction that was hostile to the interests of capital. At a moment when the propertied classes were striving, through the Provisional government, to establish the rule of a strong capitalist republic, the full power of the Soviets, as yet by no means synonymous with “Socialism”, would in any case have broken the opposition of the bourgeoisie, and in alliance with the existing productive forces and the situation in Western Europe, would have imposed a direction and a transformation upon economic organization that would have been in the interests of the toiling masses. Casting aside the chains of capitalist power, the Revolution would have become permanent, that is, continuous it would have applied its state power, not to the perpetuation of the rule of capitalist exploitation, but, on the contrary, to its undoing. Its ultimate accomplishments on this field would have depended on the successes of the proletarian revolution in Europe. On the other hand, the Russian revolution might give an impetus to the revolution in Western Europe, the more resolutely and courageously it put down the opposition of its own bourgeoisie. Such was and such remains the sole and only actual prospect for the further development of the Revolution.”(6)

This comment indicates that Trotsky consistently supported his perspective of permanent revolution in both 1905 and 1917. He did not have any dogmatic illusion that socialism could be instantly possible after a successful proletarian revolution in Russia. Instead he was arguing that the dynamics of the development of Soviet power, and the related intensification of the class struggle, meant that the process of potential transformation was acquiring the dimensions of opposition to capitalism and the development of the importance of workers control. Hence he was arguing that a transitional state could be created which would be committed to overcoming the domination of capital, and in this context would enhance the role of the working class within the production process, but socialism would not be a short-term possibility. Instead this potential for socialism would require the success of the international revolution and the development of relations with the more advanced economies of Western Europe. But this approach implies that the aim of the dynamics of the class struggle was socialist insofar as what was occurring was the undermining of the domination of capital and the connected generation of the hegemony of labour. In this context, the Mensheviks were acting entirely against the progressive logic of the revolutionary process because they considered that the limits of the situation were defined by the necessity to generate the stability of bourgeois democracy. The Mensheviks were opposing what the workers were doing which was to establish workers control of production and so end the domination of capital within the relations of production. Therefore developments would either realise proletarian revolution, with the ultimate aim of socialism, or else confirm the continued consolidation of the domination of capital over labour. The reactionary role of the Mensheviks was that they effectively were acting to oppose the attempts of the workers, via the role of the Soviets, to establish supremacy over the relations of production. However, Trotsky also admitted that if success could be realised in relation to this process of change in terms of proletarian revolution, socialism would only become possible in relation to the success of international revolution. This standpoint was an updated form of the perspective of permanent revolution as related to the events of 1917.

But Trotsky was not a utopian. He recognised that it would be a voluntarist illusion to directly define the next stage of the Russian revolution as being socialist. Such a view would express the false view that socialism in one country could be possible. Instead he was content define the revolutionary process as anti-capitalist, but with the potential and promise to advance the aim of socialism. Whether this aim could ultimately be realised would depend on the level of success or failure of the international revolution. But what the actual situation indicated in 1917 was that increasingly the workers were determined to undermine the domination of the capitalists. This aspect was the major impetus towards the realisation of proletarian revolution. But the consolidation of workers control by a proletarian state would not be socialism. Instead what would be established would be a transitional state with the aim of socialism. Whether socialism could be realised would depend, firstly on the ability to develop the popular role of the Soviets, secondly, on the level of success of the worker-peasant alliance, and thirdly, on the progress of international revolution. Trotsky's approach was complex and involved a number of conditions and predictions. Primarily, the advance of international revolution would be vital. But the merit of Trotsky's approach was that it was based on developments that were occurring in 1917, and instead the Mensheviks dogmas meant that they rejected the importance of the role of the empirical and instead emphasised an opportunist policy that could only result in the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Thus Trotsky outlined the principled alternative to this opportunism which was that of proletarian revolution, in the form of 'All Power to the Soviets'.

The ultimate opportunism of the Mensheviks was that their approach was counterposed to the logic of the struggles of the workers and their attempt to overcome the domination of the capitalists in economic and political terms. In contrast to this revolutionary dynamic the Mensheviks were acting to encourage the Provisional government to end the influence and role of the Soviets. Hence the approach of Trotsky was defined by what he was considering to be the logic of the political situation in 1917. His perspective was either the victory of proletarian revolution, or the triumph of counterrevolution. In this context the immediate task was to overcome the aims of the Provisional government and the bourgeoisie by obtaining the support of the Soviets for a strategy of a revolutionary offensive. In this context the question of socialism was not an immediate issue. Instead what was troubling Trotsky was the possibility of whether the impetus for counterrevolution could be overcome by developing majority support for Soviet power. Socialism did not define the immediate tasks of the strategy of proletarian revolution, which was instead about how to advance the strength of the working class and so undermine the strength of the forces of counterrevolution. Socialism would be something that would be concretely addressed in terms of the success of the strategy of proletarian revolution. But it would also be dogmatic to deny the proletarian character of the revolution in the manner of the Mensheviks. It was the workers, via the role of the Soviets, who were the major social force of the revolutionary process. Thus to define the revolution as being either bourgeois, or democratic, would be to obscure and indeed undermine the significance of what was occurring. Rather what Trotsky seemed to be implying in the above quotes was that the bourgeois tasks, such as land reform, could only be realised in the context of the proletarian revolution. To deny this approach was to justify a political stance in terms of the actual counterrevolutionary interests of the bourgeoisie. But this perspective meant it was illogical from his standpoint to define the revolution as being primarily democratic. Instead the analysis he used established the proletarian character of the revolutionary process. This was connected to the examples he provided about how it was the workers who primarily advanced the aims of the revolution. Thus Lars Lih's view seems to contradict the implications of Trotsky's strategical approach.

In the chapter of his article called 'The Character of the Russian Revolution', Trotsky is very critical of those that define events in terms of a bourgeois revolution.(7) The only result of this standpoint is to justify the role of the Provisional government, and so deny the importance of the Soviets: “The fact is that the Miliukov-Dan estimate, inspired by Plekhanov, as to the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution contains not a single grain of theory.....Even though the Soviets may represent the majority of the politically trained population....”so long as our revolution is bourgeois in character” it is necessary to preserve the privileges of the bourgeoisie.....the principles of democracy are suspended....To hell with democracy! Long live Plekhanov's Sociology.”(8) But this criticism of the anti-democratic logic of the view that the bourgeois revolution must involve the bourgeoisie is not an expression of support for this approach in a more revolutionary manner. Trotsky outlines in the past that the Jacobins, often against the objections of the more moderate bourgeoisie, carried out the ruthless revolutionary tasks of the bourgeoisie in an emphatic manner and with the support of the plebeian masses. But the petty bourgeoisie in the era of developed capitalism is dependent on the support of the capitalist class, and this explains the accommodation of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries to the bourgeoisie within the Provisional government. In contrast the workers have become the most consistent revolutionary class: “In our case, the industrial working class has worked its way out of the ill-defined democracy into a position in history where it exerts an influence of primary importance.”(9) This means that the attempts of what has become petty bourgeois parties to define the revolution in terms of being bourgeois, or democratic, act against the trends of economic and political development and can only create confusion and so strengthen the forces of reaction. The result is that: “Because they “voluntarily” handed over their power to the bourgeois cliques, the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks were obliged to hand over the revolutionary mission definitely to the party of the proletariat. This alone is sufficient to show that the attempt to decide fundamental questions of tactics by mere reference to the “bourgeois” character of the Revolution can only succeed in confusing the minds of the backward workers and deceiving the peasants.”(10) Instead of this reactionary approach that can only accommodate to the counterrevolutionary interests of the bourgeoisie, it is vital to recognise that: “The revolutionary power of the Russian proletariat, which can by no means estimated by its numerical strength, is based upon its immense productive power, which is most of all apparent in wartime.”(11) Therefore the situation is defined by class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This means to define the situation as a bourgeois revolution means to reject the rival interests of the working class. Indeed, this opportunism has been the role of the petty bourgeois parties, which in the name of the bourgeois revolution have attempted to influence the workers to accept the antagonistic domination of the bourgeoisie in terms of support for the Provisional government. The result of this servile acceptance of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie was to only enhance the influence of the genuine revolutionary party of the proletariat. Its opposition to the Provisional government meant that its strategic task was not primarily to complete the bourgeois revolution. Instead its aim, which corresponded to the important social influence of the working class, was to realise proletarian revolution.

Furthermore, Trotsky makes the point that the revolutionary process could not express something similar to the dynamics of the French bourgeois revolution because the social situation is different. The Jacobins had the international task of overcoming the opposition of what were feudal powers. But the situation since then has generated the creation of capitalism which has resulted in the generation of inter-imperialist contradictions and war. The implicit assumption is that the revolutionary process will express the necessity for European socialist revolution: “The Russian Revolution.... has before it a Europe that has far outdistanced it, having reached the highest degree of capitalist development. The present slaughter shows that Europe has reached the point of capitalist saturation, that it can no longer live and grow on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production.”(12) Hence the increasing unity of the revolutionary process in Russia with that of Europe will consolidate the fact that the outcome of this development will be defined by proletarian revolution. The only alternative is the reactionary possibility that the approach of support for bourgeois revolution will be able to enhance the influence of the Provisional government, and so confuse the workers. The result of such a prospect can only be reactionary. Hence the only principled alternative is to support the hegemonic role of the working class, and so uphold the perspective of proletarian revolution. But Trotsky is careful not to define this revolutionary approach as expressing the prospect for socialism. Instead it is assumed that such an objective can only be effectively advanced with the progress of European revolution. Therefore it seems to be argued that the outcome of a successful revolution in Russia will be the formation of a workers state that could become transitional to socialism under favourable international circumstances. The alternative is to consolidate the rule of the bourgeoisie, which would be a distorted form of the bourgeois revolution because it would not represent a progressive revolutionary process, and instead would be characterised by repressive forms of Bonapartism and the undermining of the influence of the Soviets. In other words, the so-called bourgeois revolution would be expressed by reactionary developments which means the only progressive outcome is the struggle for power by the working class.

On the basis of the above discussion of Trotsky's views about the bourgeois character of the revolution, Trotsky is arguing that contrary to its expression in France of 1789, it has become an outdated prospect in the developed world capitalist economy of 1917. The assumption being made is that any outstanding tasks of the bourgeois revolution, such as land reform, should be carried out in terms of the possible success of the only revolutionary class, which is the proletariat. Either the Soviets will decline in influence, which means the end of the Kerensky-Menshevik government and instead a reactionary administration will be formed, or else the working class will overcome the problem of bourgeois power and establish a proletarian regime. Only in the international context will the aim of socialism in Russia become valid: “Either we shall see continued convulsions of the forces of production, in the form of repeatedly recurring imperialist wars, or we shall see a socialist organization of production: that is the question History is placing before us.”(13) This view implies that the role of a national proletarian regime would be to carry out bourgeois democratic tasks such as land reform, and to promote the influence of workers control of production. Thus the posibilities for socialism would be advanced, but it would be wrong to define this transitional society as socialist. Instead only the advance of international revolution would create the possibility of socialism. In this context the perspective of the Bolsheviks is based on the role of world revolution.

Therefore Trotsky explains his differences with Martov in the following manner: “The Menshevik Internationalists, those of like mind with Comrade Martov, in opposition to us, deny the social-revolutionary character of the political task. Russia, they declare in their platform, is not ready for socialism, and our function is limited to the funding of the bourgeois democratic republic. The whole attitude is based on a complete rejection of the international problems of the proletariat. If Russia were alone in the world, Martov's reasoning would be correct. But we are engaged in carrying out a world revolution, in a struggle with world imperialism, with the tasks of the world proletariat, which includes the Russian proletariat. Instead of explaining to the Russian workers that the destinies of Russia are inextricably bound up with the destinies of Europe, that the success of the European proletariat will assure us a swifter realization of a Socialist society, that on the other hand, a defeat for the European proletariat will hurl us back into a condition of imperialist dictatorship and monarchy, and finally into the status of mere colonies of England and the United States, instead of subordinating all our tactics to the general aims and objects of the European proletariat, Comrade Martov looks upon the Russian revolution from a narrow nationalistic standpoint and reduces the tasks of the revolution to that of creating a bourgeois democratic republic.”(14) Trotsky emphatically rejects what he considers to be the stance of national democratic revolution defended by Martov: “The struggle for capturing power is not, for us, merely the next step of a national democratic revolution. No, it is fulfilment of our international duty, the conquest of one of the most important positions on the whole front of the struggle against imperialism.”(15) He defines this approach as that of permanent revolution.

In other words, this discussion of his approach about the perspective of revolution in 1917 is consistent with the standpoint of permanent revolution adopted in 1905-1906. He emphatically rejects any notion that the bourgeoisie has a progressive historical role, and vehemently criticises the Mensheviks for adapting to this view. Instead he outlines how the era of classical bourgeois revolution is over in the context of the maturing of capitalism and its development as imperialism. Instead the central task is that of international proletarian revolution, and the revolutionary process in Russia will realise its most progressive outcome if it corresponds to this possibility. The Mensheviks can only undermine the role of the Soviets, which express organs of workers power, because they have antiquated ideas that the major progressive task in Russia is to promote the advance of bourgeois revolution. To uphold this standpoint can only have a reactionary outcome such as to encourage the formation of a Bonapartist administration, and to accept the foreign policy aims of the Allies. The only principled strategy is to promote the possibility of proletarian revolution as an expression of realising the political power of the Soviets. There is no suggestion that the character of this progressive revolutionary process can be defined as being bourgeois or democratic. In contrast, such an approach can only represent opportunist policies and result in opposition to the attempt to realise the hegemony of the working class. Only the working class is a consistent revolutionary social force, and so the aims and character of the strategy for the overthrow of the domination of capitalism should be defined in the corresponding terms of proletarian objectives. The only context in which Trotsky mentions the socialist character of the revolution is in terms of the international objectives of world revolution. The assumption being made is that Russia in its own national context has not matured sufficiently to realise socialism. Instead it is being assumed that a workers government would promote the aim of world revolution in order to advance the possibility of socialism in Russia. Hence Trotsky would seem to be critical of any view that suggested that bourgeois and democratic tasks should dilute the intransigent proletarian character of the aims and objectives of principled political strategy. Instead bourgeois tasks are an aspect of the proletarian revolution. But he would deny Plekhanov's view that the Bolsheviks were advocating a socialist revolution because he outlines in detail that such an aim requires the international success of the class struggle. Hence to define the revolution as being either bourgeois or socialist would express a nationalist deviation from the internationalist perspective of proletarian revolution.

In relation to his 'Lessons of October' Trotsky’s emphasis was bound to be different because in 1917 he was concerned to criticise the views of the Mensheviks, but in his booklet of 1924 he was concentrating on refuting the views of those Bolsheviks who upheld the perspective of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.(16) He argued that to rigidly adhere to Lenin's 1905 position about the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry meant to counterpose the importance of democracy to the aim of proletarian revolution: “The February revolution, if considered by itself, was a bourgeois revolution. But as a bourgeois revolution it came too late and was devoid of any stability. Torn asunder by contradictions which immediately found their expression in dual power, it had either to change into a direct prelude to proletarian revolution – which is what actually did happen – or to throw Russia back into a semi-colonial existence, under some sort of bourgeois-oligarchic regime. Consequently, the period following the February revolution could be regarded from two points of view: either as a period of consolidating, developing or consummating the 'democratic' revolution, or as a period of preparation for the proletarian revolution.”(17) There is nothing to suggest that this approach is different to the one he adopts in 1917. The only difference is that he is trying to establish the opportunist logic of the views of a section of Bolsheviks. It would be the logic of their standpoint to adapt to the bourgeoisie in the name of the democratic revolution. The only basis to reject this standpoint was to consistently support the alternative strategy of support for proletarian revolution. He is suggesting that the right wing Bolsheviks position adapted to the standpoint of the Mensheviks, and would have had the same class collaborationist consequences if adopted. The view that the working class could have promoted a democratic revolution was an illusion which would have resulted in accommodation to the interests of the national bourgeoisie. The attempt to apply pressure on the national bourgeoisie would have resulted in failure, and instead led to political crisis within the Bolsheviks. The only principled manner in which this prospect could be overcome was by consistently promoting a perspective of proletarian revolution.

Trotsky outlined that Lenin's view was that the February revolution meant that in an opportunist manner the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry had been realised in form of the support of the Soviets, under the leadership of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, for the Provisional government. Hence the task was to go beyond this opportunist approach and instead realise the actual political power of the Soviets in terms of the formation of a workers government: “The instability of the conciliationist Soviets lay precisely in this democratic amorphousness of a demi-power coalition of workers, peasants, and soldiers. The Soviets either had to disappear entirely or to take power into their hands. But they could take power not in the capacity of a democratic coalition of workers and peasants represented by different parties, but only as the dictatorship of the proletariat directed by a single party and drawing after it the peasant masses, beginning with their semi-proletarian sections. In other words a democratic workers’ and peasants’ coalition could only take shape as an immature form of power incapable of attaining real power – it could take shape only as a tendency and not as a concrete fact. Any further movement towards the attainment of power had inevitably to explode the democratic integument, confront the majority of peasants with the necessity of following the workers, provide the proletariat with an opportunity to realize a class dictatorship, and thereby place on the agenda – along with a complete and ruthlessly radical democratization of social relations - a purely socialist invasion of the workers state into the sphere of capitalist property relations.”(18) Thus Trotsky emphasised that the perspective of a democratic form of revolution as an initial and progressive stage of the revolutionary process was an expression of accommodating the Soviets to the domination of the bourgeoisie and the Provisional government. The principled task of promoting the aim of the realisation of Soviet power meant rejecting these illusions and instead adhering to the approach of advancing the possibility of proletarian revolution in this manner, or rejecting any temptation to uphold support for class collaboration. Hence Trotsky was merely extending his criticisms of the Mensheviks that he had outlined in 1917 to what he considered to be the similar tactical errors of a section of the Bolsheviks in 1924. The perspective that he was defending in 1917 was identical in 1924. In both instances he was rejecting any illusion in the progressive historical character of the supposedly democratic or bourgeois revolution, and instead suggesting that this situation had come about because of the opportunist limitations of the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets. Thus the 'bourgeois revolution' had only been realised because of the opportunist misleadership that developed within the Soviets. Hence the only principled course of action was to uphold the perspective that the task was to promote the possibility of realising the formation of a workers state by means of the act of proletarian revolution, which was the only instance in which the genuine power of the Soviets would be realised. Furthermore, Trotsky was careful to outline in 1924, as in 1917, that the class character of the realisation of the revolutionary process would be the creation of a workers state, and so it would be misleading and subjective to define the proletarian revolution as being socialist.

Also, Trotsky, like Lenin, was not reticent to accept that in some sense the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had been realised in 1917. But the problem was that the conditions in which it had been realised in 1917 was opportunist, or in terms of the justification of the subservience of the Soviet to the domination of the Provisional government. Hence, Trotsky did not criticise Kamenev for being wrong. Far from it. But rather that the logic of Kamenev's position was that he was unable to uphold a principled alternative to the view of the Mensheviks. The result of Kamenev's stance was to capitulate to the logic of the process of the accommodation of the Soviet leadership to the bourgeoisie. In this manner the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had been realised. Thus Trotsky was not denying a democratic form of the revolutionary process, but rather that uncritical acceptance of this situation could only result in an opportunist policy of class collaboration. The only principled standpoint was to go beyond the limitations of the democratic revolution and instead uphold a perspective of proletarian power in the form of the promotion of the Soviets to a position of genuine hegemony in terms of establishing the workers state. The point being made was that the democratic revolution was no longer progressive in historical terms. Instead it meant the submission of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie in a situation in which the realisation of the power of the working class was possible. Thus it was necessary to connect the genuine progress of the democratic revolution to the aim of the ascendency of the proletariat to power.

In other words the concrete expression of the approach of Kamenev was a reluctance to strive for power: “The fundamental controversial question, around which everything else centred, was this: whether or not we should struggle for power, whether or not we should assume power. This alone is ample proof that we were not then dealing with a mere episodic divergence of opinions but with two tendencies of utmost principled significance. The first and principled tendency was proletarian and led to world revolution. The other was 'democratic' i.e., petty bourgeois, and led, in the last analysis, to the subordination of proletarian policies to the requirements of bourgeois society in the process of reform. These two tendencies came into hostile conflict over every essential question that arose throughout the year 1917.”(19) Hence the view that the democratic revolution had to be completed meant the effective opposition to the aim of striving for proletarian power. Instead it meant the reform of what had become a bourgeois society because of the accommodation of the leaders of the Soviets. Therefore there was not some ambiguous democratic stage of the revolution to be realised, instead in the unique form of the support of the Soviets for the Provisional government this stage had been completed. This meant that the only principled policy was for the Soviets to end their adherence to class collaboration and instead become the instruments for the attainment of the hegemony of the working class. If this development did not occur then the so-called democratic process would merely become the justification for the continuation of the imperialist war and the related misery of capitalism, and the opposition to the aspiration of the peasants for land. This view of Trotsky was vindicated by the fact that Kamenev could never articulate what was meant by the success of the democratic revolution, and instead the concrete aspect of his standpoint amounted to opposition to the insurrection of October 1917.

Indeed Lars Lih tries to evade the most important strategic issues of 1917 by arguing that the approach of democratic revolution was compatible with the aim of Soviet power. But this was not how it was argued in 1917. Instead Trotsky was right to contend that adherence to a concept of democratic revolution meant rejecting the perspective of striving to realise the domination of the working class. However, this meant there could not be any principled understanding of democratic revolution. Instead it could only express effective subordination to the interests of the bourgeoisie. The very practice of the class struggle in 1917 had discredited the aim of democratic revolution. Obviously this did not mean that democratic tasks had become superfluous, but there realisation depended upon the success of the proletarian revolution, as with the prospect of achieving land reform. But, in contrast to this principled approach the Bolsheviks led by Kamenev expressed a reformist acceptance of applying pressure on the bourgeoisie rather than promoting their overthrow. Trotsky outlines the differences between Lenin and his critics within the Bolsheviks in the following manner: “Lenin's position was this: an irreconcilable struggle against the defencism and its supporters, the capture of the Soviet majority, the overthrow of the Provisional government, the seizure of power through the Soviets, a revolutionary peace policy and a programme of Socialist revolution at home and International revolution abroad.”(18) This represented the only principled approach because its alternative was to apply pressure on the bourgeoisie, or to accept the supposed limits of the February revolution. Lenin advocated an end to all suggestion of class compromise, and the beginning of the consistent application of the tasks of proletarian revolution. Trotsky defines his standpoint as supporting socialist revolution, but his approach has not been modified. He still upholds the view that the possibility of socialism is an internationalist task. Hence to define the revolution as socialist is essentially about differentiating political perspectives from any suggestion that the task should be about supposedly completing the democratic revolution. In contrast, Trotsky argues that the approach of Kamenev supporting completing the bourgeois revolution was in contradiction to the task of realising Soviet power and achieving proletarian hegemony. Instead Kamenev’s logical tactics became that of applying pressure on the Provisional government. (21) Thus the divisions were between a tendency that accommodated to reformism and the alternative of a revolutionary standpoint.

Trotsky is suggesting that there was no sense of convergence between Lenin and the Old Bolsheviks, but instead they differed about tactics and perspectives. In 1917 Trotsky made no mention of this situation because he was actively concerned with the tasks of the revolutionary process. In practice he was striving to advance the prospect of the success of proletarian revolution. In 1924 when his approach of permanent revolution was being called into question he defended it in terms of indicating its similarities with the stance of Lenin in 1917. Permanent revolution meant an uncompromising support for the aim of Soviet power, and related opposition to any form of opportunism such as the view expressed by those that had called for the completion of the democratic revolution. It was not Trotsky who changed his view in 1924, instead he upheld and improved it by indicating the similarities of his standpoint with that of Lenin. But, he argued that his critics in 1924 were often the expression of an opportunist approach of advocating the completion of the democratic revolution in 1917. They argued on the eve of the revolution that the political conditions for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie were not yet favourable, yet Trotsky contends that the Bolsheviks had genuine indications from the workers that they were ready for insurrection. The implication is that the pressure of Lenin, combined with Trotsky's organisational skills, was ultimately sufficient to overcome the influence of the objectors to the act of the overthrow of the Provisional government.

However, what is problematical about Trotsky's views in 1924 is his conclusion. He outlines quite rightly that it would be dogmatic to view the Soviets as the only agency of the mass movement which can bring about the success of the revolutionary process. He indicates that under certain conditions that factory committees, or the trade unions may have a role that could be similar to that of the Soviets. But what he also contends is that the revolutionary developments of 1917 indicated the primary importance of the role of the party: “The proletarian revolution is precisely distinguished by the fact that the proletariat – in the person of its vanguard – acts not only as the main offensive force but also as the guiding force. The part played in bourgeois revolutions by the economic power of the bourgeoisie by its education and municipalities and universities, is a part which can be filled in a proletarian revolution only by the party of the proletariat. The role of the party has become all the more important in view of the fact that the enemy has become far more conscious......The epoch of the social revolution in Europe, as has been shown by its very first steps, will be an epoch not only of strenuous and ruthless struggle but also of planned and calculated battles – far more planned then with us in 1917.”(22) If this approach is utilised in order to contribute towards opposing organisational conservatism in the party about the tasks of revolution, it should be supported. But, it is also possible, that if applied in a one-sided and elitist manner it could become the basis to underestimate the importance of the development of mass organisations of working class power in order to promote the vitally necessary popular and so effective character of the revolutionary process. The point is that the party could not have led the workers in a revolutionary struggle in 1917 if it was not for the formation of Soviets which expressed popular and alternative forms of democracy, and therefore represented a challenge to the domination of the Provisional government. Hence the party would not have had any credibility if it had not supported the perspective of 'All Power to the Soviets'. In other words the approach of party revolution, later justified by Stalin, could not express the actual dynamics of the genuinely proletarian aspiration for the overthrow of capitalism. Hence it is the duty of the party to encourage the formation of Soviets or factory committees if the possibility of an authentic revolutionary process is to be encouraged and developed. Trotsky was right to suggest that the role of Soviets should not be considered in dogmatic terms. But the alternative to Soviets is that of the factory committees or the role of the trade unions. What is problematical is to reject the importance of the Soviets in favour of party revolution. This is the correction that we should make to Trotsky's possible justification of a party conception of revolution. Only the mass activity of the working class can ensure that a genuine proletarian revolution is occurring. In this context, Soviets may not be crucial, but other organs of mass struggle are still required if a popular revolutionary process is to be realised.

APPENDIX – THE APPROACH OF LENIN

Lenin outlined in his major article: The Tasks of Proletariat in Our Revolution' that the aim of the realisation of genuine Soviet power could represent the formation of a commune state that would be able to introduce measures in favour of the interests of the workers and peasants, such as land reform and nationalisation of the banks: “Such measures as the nationalisation of the land, of all the banks and syndicates, or at least the immediate establishment of the control of the Soviets of Workers deputies, etc., over them – measures which do not in any way constitute the introduction of socialism – must be absolutely insisted on, and wherever possible carried out in a revolutionary way.”(1) The point being made is that under the present economic and political conditions it would not be possible to promote the direct introduction of socialism. Instead transitional measures would be necessary, and connected to the advance of the international revolution, in order for socialism to become possible. This was why Lenin refuted Plekhanov’s view that the Bolsheviks were contemplating a socialist revolution. But nor was a supposedly democratic revolution being contemplated by Lenin. Instead his perspective was that Soviet power would create the political conditions in order to provide an impetus for the possibility of socialism. In his direct reply to Plekhanov, the article: 'A Basic Question', Lenin accepted that because the peasants were in the majority of the population this means that a direct and short-term transition to socialism was not possible.(2) In this manner, the revolution being proposed was not socialist. Indeed he accepts that actions like land reform would express a bourgeois character, and nor would nationalisation of the banks be socialist. But the political character of such measures would be to enhance the influence of the workers and the Soviets. Lenin concludes that: “After these measures will have been put into effect, further progress towards socialism in Russia would have become fully possible, and given the aid of the more advanced and experienced workers of Western Europe who have broken with their Western European Plekhanov's, Russia's real transition to socialism would be inevitable, and the success of such a transition would be assured.”(3)

Thus a genuine Soviet government would be carrying out bourgeois tasks such as promoting land reform, but its overall character would be to promote measures that advance the possibility of socialism. But socialism as such would become only realistic in connection to the progress being made by the international revolution. Thus Plekhanov is wrong because he is implying that the aim of the Bolsheviks is socialism in one country. Instead of this idealist and voluntarist perspective it would be premature to define the forthcoming revolution as being socialist. The most it can achieve is to generate measures that could make the realisation of socialism more possible. Forming a Commune state would represent the political conditions to make the process of transition to socialism a potentiality, but in order that this possibility could become an actuality requires the transformation of the international situation in terms of the success of the European proletariat. This standpoint is identical to that of Trotsky, and enabled him to support the Bolsheviks in 1917. In refuting Plekhanov Lenin was not in any sense suggesting that what could occur under the leadership of the Soviet was a bourgeois democratic revolution. Indeed he accepted that the formation of the Provisional government meant the realisation of the bourgeois revolution. Hence the principled task of the proletariat was to promote the power of the Soviets. This would have bourgeois democratic tasks like land reform, but it would also be about generating the economic conditions for the promotion of the tasks of advancing the possibility of socialism. In precise terms he was for the formation of a Commune state that would have the aim of socialism. But this could only become an effective possibility in terms of the advance of the international revolution. In terms of the economic conditions of Russia itself, socialism was not a realistic possibility. This view must have been an important reason why Lenin did not accept Plekhanov's characterisation of the revolution as being socialist. More precisely the aim of Soviet power would be to carry out measures that would promote socialism. Only international revolution would ensure that socialism itself became the direct aim of the revolutionary process. This approach of Lenin indicates that it would be a caricature to argue in the manner of Lars Lih that his aim was primarily the realisation of a democratic revolution. Instead in a precise manner Lenin was for the formation of a transitional state that would take measures that could generate the possibility of realising socialism under favourable international conditions

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Lar T Lih Trotsky 1917 versus Trotsky 1924 in Weekly Worker November 2nd number 1177 p1-3

(2) ibid p1

(3) ibid p3

(4)Leon Trotsky What Next, (1917) in Marxist Internet Archive

(5) ibid chapter one: What Has Happened p3

(6) ibid p3-4

(7)Chapter five The Character of the Russian Revolution p1-6

(8) ibid p1

(9) ibid p3

(10) ibid p4

(11) ibid p4

(12) ibid p5

(13)Chapter six: International Tactics p2

(14) ibid p3-4

(15) ibid p4

(16)Leon Trotsky: Lessons of October, Union Books London 1993

(17) ibid p9

(18) ibid p13

(19) ibid p13

(20) ibid p22

(21) ibid p25

(22) ibid p63

Lenin Appendix

(1)Lenin: Tasks of Proletariat in Our revolution, Collected Works Volume 24 p74 (Progress, Publishers Moscow 1964)

(2)Lenin: The Basic Question CW volume 24 p192-195

(3) ibid p195