PERMANENT REVOLUTION IN CHINA

TROTSKY'S EVALUATION OF THE CHINESE RED ARMY

The political events in China between 1926-27 led to a serious defeat of the revolutionary forces. (1) This meant the potential for proletarian uprising was seriously undermined and instead the emphasis changed to the importance of political activity in the rural areas. Trotsky had criticised the policy of accommodation to the Kuomintang, and he outlined how this would result in the suppression of the working class. Tragically, Stalin was against this viewpoint and instead advocated united struggle against imperialism and for the democratic revolution. Trotsky's approach was vindicated with Chiang-Kai-Shek's repressive coup in Shanghai which led to the massacre of many workers. The effective response of the Chinese Communist Party was to become either Trotskyists, or to support Mao's creation of the Red Army. We will attempt to outline how Trotsky defended the perspective of permanent revolution in these difficult circumstances, and in this manner outline the principled aspects that represent opposition to what became the guerrilla strategy of Mao.

Mao essentially rejected the possibility of a popular uprising of the working class after the serious defeats of the late 1920's. However, this tactical mistake did not mean that he accommodated to Chiang-Kai Shek. Instead he upheld the necessity of a Communist party leadership of the peasants. This would become the basis of a revolution against imperialism and for the unity of China. He still formally adhered to the importance of working class leadership of the bourgeois democratic revolution. (2) But he accepts that the defeats of the 1920's had altered the character of this strategy. The social content of the hegemonic role of the working class becomes carried out by the Red Army and the continual enlargement of its control: “Only the Soviet government and only the Red Army can protect the interests of the workers, peasants and soldiers, overthrow the Kuomintang, overthrow imperialism, and really defend the people.”(3) Hence the possibility of the advance of the Chinese revolution depends upon the importance of the Communist party and its ability to express the distinct interests of the working class and the aspiration of all the social forces that are opposed to imperialism. This standpoint represents the aim of the new democratic revolution. Mao comments: “The Chinese revolution as a whole involves a two-fold task. That is to say, it embraces a revolution that is bourgeois democratic in character (a new-democratic revolution) and a revolution that is proletarian-socialist in character....The leadership in this twofold revolutionary task rests on the shoulders of the party of the Chinese proletariat, the Chinese Communist party, for without its leadership no revolution can succeed.”(4)

In other words, Mao rejects the previous policy of accommodation to the Kuomintang which had led to serious defeats in the recent past. But the strategic orientation is considered to be the development of a party led revolution which aims at military success over the forces of reaction and imperialism. In this context, the hegemonic importance of the proletariat is a formality because it is considered seriously weakened and unable to have an effective primary role in the revolutionary process. However, the Communist Party acts to uphold the interests of the working class in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism. In this context Mao would argue that the working class still has a leading role in the struggle to change society. Mao has suggested that the difficulties involved in the attempt to end the domination of imperialism within Chinese society means that only the strict subordination of the exploited social forces to the role of the party can result in success. In this sense the importance given to military struggle led by the Red Army was perfectly logical, and expressed Mao's conception of the revolutionary process. The activity of both the peasantry and the working class was to be subordinated to the directives of the party.

Trotsky was to reject these arguments. However, he does not deny the necessity to form a Red Army under the circumstances of defeat: “A Red Army of regulars must be constructed on the basis of the movement of the workers and peasants that is actually unfolding.”(5) But this task is not considered to be primary, and is effectively of a secondary character when compared to the importance of reviving struggle within the cities. Hence the defeats of the working class do not change their hegemonic role in the Chinese revolution. The importance of the Red Army is still secondary when compared to the activity of the working class in the urban areas. Instead of an emphasis on the activity of the Red Army at the expense of the significance of the working class, the task of the Communist party after the period of serious defeats should be about how to revive their activity and militancy: “We demanded a shift to the defensive, a strengthening of the underground organization of the party, the participation in the economic struggles of the proletariat, and the mobilization of the masses under democratic slogans: the independence of China, the right of self-determination for the different nationalities in the population, a constituent assembly, the confiscation of the land, the eight hour day. Such a policy would have allowed the communist vanguard to emerge gradually from its defeat, to re-establish connections with the trade unions and with the unorganized urban and rural masses, and to prepare to meet the new revolutionary upsurge fully armed.”(6)

Thus Trotsky rejects any suggestion that the defeats of the recent past have ended the hegemonic and revolutionary role of the urban working class. Instead the primary role of the party is to develop policies that can contribute to the revival of militancy, and the incentive to engage in struggle by the proletariat. But this means that over-ambitious demands will be futile under conditions of defeat, and instead what is necessary is the advocacy of defensive demands that can promote the beginnings of the mobilisation of the workers. What is necessary is to support demands that are best able to bring about the self-activity of the working class. It is necessary to recognise that the workers have been demoralised by defeats, and support for the Communist Party, has become small. However, the tempo of developments in the rural areas is different to that of the urban cities. The defeats that have occurred in the cities do not necessarily influence the situation in the countryside which is still based on the development of discontent between the peasantry with the feudal landowners. Trotsky believes that is possible to develop war by the peasantry with the forces of feudal reaction, but this activity is not sufficient to establish a viable system of Soviet government which requires the leadership role of the working class: “The peasantry, even the most revolutionary, cannot create an independent government; it can only support the government of another class, the dominant urban class. The peasantry at all decisive moments follows either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. So-called peasant parties may disguise this fact, but they cannot annul it. Soviets are the organs of power of a revolutionary class in opposition to the bourgeoisie. This means the peasantry are unable to organize a soviet system on its own. The same holds true for an army. More than once in China and in Russia and other countries too, the peasantry has organised guerrilla armies which fought with incomparable courage and stubbornness. But they remained guerrilla armies, connected to a local province and incapable of centralised strategic operations on a large scale. Only the predominance of the proletariat in the decisive parts of the country creates the necessary basis for the organization of a Red Army and for the extension of the Soviet system into the countryside.”(7)

This approach is flawed because the very role of the Communist party changes the character of the situation. Without the influence of the Communist party in the countryside it would not be possible to create a Red Army and Soviets. But in a substitutionist and bureaucratic manner, the Red Army is created, and caricatures of Soviets are generated by the Stalinist Communist party. This is not a genuine expression of authentic proletarian revolution, but these developments do indicate that the peasantry is able to overcome the domination of the feudal landowners under the leadership of the Communist party. In general terms, Trotsky is not wrong to outline how the principled process of the emancipation of the peasantry occurs under the leadership of the working class, but this very development is taking a bureaucratic form in terms of the role of the Communist party. This does not mean that the Stalinist Communist party has become revolutionary. Instead it is forced to rely on the implementation of land reform in order to advance the success of the military struggle with the Kuomintang. Hence what is not being carried out is a revolutionary process based on the leadership of the working class, because the actions of the Communist Party are an alternative to the genuine influence of the proletariat. Trotsky rejects the importance of these developments because he argues, quite rightly, that the working class and the peasantry have not yet been able to form an alliance, or an ability to act together for common objectives. This point is true, but in a distorted manner the Communist Party has replaced the role of the working class in the process of realising land reform and the undermining of the domination of the landowners. The weakness in Trotsky's position is that he relies on the future development of the struggle of the working class in order to create the economic and political conditions for the emancipation of the peasantry. But in the meantime, the peasants are being effectively emancipated by the military success of the Red Army.

Thus Trotsky's perspective seems an ideal abstraction. He argues: “No one but the workers can lead the poor peasants to victory. Their mutual victory can lead to no other regime than the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only such a regime can establish a soviet system and organise a Red Army, which will be the military expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the poor peasants.”(8) But Trotsky has already established an important flaw in his own strategy, which is that the working class is not yet capable of providing this type of revolutionary leadership of the peasantry because of the recent serious defeats inflicted by the Kuomintang. In contrast, the Red Army under Communist Party leadership is advancing the cause of land reform and emancipation of the peasants. The Red Army is carrying out the programme that Trotsky has outlined as the exclusive tasks of the working class. The strategic problem in his standpoint is that the working class is not yet able to implement the revolutionary programme of land reform through the realisation of proletarian power. Instead in a distorted manner the Red Army is carrying out these tasks. But what provides validity for the approach of Trotsky is that he provides the most emphatic reasoning why the democratic dictatorship can only be successful as an integral part of the struggle for proletarian revolution: “The peaceful “growing over” of a democratic revolution into a socialist revolution is possible only under the dictatorship of one class – the proletariat.”(9) Hence whilst the Red Amy may be making empirical successes in relation to the advance of land reform, they still lack the most principled and effective strategy for realising the completed emancipation of the worker and peasants. This task is represented by the establishment of a workers state. The strategic ambiguity of the Chinese Communist Party means they do not support this approach, and this limitation is an important reason why Trotsky's criticisms of the struggle of the Red Army still has validity, because they do not recognise the connection between the peasant unrest to the importance of striving for the formation of a proletarian regime. Instead Trotsky believes, with some justification that the Communist Party still differentiates between democratic tasks and the aim of the formation of a Soviet state.

The Communist party has developed strategic illusions because of the very fact that it has made advances in its domination of rural areas, and so no longer has to rely on the role of the urban working class in the revolutionary process. Trotsky opposes this standpoint, but his error is that he underestimates the importance of the developments in the agricultural areas, and so he does not recognise the importance of peasant unrest for the very revival of the class struggle in the cities. Hence he comments in a one-sided manner that: “But it must be understood in advance that in the consciousness of the Chinese peasant the general slogan of soviets does not by any means signify the dictatorship of the proletariat. The peasants cannot speak for the proletarian dictatorship a priori. They can be led to it only through the experience of a struggle that will prove to them in life that their democratic problems cannot be solved in any way except through the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(11) This view seems to be generally valid. But his strategy could be improved if he explicitly and precisely suggested that the present peasant struggle was contributing to the revival of the activity of the working class. The unrest of the peasants is directly and constructively promoting the attempt to generate the possibility of proletarian revolution. His failure to make this point seems to be a serious strategic error, and so his approach seems to represent an ideal conception of the revolutionary process which is imposed onto actual events. It would be more concrete if he related the actual development of peasant struggles to the promotion of the revolutionary process and the creation of the prospects for the formation of a proletarian regime.

In other words Trotsky is not being dogmatic when he contends that the peasantry can only be liberated by the development of a proletarian revolution. The domination of the Communist party over sections of the peasantry is not identical with this possibility because the revolutionary role of the party is not about establishing its domination over all classes within society. Instead only an authentic proletarian revolution, which results in the formation of workers and peasant soviets and the expression of their self-activity, can achieve the genuine liberation of all subordinated class forces. This standpoint is a valid view being outlined by Trotsky, but does this articulation of a correct strategy mean that he should also ignore, or under-estimate the process of peasant uprising that is occurring within the auspices of the influence and role of the Chinese communist party? Instead would it not be more flexible, and yet still principled, to call for the unification of the struggles of the Red Army, and Chinese peasants, with the urban activity of the working class? Instead in a dogmatic and illusory manner Trotsky calls for the unity of the role of the workers with an ideal conception of the struggles of the peasants. Hence instead of actual recognition of the importance of what exists he calls idealistically for the formation of an alliance of workers and a peasant movement which is defined by his political principles. This means he is reluctant to define events in terms of what exists rather than the tendency to impose his ideal conception of what should happen. This subjective limitation is outlined in the following point: “The peasant movement, although adorned with the name of soviets, remains scattered, local, and provincial. It can be elevated for a national movement only by connecting the struggle for land and against oppressive taxes and burdens of militarism with the ideals of the independence of China and the sovereignty of the people. A democratic expression of this connection is the sovereign constituent assembly. Under such a slogan the communist vanguard will be able to unite around itself, the vast millions of workers, the oppressed small townspeople, and the hundreds of millions of poor peasants for an insurrection against foreign and native oppressors.”(12)

The point is that what he is proposing in the situation of recent defeats of the working class may be the most practical and credible basis to develop a unified mass movement of opposition to imperialism and capitalism. But this possibility to develop mass struggle will not occur if the present unrest of the peasants, and its expression in the role of the Red Army, is effectively ignored. Instead Trotsky should call for the revival of the working class movement together with support for the advance of the Red army and its expression of the discontent of the peasants. This tactical flexibility is not an undermining of the perspective of the permanent revolution, but instead would represent its role within the conditions of the ascent of peasant struggle in the Chinese situation. To make this tactical adaptation would not be to betray the aim of working class hegemony in the revolutionary process. Instead this hegemony would be expressed by the unification of the struggle of the workers and peasants. Nevertheless despite this criticism, Trotsky is being principled when he maintains that the liberation of the peasants requires the leadership of the working class and the role of proletarian revolution. It would be an illusion to consider that the peasant movement, however militant, can liberate the cities. Instead the actions of the working class are required in order to bring about the emancipation of the peasants. Trotsky could not have expected that the revolutionary process would have been distorted by the role of the Communist party and its bureaucratic domination of the activity of workers and peasants. To have considered this an option in the early 1930's would have been to reject the only credible revolutionary policy which was that the working class consciously acts to enhance the emancipation of society.

However, it is necessary to slightly modify this criticism and accept that Trotsky, despite the dogmatism in his position, did also tentatively recognise the potential of the peasant unrest if this mass struggle is connected to the role of the working class and the correct revolutionary strategy: “At the present time it is evident that there are substantial grounds for expressing the hope that, through a correct policy, it will be possible to unite the workers movement and the urban movement in general with the peasant war, and this would constitute the beginning of the third Chinese revolution. But in the meantime this still remains only a hope, not a certainty.(13) The caution of Trotsky is explained by the fact that bitter experience has indicated that Stalinism has generally acted to undermine the potential of mass struggles because of its opportunist character. It is not unreasonable for Trotsky to consider that Stalinism will act in this manner in the present situation and therefore will undermine the struggle of the peasants in the name of unity of the anti-imperialist forces, etc. However, his concern could become the very reason to support the peasants and to advocate unity of the urban and rural centres of mass struggle, Instead he asks in a pessimistic manner the following question: “The peasant movement has created its own armies, has seized great territories, and has installed its own institutions. In the event of further successes – and all of us, of course, passionately desire such successes – the movement will become linked up with the urban and industrial centres, and through that very fact it will come face to face with the working class. What will be the nature of this encounter? Is its certain that its character will be peaceful and friendly.”(14) Trotsky asks a very important question, but he is being pessimistic if he assumes that it is likely that the encounter between peasant army and the workers will be unfriendly. If the revolutionary process is authentic and democratic, it is entirely likely that the peasants and workers will greet each other as mutual allies. Indeed, this situation could have been possible, but instead the domination of the Communist party over the Red Army meant the cities were occupied by what seemed to be a hostile force. A genuine revolutionary process would have ensured that the Red Army could have been the genuine liberators of the towns.

But this view is not the basis of Trotsky's caution about the meeting of peasants and workers. Instead he contends that different class interests could result in hostile encounters, and this viewpoint is not modified by Communist leadership of the peasant armies. He argues that the Communist commissars have absorbed the petty proprietor attitudes of the peasants. In contrast the workers have been weakened by recent defeats in the class struggle, and so will lack the ability or strength to influence the peasant armies. In this context the result of the peasant invasion of the towns may be domination and subjugation of the workers. This does explain accurately what happened, but what Trotsky could not properly anticipate was that this situation was because of the Communist party policy, which was to ensure that the working class could not act independently in order to promote the possibility of authentic proletarian revolution. But in an important questioning mode of expression, Trotsky does ask whether the relationship of the Communist party to the peasants could result in an antagonistic attitude towards the workers: “The peasant detachments flushed with the victories they have achieved, stand under the wing of the Comintern, They call themselves “The Red Army”, i.e. they identify themselves with the armed forces of the Soviets. What results consequently is that the revolutionary peasantry of China, in the person of the ruling stratum, seems to have appropriated to itself beforehand the political and moral capital which should by the nature of things belong to the Chinese workers. Isn't it possible that things may turn out so that all this capital will be directed at a certain moment against the workers?”(15)

Consequently in a perceptive manner, Trotsky tentatively asks the question as to whether the Red army will become a force that opposes the independent interests of the working class. The problem with his standpoint is methodology. He assumes that the peasants will be the accomplice of the Communist party in repressing the workers. What he should have been more willing to accept is that it was the very domination of the peasantry by the Communist party which enabled it to utilise the Red Army in order to undermine the mass strength of the workers. Trotsky ambivalent attitude towards the self-activity of the peasants enables him to arrive at the conclusion that the peasants would willingly act to undermine the importance of the working class in the revolutionary process. Instead Trotsky is being more accurate when he comments that: “The commanders and commissars appear in the guise of absolute masters of the situation and upon occupying cities will be rather apt to look down from above upon the workers. The demands of the workers might often appear to them either inopportune or ill-advised.”(16) But this very ability to dominate the working class is the logical outcome of a situation in which the party bureaucracy also maintains the peasants in a subordinated position. Trotsky is unwilling to accept this relationship between the Red Army and the peasantry because of his cautious conception of the peasants as an intermediate class, who can follow either the proletariat or bourgeoisie. Hence he suggests that only under exceptional circumstances do the peasants and workers become allies: “The peasantry does not find the road to the proletariat easily but only after a series of mistakes and defeats.”(17) This standpoint is very dogmatic and denies the immense potential for an alliance of the workers and peasants in the conditions of China. He is more credible when he outlines how the privileges of the bureaucracy act as the major problem for creating an alliance between the peasant red Army with the working class: “Nor should one forget such “trifles” as the fact that within cities the staffs and offices of the victorious armies are established not in the proletarian huts but in the finest city buildings, in the houses and apartments of the bourgeoisie, and all this facilitates the inclination of the upper stratum of the peasant armies to feel itself part of the “cultured” and “educated” classes, in no way part of the proletariat.”(18)

Thus in an anticipatory manner, Trotsky is describing the possibility of bureaucratic counter-revolution on the basis of the dominating relationship of the Communist party with regards to the Red Army. But he is less perceptive when outlining in the most cautious and sceptical terms the alternative possibility of an alliance of the peasants and the working class in an authentic revolutionary process. He does not recognise sufficiently that it was the very relationship of the Communist party to the peasants which undermined the alternative of the promotion of a united front of workers and peasants. However, despite these limitations he does outline the possibilities for tensions and antagonism between the Red army led by the Communists and the working class: “Thus, in China the causes and grounds for conflict between the army, which is peasant in composition and petty bourgeois in leadership, and the workers is not only not eliminated but, on the contrary, all the circumstances are such as to greatly increase the possibility and even the inevitability of such conflicts, and in addition the chances of the proletariat are far less favourable than was the case in Russia.”(19) The strategic impasse in Trotsky's reasoning is that he does not outline how the alliance of the peasant Red Army and the working class can be formed despite the problem of the role of the Communist party This flaw is important because the role of the Red Army represents a real mass movement which has achieved impressive victories over the Kuomintang. The point is that even if Trotsky's preference is for a mass peasant movement under genuine revolutionary leadership, the actual situation is that the mobilisation of the peasants is occurring under the influence of the Chinese Stalinists. Hence the practical strategic issue is how to unite this actual mass movement with the urban working class. Trotsky warns of the limitations of the present peasant organisations, but he does not attempt to consider how these problems can be overcome. The result is that he demarcates between an ideal situation of the revolutionary unity of the workers and peasants from the reality of a Stalinist led peasant movement which may undermine the role of the working class. He does not outline how the limitations of the real may be transformed into the possibilities of the ideal.

Instead of addressing how the peasant war can become victorious, in the last instance Trotsky considers in a pessimistic manner that it cannot become successful without the revival of the struggle in the cities.(20) This conclusion is made because Trotsky considers the peasants to be a contradictory class that cannot support progressive aims without the leadership of the cities: “The peasant movement is a mighty revolutionary factor insofar as it is directed against the large landowners, militarists, feudalists, and usurers. But in the peasant movement itself are very powerful proprietary and reactionary tendencies and at a certain stage it can become hostile to the workers and sustain that hostility already equipped with arms. He who forgets about the dual nature of the peasantry is not a Marxist.”(21) Trotsky does suggest the workers can provide leadership that encourages the progressive tendencies in the present peasant war. But he is pessimistic about the possibilities of this perspective and instead indicates that what seems most likely is the repression of the workers by the peasants: “But with the development of events, class conflicts may take on a national scope and lead the revolution to a catastrophe, i.e. to a new massacre of the workers hoodwinked by the bourgeoisie.”(22) But what is forgotten in relation to this one-sided analysis is that the present peasant war is led by the Stalinists. Hence despite their reactionary character the situation has promise, and the potential to develop an alliance of the workers and peasants is possible. What is vital is that the struggle in the cities revives in order that the workers can influence the peasants to come under their leadership. In this context Trotsky is correct to suggest that the prospect of the alliance between the peasants and the workers depends on the strength of the latter and their ability to understand the character of the actions of the rural struggle: “The more clearly the advanced workers understand the living dialectic of the class interrelations of the proletariat, the peasantry, and the bourgeoisie, the more confidently will they seek unity with the peasant strata closest to them, and the more successfully will they counteract the counter-revolutionary provocateurs within the peasant armies themselves as well as within the cities.”(23)

The problem with this perspective is that Trotsky seems to be wary about the present peasant struggle and therefore contrasts it with a mythical mass movement that could be more progressive. If workers actually took his advice to study the peasant movement seriously, they would reflect about how to relate in a principled manner to the actually existing peasant mass movement. This approach would mean developing slogan and policies that could appeal to this rural struggle, and therefore undermine the problem of a Stalinist led movement 'invading' the cities. Thus when he does concentrate on what is happening, Trotsky is aware that the major issue is about the relative strengths of the workers and peasants and its consequences: “The official party, in the meantime, continues to concentrate all its forces on the “Red Armies” and in the peasant regions. The moment arrives when the peasant troops occupy the industrial centres and are brought face to face with the workers. In such a situation, in what manner will the Chinese Stalinists act?”(24) Trotsky understands that if the Trotskyists are influential in the urban areas, and represent the forces of genuine proletarian revolution, the outcome could be civil war between the peasant army led by the Stalinists with the workers. However, Trotsky recognises that this situation would express the most pessimistic outcome, and he contends this development would represent the Stalinists going over to the side of bourgeois reaction and opposing the possibility of proletarian revolution. Consequently, what he did not anticipate is that the Stalinists would utilise the peasant war, and the establishment of control of the cities, in order to impose a bureaucratic counter-revolution. But, in the final analysis, Trotsky also suggests the possibility of realising unity between the struggle of the workers and peasants: “While maintaining its political independence, the proletarian vanguard must be ready always to assure united action with revolutionary democracy. While we refuse to identify the armed peasant detachment with the Red army as the armed power of the proletariat and have no inclination to shut our eyes to the fact that the communist banner hides the petty bourgeois content of the peasant movement, we, on the other hand, take an absolutely clear view of the tremendous revolutionary democratic significance of the peasant war. We teach the workers to appreciate its significance and we are ready to do all in our power in order to achieve the necessary military alliance with the peasant organizations.”(25)

Finally, in an unqualified manner, Trotsky recognises the importance of the present peasant war occurring under the influence of the Communist party, and advocates the working class develops a perspective in order to unite with this mass movement. This approach does not mean adopting an unqualified attitude towards the peasant Red army, but instead involves trying to develop the policies that would promote the proletarian leadership of the peasant movement. Such an aim would be encouraged in terms of the development of a united front between the proletariat and peasantry. This united front would not be a situation of diplomatic unity, but instead would have as its strategy the aim of the creation of a proletarian regime with peasant support. But it is also necessary to emphasise that this united front could only become possible if the proletariat listened closely to what the peasants want. Hence solidarity with the struggle of the peasant Red Army means accepting the importance of the concerns of the peasants concerning land reform and the end of the domination of the feudal landowners. However, the problem was that the working class, as Trotsky was aware, had been seriously weakened by the defeats of the period 1926-29. In this context the leadership of the peasant struggle could ignore the aspirations of the workers and effectively deny the hegemony of the working class in the revolutionary struggle. Hence a situation eventually arose, which Trotsky was fearful of, which was the realisation of the domination of the cities by the peasant armies. This meant authentic proletarian revolution could not occur under these circumstances. Trotsky makes this point when he comments that: “Because of the absence of strong independent proletarian organizations in the industrial centres, the revolutionary workers, inexperienced or too little experienced, become totally lost in the peasant, petty-bourgeois environment.”(26)

The dilemma for Trotsky, and which he did not satisfactorily address, was that the acute seriousness of the defeats of the workers in the late 1920's meant they could not revive to become a significant revolutionary force. Instead it was essentially inevitable that the undefeated peasantry would become the mass movement of opposition to imperialism and feudalism. This situation meant that if the peasants were victorious they would effectively invade the passive cities. In this context, the working class could not assert its independent interests. Instead the character of the revolution would represent the influence of the peasants. Trotsky tries to gloss over the possibility of this perspective being realised, and instead he advocates the leadership of the working class for the peasant movement. He suggests: “Without the leadership of the proletariat, the peasant movement can only serve to advance one bourgeois clique against another, finally to break up into provincial factions.”(27) But this development did not occur because of the strict leadership of the Communist party, which meant the peasant movement adopted the objective of the Stalinists. Hence the Stalinists were able to express themselves as an effective revolutionary force because of the limitations and weaknesses of the proletariat in the cities. Trotsky's perspective of proletarian leadership of the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle was not possible because of the weakened condition of the working class. The Chinese Communist party, with peasant support, was able to impose its objectives onto the situation, and effectively substitute itself for the role of the working class. What this meant depends on the assessment that is made of the social relations of the peasant soviets and the Chinese revolution of 1949. Trotsky tried to uphold his strategy of proletarian revolution with principled arguments, but the practical feasibility of his approach was undermined by the seriousness of the defeats of the working class in the 1920's.

THE PRINCIPLED CHARACTER OF PERMANENT REVOLUTION IN CHINA

It has been argued by some defenders of an opportunist version of the perspective of permanent revolution that its tasks can be carried out by a Stalinist party. (28) But Trotsky makes explicit in his opposition to Stalin's accommodation to the Kuomintang, and the opportunist defence of the rejection of the aim of proletarian revolution, that the methods of class struggle are vital if the influence of bourgeois nationalism is to be undermined. This means the Communist party should have the perspective of the formation of Soviets. The very character of the revolution is defined by this demand: “In other words, the slogan of the Soviets will henceforth accompany the whole further course of the Chinese revolution and reflect its destinies.”(29) Thus if we deny the proletarian character of the revolutionary process, the result is a rejection of the demand for Soviets which are considered to be untimely or adventurist. But if we insist on the proletarian aspect of Chinese developments, then Soviets become a timely perspective in order to mobilise the working class against both imperialism and capitalism. The formation of Soviets would mean the working class utilises them in order to advance their class objectives, and to promote the struggle for political power. This means the Soviets will be crucial in order to undermine the influence of the national bourgeoisie, and to provide rival centres of power that can promote the definitive struggle for political hegemony: “In other words, to the extent that Soviets arise, arm themselves, consolidate themselves, they will tolerate over them only such a government as bases itself upon the armed workers and peasants.”(30) Consequently the Soviets are the independent organisations of the working class, and therefore enhance its ability to struggle for political power; this means they only become superfluous if the aim is to conciliate the national bourgeoisie. The call for Soviets is not a dogma, or an attempt to repeat the experience of the Soviet Union. Instead they are a logical expression of the very tempo of mass action and its expression as the popular development of the proletarian revolution. Thus if we limit our demands to that of national liberation the result is an indifference towards organising Soviets, but if we recognise the proletarian character of the revolutionary process then it is necessary to understand that at some point it is necessary to call for Soviets in order to enhance the mobilisation of the working class, and to ultimately aim for political power.

Not learning from experience, the Comintern tried to impose Soviets in Canton in order to justify its adventurist attempt to realise the overthrow of the local Kuomintang. Trotsky explains how the formation of Soviets does not conform to a dogma and instead is based on the development of the consciousness and militant activity of the working class. In this sense, the formation of the Soviet becomes the logical progression of the class struggle: “To set up an elected Soviet is not an easy matter: it is necessary that the masses know from experience what a Soviet is, that they should understand its form, that they should have accustomed themselves in the past to the election of Soviets. Of this, there was not a sign in China, as the slogan of Soviets was declared to be a Trotskyist slogan precisely in the period when it should have become the nerve centre of the entire movement. When, however, a date was fixed for in all haste for an insurrection so as to skip over their own defeats, they simultaneously had to appoint a Soviet.”(31) Trotsky explains how a Soviet cannot exist through a bureaucratic degree, but instead it is the outcome of the very progress made in the class struggle. Furthermore, its formation does not mean that it will or can instantly call for the act of insurrection, this possibility must be the development of several months, or even years. Thus if a Soviet is formed it will represent immense possibilities about the advance of mass struggle, but this potential is not identical to the act of insurrection. Instead the Soviet has to go through a period of preparation when it advances the idea of insurrection within the working class. This means it is the Soviet which is the best guarantee against the act of insurrection becoming an adventurist or elitist putsch, instead it is the Soviet which can ensure by its democratic and popular character that mass support has been obtained for the attempt to overthrow capitalism: “We valued the Soviet as that broad and elastic organisational form which is grasped by the masses who have just awakened, in the very first phase of their revolutionary action, and which is capable of uniting the working class in entirety....already matured to the point of understanding the task of capturing power.”(32)

In other words the Soviet is the organisation and political institution which undermines the possibility of an elite form of revolution in which the party acts on behalf of the class. Instead the Soviet is the democratic expression of the class, and as a result this means the process of revolution is authentically popular and participatory. This point is especially important in countries like China where the proletariat is a small minority. The development of Soviets is an expression of the possibility for the working class to lead a democratic type of revolution, and to also ensure that its class objectives are realised. This means that without the formation of Soviets it is not possible to suggest that the revolutionary process has been both democratic and proletarian. Consequently the political character of permanent revolution is more than about the combination of bourgeois democratic and socialist tasks. Instead it is a process that crucially involves the formation of the popular revolutionary power of the working class in the form of soviets. Without this development it is questionable whether permanent revolution has been realised. This point could be made about the Chinese revolution. It is possible to argue that capitalism has been overthrown by bureaucratic methods in the third world, and this suggests the unity of the bourgeois democratic revolution and the socialist revolution. But without a truly popular and democratic revolutionary process, such as that which involves the role of Soviets, the working class cannot come to political power and instead the domination of a party bureaucracy results. This situation indicates that it is a caricature of Trotsky to equate the formation of a degenerated workers state with the importance of nationalisation. Instead the most that can be suggested is that a genuine workers state has not been formed because of the lack of popular forms of democracy, such as an absence of the role of Soviets. It is possible to overthrow capitalism in a bureaucratic manner, but this does not mean that the result is a type of workers state.

In relation to events in China, Trotsky is making the point that Soviets cannot be formed by bureaucratic decree but instead are the outcome of the increasing tempo of the class struggle. Furthermore, the Soviets have a political role which is to oppose the role of the Kuomintang and to instead represent a rival form of class power. Instead the Stalinists promote Soviets in order to uphold their failing prestige. In contrast to this opportunism and elitism, Trotsky outlines how the very character of the Soviet is defined by the high level of participation of the working class in its activity and functioning: “The masses must sense and understand, while in action, that the Soviets are their organization, that they marshal the forces for a struggle, for resistance, for self-defence, and for an offensive. They can sense and understand this not from any action of a single day, nor in general from any single act, but from the experience of several weeks, months, or perhaps years with, or without interruption.”(33) The character of the Soviet is defined by its ability to express the moods and consciousness of the working class, and this very popular aspect means that it has a dynamism that advances the aim of proletarian revolution. In contrast the role of Stalinism is to define the struggles under its influence in terms of the actions of a bureaucratic apparatus. Hence the peasants are not able to express themselves freely, and so cannot define their own aims. In contrast, the Soviet is the very instrument of the views and aspirations of the working class, and this means that the revolutionary process becomes truly principled and proletarian when Soviets are formed. This understanding explains the importance that Trotsky provides to Soviets within the permanent revolution perspective.

He recognises that the alternatives developing within the Chinese revolution is either the role of the Red Army under Stalinist leadership, or the formation of Soviets and their expression of mass popular struggle. Only the latter development can represent genuine permanent revolution. Why does Trotsky seem to shift emphasis and advocate the Constituent Assembly in 1929? The answer is that he has not rejected the importance of the Soviets, but rather that the defeats of the recent period have meant that democratic and more defensive demands have come to the fore. This means: “By judiciously combining these slogans, by advancing each of them at the proper time, the Communist party will be able to tear itself out of its clandestine existence, make a bloc with the masses, win their confidence, and thus speed the coming of the period of the creation of the Soviets and of the direct struggle for power.”(34) Thus to support the role of the Soviets does not mean advocating their formation automatically, and instead it is necessary to recognise the development of more favourable periods in the class struggle when the question of Soviets is on the agenda. The very relevance of democratic demands is that they create the possibility to raise the issue of the Soviets. Thus raising democratic demands does not mean capitulation to the national bourgeoisie. On the contrary, they are the means to promote the mobilisation of the working class after its period of defeats. But only the creation of Soviets will ensure that the revolutionary process is truly principled and proletarian.

The point is that whatever the tactical changes, Trotsky is interested in what will promote the maximum mobilisation of the workers and peasants at any given moment in time. This development will ensure the possibility of movement to a higher phase in the class struggle. The highest point of this process is the creation of Soviets, which are not only popular institutional forms but also represent the prospect of the realisation of an authentic act of proletarian revolution. The Communist Party is no longer capable of expressing this principled leadership role because its aim is to restrict and limit the development of mass struggle. Hence Trotsky also seems to be suggesting that only with a new type of revolutionary leadership will the prospect of Soviets be encouraged. But if the Communist party is not willing to support the formation of genuine Soviets this implies it no longer aims to promote genuine proletarian revolution. Instead Trotsky concludes that it is only capable of defending capitalism. But we know from historical events that the Communist party is able to realise the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. However, we can conclude from the effective opposition of the Communist party to the principled revolutionary role of Soviets that it cannot represent the perspective of permanent revolution.

From the beginning of his criticism of the policy of the Comintern with regards to China, Trotsky was aware that the struggle against imperialism required the methods of the proletarian class struggle, and this meant that Soviets would be the logical outcome of the progress of mass activity: “It is possible to proceed towards the democratic worker-peasant dictatorship only on the basis of the unfolding struggle against imperialism which will be long and drawn out; only on the basis of a struggle against the national-liberal bourgeoisie for influence over the workers and peasants; only on the basis of the mass organisations of the workers and peasants not just against imperialism but also against the Chinese bourgeoisie. The only form this organisation can take is soviets.”(35) This conclusion is not dogmatic but is based on the recognition that the highest form of proletarian class struggle has been the creation of the soviet. However, they are not promoted simply for the task of revolution. This aim can only be advanced in relation to a period of struggles which increasingly result in this conclusion that the interests of the workers and peasants require the act of insurrection “But only through the experience of struggle can they mature for the role of organs for the dictatorship....If we seriously intend to strive for a democratic workers and peasants dictatorship, the soviets will have to have the necessary time develop and intervene in the unfolding events.....so that they, the soviets, can become firmly established, gain experience and subsequently make a bid for power.”(36) This means the soviets must have a period of development so that working people have time to recognise and participate in these institutions of the future socialist society. In this manner the growing influence of the soviets is concluded by the act of revolution. Hence it would be sheer folly to consider that Soviets are merely the instrument of an uprising. They can only acquire this character by having become a rival centre of power within society. This process will take time, possibly months.

Trotsky rejects any suggestion that the formation of soviets represents adventurism, and the temptation to engage in a premature attempt to seize power. He contends that: “Premature insurrections erupt more easily and frequently in cases where the masses lack an authoritative organization that embodies their revolutionary will. That is to say, the absence of soviets in the major revolutionary centres will lead to chaotic, premature, and pointless outbreaks as a result of the unorganized state of the class struggle and the absence of correct political leadership.”(37) He is making the point that because the formation of Soviets represents the highest form and expression of class struggle, this institution is the most capable organ for deciding the question as to when the direct attempt to seize political power should begin. This point was proved by the success of the October revolution in Russia. In more negative terms the importance of Soviets is being proved in China because the lack of soviets means the subordination of the working class to the Kuomintang. It is not possible to develop the class struggle in the most principled, independent and emphatic manner because the lack of soviets means the working class is subordinated to the interests of the national bourgeoisie. The soviets represent the most basic organisation of the workers, and this enables it to establish contacts with the soldiers and peasants. Only the soviets are capable of undermining the reactionary character of the army of the Kuomintang and transforming it into an ally of the cause of the working class. In other words the activity of the soviets will progressively alter the balance of class forces in favour of proletarian revolution: “The alignment of forces will proceed as follows: for or against the soviets, i.e. for preparing the transition of the revolution to the higher stage, or for a deal between the Chinese bourgeoisie and imperialism. If the question is not posed in this way, all prospects for a democratic worker-peasant dictatorship, etc. – not to mention non-capitalist paths of development - will remain merely talk to console us while the masses of Chinese people remain the cannon fodder of a revolution led by corrupt nationalist liberals.”(38)

Note that Trotsky does not equate the formation of Soviets with the inevitable victory of the working class. Instead he argues that their development means the intensification of the class struggle and increasing social polarisation that results in precise questions being asked about who should govern society. The working class acquires the belief that it can change society, and the ruling class becomes more afraid of the prospect of revolutionary change. These developments represent the generation of an atmosphere that is inclined to be optimistic about the prospects of proletarian revolution. In contrast a situation without soviets represents the subordination of the working class to the Kuomintang, and a situation of disorganisation rather than the realisation of progress in the class struggle. In precise terms the formation of soviets will create the possibility to develop dual power that would facilitate the prospects for the revolutionary transformation of society. But the Stalin leadership of the Soviet Communist party rejects the task of the formation of soviets which they equate with a situation of direct insurrection. This is an adventurist formulation which denies the role of the soviets as the highest instrument of proletarian class struggle. It is the ability of the soviets to prepare the conditions for insurrection, and so it would be illogical for them to appear on the very eve of this event! Instead soviets are the highest class content of the struggle against imperialism and capitalism, and in this manner they create the political and organisational conditions for insurrection to occur. They are popular organs that mobilise workers, soldiers and peasants in the highest forms of activity, and in this manner act as the prelude to and expression of the act of insurrection.

Trotsky is outlining the issues in the most graphic terms. Either accept subordination to the Kuomintang and accommodation to imperialism, or strive to form soviets and so advance the aim of the realisation of proletarian revolution. In this manner the role of the soviets is that they act as the organisational and political content of the strategy of permanent revolution. It would be inconceivable to try and define this revolutionary process without the role of soviets. These organs are the only effective expression of the ability to defeat the counter-revolutionary forces of imperialism and the national bourgeoisie. Furthermore, if the communist party argues against the formation of soviets in favourable conditions, this development is an indication that they have become opportunist and increasingly against proletarian revolution. In this sense to call for the arming of the workers and peasants – as Stalin does – and yet oppose soviets, is a nonsensical policy. What has to be understood is that only with the development of soviets does the question of the arming of the workers become realistic and a possible prelude to revolutionary action.

The above analysis of Trotsky's view of the relation of the role of soviets to the class struggle is meant to outline how they are indispensable to the possibility for the realisation of permanent revolution, or the connection of the bourgeois democratic tasks with the development of proletarian revolution. This awareness is obscured by the fact that Trotsky's basic definition of permanent revolution in the later 1920's seems to ignore the role of soviets: “With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of the peasant masses.”(39) We would argue that whilst this definition may be generally adequate in strategic terms it lacks concrete content. Trotsky's very writings indicate that the role of soviets, or similar popular mass organisations of the working class, are vital if the task of proletarian and permanent revolution is to be realised. The very crucial message of Trotsky's writings on China was that without the formation of soviets, the working class was subordinated to the class interests of the national bourgeoisie. Hence the primary manner in which this situation could have been transformed was by the formation of soviets. This means this task is an integral aspect of the perspective of permanent revolution. Failure to recognise this point has led to opportunist degeneration within the Fourth International.

FOOTNOTES:

(1Harold Issacs: The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution, Stanford University California 1951

(2)Stuart Schram: The Political Thought of Mao Tse Tung, Frederick A Praeger New York 1963 p147

(3) ibid p151

(4) ibid p163

(5)Leon Trotsky on China Pathfinder Press, New York 1976 p266

(6) ibid p478

(7) ibid p480

(8) ibid p482

(9) ibid p483

(10) ibid p483

(11) ibid p483

(12) ibid p484

(13) ibid p523

(14) ibid p523

(15) ibid p526

(16) ibid p526

(17) ibid p526

(18) ibid p526

(19) ibid p526-527

(20) ibid p527

(21) ibid p528

(22) ibid p528

(23)Ibid p528-529

(24) ibid p529

(25) ibid p530-531

(26) ibid p536

(27) ibid p537

(28) Michael Lowy: Combined and Uneven Development, Verso London 1980

(29)Trotsky: Problems of the Chinese Revolution: New Park, London 1969 p25

(30) ibid p27

(31) ibid p114

(32) ibid p116

(33)Leon Trotsky: The Third International after Lenin, Pathfinder Press, New York 1970 p203

(34)Problems op cit p148

(35)On China op cit p151

(36) ibid p151

(37) ibid p152

(38) ibid p154

(39)Leon Trotsky: The Permanent Revolution, New Park London 1962 p152