TROTSKY'S ANALYSIS OF THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

Jack Conrad utilises the opportunity of the hundredth anniversary of the October revolution in order to criticise Trotsky's interpretation of these historical events. He contends that: “Beginning with his The Lessons of October (1924), Trotsky, argued that the standing programme of 'old Bolshevism', because it did not envisage immediate socialist tasks, proved entirely inadequate, given the challenges of 1917.”(1) This is a puzzling criticism because both Trotsky, and Lenin, the leader and major theoretician of Bolshevism, were united in 1917 around the task of realising the power of the Soviets. In this sense they were united concerning issues of programme, strategy and tactics. But, in 1924 when the criticism of Trotsky's perspective of permanent revolution became incessant, Trotsky outlined what he considered to be the character of the October revolution. This defence developed for the first time his criticisms of Bolshevik leaders like Zinoviev and Kamenev. However, the emphasis of his criticism concerns their opportunist rejection of the necessity of insurrection in October. (2) Trotsky is concerned about their integrity and vacillation concerning the decision to take power. Hence his criticism is primarily about the moral stature of Zinoviev and Kamenev. He considers that outstanding theoretical questions have been resolved by the common practice of himself and Lenin during 1917. Trotsky does briefly explain why he considers that Lenin began to view the perspective of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat as resolved during 1917, but this issue is entirely of a secondary importance: “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 are not then dealing with a mere episodic divergence of opinions, but with two tendencies of principled significance. The first and principal tendency was proletarian and led to the road of world revolution. The other was 'democratic', i.e., petty-bourgeois, and led, in the last analysis to the subordination of the 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.”(3)

In other words the primary political differences were between the Mensheviks, who supported accommodation with the bourgeoisie and imperialism, and the Bolsheviks, and their advocacy of the strategy of proletarian revolution. Hence Lenin and Trotsky were united around the aim of establishing the complete political power of the Soviets, whilst the Mensheviks utilised their influence in the Soviets in order to accept the political influence of the bourgeois Provisional government. This meant the tendency for Zinoviev and Kamenev to support opportunism was an entirely secondary matter, and one that could be resolved by the general support for a revolutionary standpoint within the Bolsheviks. Their opportunism did not undermine the Bolsheviks acting to promote a revolutionary standpoint. In an article about the 1917 revolution written in 1918, Trotsky did not even directly mention the opportunist lapses of Zinoviev and Kamenev. (4) Instead his major emphasis was on the problem that the reformist influence of the Mensheviks created in relation to the tasks of achieving a successful proletarian revolution. Indeed, he definitively broke with the Mensheviks and became a Bolshevik because the former acted to uphold capitalism and imperialism. Utilising Leninist terminology, Trotsky explained that he emphatically opposed the Menshevik support for dual power, and instead he argued in favour of ending dual power in terms of revolutionary class struggle. The point is that by 1917, the differences involving the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks no longer could be limited to issues of historical materialism and political economy. Instead their opposing views placed themselves on the different sides of the class divide. Trotsky recognised that the Bolsheviks were on the side of the working class and against the bourgeoisie. The Mensheviks defended the bourgeoisie against the threat of revolution. This was the basic demarcation that defined the standpoint that Trotsky was to make in 1917.

TROTSKY'S JOURNEY TO BOLSHEVISM

Trotsky announced his allegiance with the Bolsheviks with his article: “The Farce of Dual Power” (5) He outlines how the newly formed bourgeois government in early 1917 obtained the willing co-operation of so-called Marxists, who agreed with the aim of taming the dynamism of class struggle. This process took the form of agreement between this government and the Menshevik led Soviet. But Trotsky outlines with satisfaction how the Bolsheviks undermined this display of harmony: “Therefore, the unpatrolled surprise and wonder when an independent proletarian policy again asserted itself, and therefore the savage, in truth disgusting wail against the revolutionary socialists, the destroyers of the universal harmony.”(6) The Bolsheviks had carried out an immensely progressive policy in expressing opposition to all forms of class compromise, and instead had asserted the intransigence of a principled policy for the proletariat. The Bolsheviks were rejecting the approach that led to the Mensheviks handing over political power to the bourgeoisie in terms of the opportunist principle of dual power: “The bourgeoisie assumed authority in the name of order and of a war for victory; yet, without the Soviets, it could not rule; the latter's relationship to the government was that of an awed half-confidence, combined with a fear lest the revolutionary proletariat might, in some unguarded gesture, upset the whole business.”(7)

Thus the political approach of Lenin and Trotsky was identical. Both recognised the possibilities of the Soviet, but were also concerned that this potential was being undermined by the opportunist role of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. They called for the development of a principled policy of rejecting support for the bourgeois government, and instead argued in favour of a long term perspective of 'All Power to the Soviets'. Lenin may have been the effective originator of this strategy, but Trotsky had become his faithful advocate. Trotsky outlines the failures of the bourgeois government in relation to economic policy and foreign affairs, and suggests that peace will never be realised if the pro-imperialist policy is continued. The proletariat must adopt a policy of 'aggressive action' in order to oppose the reactionary role of the government.(8) He finishes his article with an articulate expression of revolutionary strategy: “Together with the inevitable downfall of the present government will come the downfall of the present leaders of the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers delegates. To preserve the authority of the Soviet as a representative of the revolution, and to secure for it a continuation of its function as a directive power, is now within the power only of the present minority of the Soviet. This will become clearer every day. The epoch of dual impotence, with the government able and the Soviet not daring, is inevitably culminating in a crisis of unheard of severity. It is our part to husband our energies for this moment, so that the question of power may be met with in all its proportions.”(9)

Trotsky's article indicates dramatically his agreement with the Bolsheviks. This principled level of support for Lenin's approach means that it was entirely logical for Trotsky and his group to apply to join the Bolsheviks. Lenin enthusiastically supported this development, and the question of the history of their differences became entirely secondary. In contrast, Conrad tires to portray Trotsky as the perpetual outsider, and this explains his differences with Zinoviev and Kamenev. In actuality, a history of the Revolution written by Trotsky in 1918 make no direct mention of the role of Zinoviev and Kamenev, and instead outlines the role of the party in non-controversial terms. (10) It was only the development of the Stalinist campaign against Trotsky that led to his writing 'Lessons of October', which does make detailed reference to the role of Zinoviev and Kamenev. The point is that Trotsky was motivated primarily be the aspiration to outline the principled validity of the strategy of the Bolsheviks. In this context the question of differences between individuals was an entirely secondary matter. Indeed, Trotsky in the period before 1924 does not refer to them. Only when he was forced to defend his theory of permanent revolution does he explain the October revolution in these terms. Until 1924 he was perfectly content to describe the revolution in the terminology of Lenin and Bolshevism. However, in 1924 Trotsky's reputation came into question. It was then that he decided to defend the October revolution by indirect reference to permanent revolution. But even in this context he was still concerned to primarily oppose the reformism of Menshevism.

TROTSKY'S ANALYSIS OF THE REVOLUTION IN 1918

Trotsky introduces his analysis of the revolution in 1918 with the following comment: “What distinguished our party almost from the first stage of the revolution was the firm conviction that the logic of events would place it in power. I am not speaking here of the theoreticians of our party, who many years before the revolution, even before the revolution of 1905, had come to the conclusion from a close analysis of the class relations in Russia, that the victorious course of the revolution would inevitably place the power of the state in the hands of the proletariat, supported by the wide masses of the poorest peasantry. The main foundation for this belief was the insignificance of the Russian middle class democracy, and the concentrated character of Russian industry, and, therefore, the immense social importance of the Russian working class. The insignificance of the Russian middle class democracy is but the obverse side of the power and importance of the proletariat.”(11)

This comment indicates that Trotsky was not interested in elaborating and describing disputes about the class character of the revolution within Bolshevism, instead his major aim was to connect his own approach with the common heritage of Marxism within Russia. Thus he sought to deliberately outline what was common between himself, Lenin, and the Plekhanov of pre 1905. He is suggesting that the Marxism of the period before 1905 had some understanding of the importance of the proletariat for the coming revolution because of its economic significance, and so the assumption was that working class hegemony would occur in this development of opposition to the existing absolutist system. Thus Trotsky was also trying to establish what was common between himself and Lenin. Both advocated the leadership of the working class in the revolution of 1905 despite important differences. In this comment Trotsky glosses over any differences and instead outlines the strategic role of the alliance of the proletariat and poor peasantry. This perspective is virtually identical to that which was promoted by Lenin in 1905. In other words in this comment there is no mention of the role of permanent revolution, or the necessity for the process of revolutionary change to acquire the dynamic of the overthrow of the domination of capital. Instead Trotsky deliberately outlines what united him with Lenin which is the struggle to realise the hegemony of the working class. Hence Trotsky outlines that all the various trends within Russian Marxism were aware of the importance of the Russian working class for the revolutionary process because of its sociological significance. Trotsky considers that his own approach is part of this trend. He deliberately tries to deny any special significance for his theory of permanent revolution.

Furthermore, Trotsky outlines his understanding of the Russian revolution in terms of an approach that would be compatible with the analysis of Lenin. He indicates that the growing working class discontent because of the imperialist war becomes combined with the increasing discontent of the peasantry in the army. This spontaneous but united discontent creates the basis for change, and the result is the February revolution: “The deep social discontent of the masses grew ever deeper and strove for expression, particularly owing to the military debacle of Stardom. Immediately the revolution broke out the advanced sections of the proletariat revived the traditions of 1905 by calling upon the popular masses to organize in representative bodies, viz, the “Councils” of delegates (soviets).”(12) Thus the actual practice of the working people – both proletariat and peasantry – generated the dynamics of the revolution by their own practice. The creation of Soviets meant the revolutionary process would be defined by their significance. The central issue would concern how much power would the Soviets represent? Would they be subordinated to a bourgeois administration, or could they be able to promote the possibility of the political power of the proletariat and peasants. This meant the revolutionary approach meant: 'urging the social demands of the working class and peasants in a most resolute and uncompromising fashion'.(13) This meant the major opposition to the revolutionary approach was represented by the alliance of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who considered the present revolution was bourgeois, and so meant support for a bourgeois government. Consequently, the theoretical issue of the strategic primacy of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, or permanent revolution, was no longer important. Instead the central question had become about the struggle for Soviet power, and in that manner achieving the domination of the proletariat and poor peasants, or alternatively accommodating to the Menshevik view of support for the bourgeois government, via the collaboration of the Soviet Central Executive Committee. An important problem for the revolutionary party was that the illusions of the peasants, via their role in the army, and sections of the workers, in the opportunist role of the Soviets, meant there was a crucial task regarding convincing the masses that the present activity of the Soviets was unprincipled and meant the necessity to create an alternative revolutionary leadership.

It is interesting that Trotsky's analysis makes no mention of support within the Bolshevik party for the provisional government. This issue is obviously of secondary significance. Instead Trotsky is content to support Lenin's understanding of the issues. The major strategic question is to end dual power and the collaboration of the Soviets with the bourgeois government, and instead replace this policy of accommodation with the intransigent standpoint of the political independence of the working class. This strategy could not immediately take the form of promoting the majority influence of the Bolsheviks, but instead took the tactical form of calling for the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries to break with the bourgeoisie: “We were quite certain that if the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks broke with the liberal bourgeoisie, they would be compelled to seek support from the most energetic and most advanced elements of the proletariat, which would thus obtain the leading role in the revolution.”(14) This tactic led to the actual expression of open confrontation between the existing Soviet leadership and the advanced sections of the working class led by the Bolsheviks. Thus what Trotsky is implying is that the situation had become so polarised, and this meant the view that it was still possible to defend the Provisional Government via acceptance of the opportunism of the Soviet leadership had become outdated by events. Instead it was already apparent that the aim was to bring about a change of the leadership of the Soviet, and in that manner advance the aim of overthrowing the bourgeois government. However despite this understanding, it was also recognised that the working class would not yet support this perspective. Hence the tactic was still in the polarised July days to call for the Mensheviks and SR's to end their support for the bourgeoisie: “On their part, having broken with the bourgeoisie, the lower middle class democrats would themselves become the target for its attacks, and would therefore be compelled to seek a closer alliance with the socialist working class, and sooner or later their political amorphousness and irresolution would be overcome by the labouring masses under our criticism. This is why we urged the two leading Soviet parties to take the reins of power into their own hands, although we ourselves had no confidence in them, and frankly said so.”(15)

The complexity of this tactic shows the real and genuine dilemmas of the revolutionary process. The Bolsheviks could understand that the opportunist character of the Mensheviks and SR's meant they would not be willing to break with the bourgeoisie. But at the same time these parties have a leading role in the Soviet, which is supported as an institution by the working class and the majority of the peasantry. Hence the Bolsheviks cannot justify the obvious and logical tactic which is to openly call for the replacement of the leadership of the Soviets by a more principled and revolutionary one. Instead in a complex manner they have to make the almost devious call for the workers and peasants to put the Menshevik and SR leadership of the Soviets to the test. The Bolsheviks make the call that the existing leadership of the Soviets should take power, even though they know that it will not be willing to carry out this action. But this 'test' is the most appropriate method by which to discredit the opportunist leadership of the Soviets in relation to the increasing disillusioned opinion of the workers. The Bolsheviks would prefer the more direct and open call for the replacement of the existing leadership of the Soviets, but the level of class consciousness of the majority of the workers and peasants is not yet receptive to this tactic. Therefore the Bolsheviks have to outline a complicated tactic in order to discredit the Mensheviks and SR's, and so make the workers more receptive to a change of leadership within the Soviets.

Trotsky is effectively suggesting that this tactic was the most complicated and difficult one that had to be adopted by the Bolsheviks in relation to its activity during 1917. But he does not outline any controversy within the Bolsheviks about this tactic, and instead outlines the reasons why it had to be adopted if the revolutionary process was to advance. This was because one of the major tasks of the Bolsheviks was to raise the class consciousness of the workers and peasants. Only in this manner could their illusions in the opportunist Soviet leadership be overcome. Furthermore, the situation was complicated by the development of mass unrest in the period of the 'July days', in which a demonstration took place in order to demand the Soviets seize power. The Bolsheviks supported this demonstration but could not endorse what would have been a premature attempt at revolution. The confusion caused by this situation led to a defeat of the militant sections of the working class and the party, and the result was state repression against the Bolsheviks.

In other words, this commentary indicates that Trotsky was not in the least concerned with the outstanding theoretical issues about the character of the revolutionary process during 1917. Instead, alongside Lenin, he was primarily motivated by the task of how the process of proletarian power was to be successfully realised. In this context the central problem was that the working class had become divided between those that had become opponents of the Soviet leadership, in comparison to those that still supported them. It was this division that led to an impasse, or undermined the continual progress of the revolutionary process. In other words, what to some extent perplexed the Bolsheviks was the importance of the different levels of class consciousness within the proletariat. It was this aspect that still provided some credibility for the Soviet leadership. Furthermore, the hopes of the Bolsheviks seems to have been undermined by the repression in the aftermath of the July days, but the reactionary developments that were promoted by the events of July were counteracted by the mobilisation of the working class in order to oppose the threat of the Kornilov coup. This victory over the forces of counterrevolution undermined the advance of reaction, and so it was not surprising that the Bolsheviks gained a majority in the Petrograd Soviet. The problem was that the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets was still dominated by the opportunists who were trying to postpone the calling of a Congress that could legitimate the seizure of power.

However, Trotsky is outlining how despite the setback of the July days, the victory over the potential coup of Kornilov, promoted the Bolshevik success in the Petrograd Soviet. This meant a major advance toward the success of the strategy of the Bolsheviks. The ability of the Mensheviks and SR's to undermine the development of the application of revolutionary strategy had been seriously opposed by this election result. Furthermore, this election indicated that the working class was becoming united in favour of a revolutionary policy. The differences between the less advanced and the more advanced workers were being overcome. This reflected the united resolve of the working class to defeat the Kornilov coup. This action had indicated that the ultimate choice confronting the workers and peasants was the victory of revolution or counterrevolution. The bourgeoisie was discredited by its implicit support for Kornilov, whilst the opportunist Soviet leadership was undermined by its vacillation and lack of resolution during this important period. Instead the Bolsheviks effectively organised the Soviet resistance to counterrevolution.

But Trotsky is emphatic that the aim of the revolutionary process is not the domination of the Bolshevik party. Instead the character of the Soviets enables the aspirations of working people to be expressed, and in this manner the class interests of the working class and peasantry is realised. Furthermore, the Soviets are the most effective institutions to express the consciousness of the working people during a period of revolutionary development: “Revolution is distinguished by this, that the consciousness of the masses undergoes rapid changes. New sections of the population constantly gain experience, revise their views of yesterday, work out new ones, reject old leaders, follow others, and press ever forward. In times of revolution the formally democratic organizations, based on the ponderous mechanism of universal suffrage, inevitably lag behind the development of the political views of the masses. Not so in the Soviets. They depend directly on organic groups, such as workshops, factories, mines, companies, regiments, etc. In these cases, of course, there are no such legal guarantees for the perfect accuracy of the elections....but there is the far more important guarantee of direct and immediate contact of the deputy with his electors.”(16) The Soviets have arisen in conditions of mass unrest and struggle, and the task of the Bolsheviks is to connect to the popular militancy and intransigence which means that the Soviets become the most adequate expression of the consciousness of the working people. The organs of bourgeois democracy are able to relate to the views of people during periods of tranquillity, but the Soviets are more responsive during a situation of revolutionary upheaval. This is why it is logical that the opinions of the Soviets will ultimately correspond with the revolutionary aims of the Bolsheviks. In contrast, Menshevik domination of the Soviets is likely to be temporary, and which is increasingly opposed to the popular sentiments of the people. Hence Trotsky is outlining how the correspondence of the role of the Soviets with the potential of the revolutionary process means that the development of the leadership of the Bolsheviks within the Soviets is the primary strategic aim. This understanding is what united Lenin and Trotsky. When Lenin seemed to suggest that the prospects of a Soviet based revolution was over, this was when Trotsky diplomatically disagreed with him. (17)

Instead of Lenin's impatient aspiration to ignore the role of the Soviets in the revolutionary process, Trotsky recognised their continued significance because they could also become the political basis for the organisation of the Commune state: “The member of the Town Council or Zemstvo depends on an amorphous mass of electors who invest him with authority for one year and then dissolve. The Soviet electors, on the other hand, remain in permanent contact with one another by the very conditions of their life and work; their deputy is always under their direct observation and may at any given moment be given new instructions and if necessary, may be censured, recalled, and replaced by someone else.”(18) This objective of a Commune state based on the popular democracy of the Soviets is what primarily motivated the character of the strategy and tactics of Lenin and Trotsky during 1917. In this analysis, Trotsky diplomatically makes no mention of those within the Bolshevik party who compromised this aim of a Soviet state because of their conciliation of the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets. The point was that the opportunism of the Mensheviks meant they could not promote the realisation of a Soviet state. Only under Bolshevik leadership could this aim be realised. This is why Zinoviev and Kamenev based their policy on diluting revolutionary opposition to the alliance of the bourgeois government and the Soviets. They effectively proposed a policy of accommodation, which meant the strategic aim of 'All Power to the Soviets' would become practically compromised. The logic of their position was that they had to accommodate to the supremacy of the Provisional Government.

In 1918, Trotsky was not concerned with indicating this opportunism. Instead his aim was to outline how the objective of the revolutionary struggle for the Bolsheviks was the realisation of the power of the proletariat and peasants, in the form of the realisation of the potential of Soviet democracy. Only this dynamic and accountable expression of popular democracy could ensure that the interests and aspirations of working people would be realised. The opportunist character of the Mensheviks and SR's was that they rejected this perspective in favour of accommodation with the bourgeois government. This is why primarily the policies of the Mensheviks had to be opposed and instead the aim of establishing Soviet power consistently advocated. Hence Trotsky outlines in 1924 how Lenin opposed any conciliation within the Bolsheviks in relation to the role of Mensheviks in the following terms: “Lenin's position was this: an irreconcilable struggle against 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 of international revolution abroad.”(19) Thus Trotsky indicates that Lenin's major concern was to oppose any dilution of the perspective of the realisation of Soviet power by the working class. The strategy of the Bolsheviks was based on the perspective of the realisation of the hegemony of Soviet democracy. It was in this context that Kamenev and Zinoviev were opposed on different occasions.

In other words the issue of the historical character of the Russian revolution was an antiquated question. Instead the formation of Soviets in 1917 meant that the important position that generated controversy within the Bolsheviks was about the attitude to be taken towards the role of the Soviet. Was it principled and sufficient that the Soviet leadership should aspire to an alliance with the bourgeois government, or was this approach unprincipled? Lenin and Trotsky were united in their intransigent perspective which expressed the view that dual power was opportunist and instead the only correct stance was to reject this form of accommodation to the hegemony of the Provisional government. In other words the Bolsheviks should not hesitate to utilise their majority on the Petrograd Soviet in order to promote a policy of power: “The Petrograd Soviet was not silent. It demanded the immediate assumption of authority by the central and local Soviets, the immediate transference of the land to the peasants, the establishment of control of the workers over industry, and the immediate initiation of peace negotiations. So long as we had been in opposition the cry “All power to the Soviets” was a battle cry of propaganda, but since we had become a majority on all the chief Soviets it imposed upon us the duty of taking up an immediate and direct struggle for power.”(20)

Consequently, the major reason for Zinoviev and Kamenev's differences with the Bolshevik majority on the Central Committee was not because of any antiquated arguments about the class character of the revolutionary process, but instead because their justification of the conception of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry meant rejecting the struggle for Soviet power. They opposed the insurrection because they did not have confidence that it was possible to relate the role of the Soviets with the task of proletarian revolution. Instead they preferred alliance with the Mensheviks and the effective continuation of dual power. This meant in practice an opportunist rejection of the logic of the intensification of the class struggle and the necessity of insurrection and the seizure of power by the Soviets: “Neither the Socialist Revolutionaries nor Mensheviks were capable of assuming authority without the help of the bourgeoisie. Only a revolutionary class could break the vicious circle in which the revolution was floundering and disintegrating. It was essential that the authority should be snatched from the hands of those elements which directly or indirectly were serving the interests of the bourgeoisie and used the government machinery for obstructing the revolutionary demands of the people.”(21)

In other words the vacillation of Zinoviev and Kamenev was not facilitating the prospect of a more favourable opportunity for revolution. On the contrary it was undermining the possibility for the opportunity to seize power by the Soviets. This was the opportunist logic of their opposition to Lenin's perspective of developing the prospect of Soviet power. Previously Lenin approach was based on the tactic of calling for the Mensheviks and SR's to take power in the name of the Soviet, but this tactic had become antiquated and superseded: “Now, however, in November 1917, this demand meant the complete supremacy of the revolutionary proletariat headed by the Bolshevik party. The question at issue was the dictatorship of the working class, which was leading, or, to be more correct, was capable of leading, the millions of the poorest peasantry. This was the historical meaning of the November rising.”(22) This comment indicates that Trotsky was not against the most principled form of the revolutionary alliance of the proletariat and peasantry, but it was an alliance that was based on the most audacious tactics, which included the aim of the realisation of Soviet power. Instead Zinoviev and Kamenev developed an opportunist version of the proletariat and peasant alliance which tried to evade the issue of revolutionary power. They wanted to postpone the revolution to a more opportune moment. To Lenin this was the justification of indecision. At a moment of the most favourable prospect for revolution, some opportunist elements within the Bolsheviks dithered and suggested that the moment had not matured for the seizure of power. This stance was argued in terms of the lack of favourable conditions for international revolution. It is not Trotsky in his 1918 analysis who outlines the opportunism of this opposition to revolution. Instead he only implicitly outlines its opportunist character with a vague reference to the hesitating role of Zinoviev and Kamenev. It is Lenin who directly criticises the wavering rejection of the necessity to seize power. Only in his 'Lessons of October' does Trotsky directly address the question of criticism of the decision to begin the insurrection. He makes this point in terms of support for or against the aim of Soviet power: “This passive fatalism is really only a cover for the irresolution and even incapacity for action but it camouflages itself with the consoling prognosis that we are, you know, growing more and more influential, as time goes on, our forces will continually increase. What a gross delusion! The strength of a revolutionary party increases only up to a certain moment, after which the process can turn into the very opposite. The hopes of the masses change into disillusionment as a result of the party's passivity while the enemy recovers from his panic and takes advantage of this disillusionment.”(23) In short, the differences within the party are reduced to whether to be for or against an insurrection in order to realise Soviet power.

However, in his analysis of 1918, Trotsky does not consider this opposition worth any detailed mention. Hence in relation to the decision taken on October 28th to proceed with the insurrection, Trotsky comments: “On the order of the day was the question of the rising. With only two dissentients it was unanimously decided that the only means of saving the country from complete destruction was an armed rising, which must have as its object the conquest of supreme government authority by the Soviets.”(24) Only in the context of the criticism of his theory of permanent revolution does he elaborate the opportunist character of the opposition to the attempt to seize power. If this criticism had not arisen the reasons for the writing of his 'Lessons of October' would not have become necessary. It was the opposition to Trotsky that emphasised the role of the political past in order to try and discredit him. In contrast, his history of the Russian revolution, written in 1918, concentrates on outlining the empirical facts of the event, and is not concerned with the importance of different theoretical views. Thus Trotsky emphasises the role of the Military Revolutionary Committee in his 1918 work in order to implicitly outline his own significant relationship to the revolution. He also outlines the process of winning the wavering units of the army to the banner of the revolution. In other words at the later stages of the process of insurrection it became a virtually organisational exercise in which the Military Revolutionary Committee utilised its information in order to understand how to carry out the process of the overthrow of the Kerensky regime and establish the power of the Soviets. Trotsky's major criticism in this context was of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who still refused to support the revolutionary process, apart from some left wing elements in the SR's.

Hence Trotsky's 1918 history of the Russian revolution is the first major empirical study of this event. It outlines the process of the development of the Bolsheviks from being an opposition party to becoming the majority in the Soviets, and so capable of organising an insurrection. Trotsky's task is obviously to celebrate the revolution and he has little time for recriminations against the wavering elements in the leadership of the Bolsheviks. This may have been his last word on the subject of the Revolution if it was not for the development of the inner-party struggle and the attempt to discredit Trotsky's role in the revolution via criticism of his support for permanent revolution. In fact 'Lessons of October' does little to defend the theory of permanent revolution, instead what Trotsky is more concerned with is to support Lenin's perspective of the intransigent struggle for Soviet power and the discrediting of the dual power strategy of the Mensheviks. In this context he implies that the opposition to the October revolution within the Bolsheviks represented an adaptation to the Menshevik approach.

Jack Conrad does not bother with detailed reference to Trotsky's work and its argument. Instead in a dogmatic manner he contends: “Though he never admitted it, in any publication, speech, letter or telegram, Lenin adopted the theory of permanent revolution first elaborated by Trotsky in 1906.” (25) In contrast to this polemical contention, Trotsky evaluates Lenin's approach in more sober fashion: “Lenin, even prior to 1905, gave expression to the peculiar character of the Russian revolution with the formula 'the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'. This formula, in itself, as future developments showed, could acquire meaning only as a stage towards the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry. Lenin's formulation of the problem, revolutionary and dynamic through an through, was completely and irreconcilably opposed to the Menshevik pattern, according to which Russia could pretend only to a repetition of the history of the advanced nations, with the bourgeoisie in power and the social democrats in opposition. Some circles of our party, however laid the stress not upon the 'dictatorship' of the proletariat and peasantry in Lenin’s formula, but upon its democratic character as opposed to its socialist character. And, again, this could only mean that in Russia, a backward country, only a democratic revolution was conceivable.”(26) This comment indicates that Trotsky is making no special claim in favour of his theory of permanent revolution, instead he is arguing that the most principled interpretation of Lenin's approach of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry explained the process of change in 1917. Hence, the most that Trotsky is claiming is that there is some affinity between his approach and that of Lenin's. However, he is differentiating between Lenin's view and that of the opportunists within the Bolshevik party who denied the aim of the perspective of the striving for Soviet power. This is the vital point that Trotsky is trying to make that both himself and Lenin were united in theory and practice in the attempt to establish the political power of the Soviets. In this context the primary task was to oppose the approach of the Mensheviks who accommodated to the bourgeois government because they defined the limits of the revolution in terms of the promotion of bourgeois democracy. In that sense, the opportunists within the Bolshevik party were also criticised because they adapted to this Mensheviks position, and so were ambivalent about the struggle for Soviet power. Therefore the strategic conclusion from this analysis is not to promote the theory of permanent revolution above that of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, but instead how to indicate that both could aim for Soviet power in the political conditions of 1917. Trotsky and Lenin's opposition was against the opportunist distortion of the democratic dictatorship position which meant accommodation to the Mensheviks.

Hence we can suggest that Trotsky's own comments indicate the falsity of Conrad's view that: “Arguably, though the idea of Lenin carrying through a “complete break” with the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry was hatched by Trotsky himself after Lenin's death in 1924. No doubt he was desperate to counter the campaign against “Trotskyism launched by the Triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev.”(27) And: “However, Trotsky directly - and at least in my view incorrectly – dismissed Lenin's formula of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. He even claims Lenin's authority for this.”(28) But we have outlined how one of Trotsky's most substantial comments on this question is not concerned with criticising Lenin's perspective of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. Instead, Trotsky suggests that when applied in the most principled manner this theory can be utilised in order to promote the vital strategy in 1917 of the struggle for Soviet power. It is the opportunist dilution of Lenin's approach which needs criticising, and Lenin does agree with this view. In this context Lenin connects the aims of socialism with the dynamics of the struggle for revolutionary democracy: “Either we have to be revolutionary democrats in fact, in which case we must not fear to take steps towards socialism. Or we fear to take steps towards socialism, condemn them in the Plekhanov, Dan or Chernov way, by arguing that our revolution is a bourgeois revolution, that socialism cannot be introduced, etc., in which case.....we in a reactionary-bureaucratic manner suppress the “revolutionary democratic” aspirations of the workers and peasants.”(29) The point is that in the context of 1917 the role of the revolutionary dynamics assumes the aim of socialism in the form of striving for Soviet power. This aim is opposed by those that limit the revolution to the bourgeois stage. In contrast the progressive aspects of the role of the revolutionary-democratic are combined with the ultimate aim of socialism. This standpoint indicates the convergence of Lenin's approach with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. But Trotsky is actually too modest to make this direct connection! But Conrad is eager to consider Trotsky as arrogant to even make some form of comparison between his own perspective and that of Lenin. This is a travesty of what Trotsky has written in the 'Lessons of October'. Trotsky is not concerned to make this comparison, instead he wants to outline how the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry can be interpreted in a principled manner, in the form of the perspective of striving for Soviet power. This meant there were two different interpretations of the democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants. The first was that which accepted the limits of the bourgeois revolution, and the second was that which expressed the dynamics of the struggle for Soviet power and the aspiration for socialism. Therefore the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants had on the one hand expressed itself in the form of the opportunist role of the Soviets and their acceptance of the bourgeois revolution. On the other hand a principled form of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would realise itself in the form of the assumption of Soviet power. This view of Trotsky is confirmed by Lenin's own views.

Thus Lenin argues in his article: 'Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution' that on the one hand there is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and on the other hand the role of the Soviets or the 'dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'(30) This means the task is to transform this form of opportunist democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry into a principled one in terms of Soviet power: “The dual power mostly expresses a transitional phase in the revolution's development, when it has gone further than the ordinary bourgeois democratic revolution, but has not yet reached a “pure” dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.”(31) Lenin's perspective is nothing more than which is outlined by Trotsky in 'Lessons of October'. Trotsky makes no attempt to elaborate his theory of permanent revolution in this context. Instead it is assumed that his approach and Lenin's have achieved a convergence in terms of the strategic aim to realise the power of the Soviets. This is how Trotsky outlines his analysis of the revolution in 1918. Only in the 'Lessons of October' does he describe in detail the opportunist limitations of Zinoviev and Kamenev. Consequently, Conrad is wrong to suggest that Trotsky rejects even the revolutionary interpretation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. This task was only carried out in relation to the Chinese revolution.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Jack Conrad: False Memory Syndrome, Weekly Worker, April 13th 2017, Number 1150 p5

(2)Leon Trotsky: Lessons of October, Union Books, London 1992 p34-46

(3)ibid p13

(4)Leon Trotsky: History of the Russian Revolution to Brest Litovsk, (1918) Marxist Internet Archive

(5)Leon Trotsky: The Farce of Dual Power, June 1917 Marxist Internet Archive p1-7

(6)ibid p3

(7)ibid p3

(8)ibid p6

(9)ibid p6

(10)Leon Trotsky: History of the Russian Revolution to Brest Litovsk, Marxist Internet Archive

(11)ibid p1

(12)ibid p2

(13)ibid p2

(14)ibid p5

(15)ibid p8

(16)ibid p15

(17)V.I.Lenin: The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power, in Collected Works Volume 26, Progress Publishers 1964 p19-22

(18)Trotsky, (1918) op cit p15

(19)Trotsky 1992 op cit p22

(20)Trotsky op cit, Marxist Internet Archive, section 2 p3

(21)ibid p4

(22)ibid p4

(23)Trotsky: Lessons of October p40-41

(24)Trotsky 1918 section 2 page 7

(25)Conrad op cit p5

(26)Trotsky, Lessons of October p9

(27)Conrad op cit p7

(28)ibid p7

(29)Lenin: The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It, In Collected Works volume 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964 p362

(30)Lenin: Tasks of Proletariat in Our Revolution, Collected Works 24 p61

(31)ibid p61