DEMOCRATIC DICTATORSHIP IN 1905 AND 1917 BY PHIL SHARPE

INTRODUCTION

Lenin’s strategy of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has been a constant subject of controversy. What has been the major subject of debate is whether Lenin’s approach in 1905 was applied to the events that resulted in the October revolution of 1917. Many commentators have argued that Lenin effectively rejected the strategy of 1905 and instead adopted the standpoint of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent revolution. (1) In contrast to this view I will attempt to indicate that Lenin adopted a distinctive perspective in 1917 which modified elements of his approach in 1905 in relation to changing circumstances and the important fact that there had already been a successful revolution in February 1917. Lenin’s distinctive strategy became the basis of the politics of the Bolshevik party in 1917 and the attempt of Kamenev to defend the approach of 1905 was rejected. It is important to recognise the changing concerns of 1905 and 1917. In 1905 the task was to overthrow Tsarism and establish a democratic republic, and this meant undermining the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the monarchy. However, in 1917 the monarchy was overthrown by spontaneous mass action of the workers and so the aim was to replace the bourgeois government with the power of the Soviets. Consequently the distinctive strategic tasks in these different years meant that the approach of Lenin was bound to be modified by changing circumstances and the unique balance of social forces in both instances. But this important aspect was not recognised by the polemical supporters of either Trotskyism or Stalinism. The supporters of Trotsky argued that nothing had changed since 1905 which meant the approach of Permanent revolution was valid, whilst the Stalinists accepted that changes had occurred but rejected the Trotskyist standpoint.(2)This polarisation did not provide clarity.

What was not sufficiently appreciated was that Lenin’s historical understanding of the role of the bourgeoisie had changed between 1905 and 1917. In 1905 Lenin did not have political confidence in the role of the national bourgeoisie which he considered would compromise with Tsarism. However he also believed that the era of capitalist development was not over and so it was necessary for the proletariat to be the hegemonic force in the bourgeois democratic revolution. The assumption was that bourgeois democracy and socialism would constitute two distinct historical stages. In 1917 Lenin’s approach was influenced by his work on imperialism and the tragic effects of the First World War. Capitalism as a world system had become decaying and moribund, and so the Russian bourgeois could no longer have a progressive significance in economic terms. Hence the Russian bourgeoisie could not resolve the economic problems of the country, or carry out land reform, and instead was only able to continue the imperialist war under the influence of the French and British capitalist class. This meant the strategic task was to overthrow the hegemony of the Russian bourgeoisie in terms of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. The changing analysis of world capitalism was the most important factor in the justification of a new strategy. This aspect was combined with the success of the February revolution of 1917 which led to the influence and power of the Petrograd Soviet, or workers council. Given these different historical circumstances it is dogmatic to claim either that Lenin merely accepted Trotsky’s approach of 1905 or effectively continued his own approach of 1905. Trotsky himself effectively followed Lenin leadership in 1917 and was not concerned to uphold the approach of Permanent revolution. Instead we can argue that the strategy of Soviet power, or proletarian revolution that was adopted in 1917 was distinct. Trotsky’s approach of Permanent revolution in 1905 could not be the same as Lenin’s in 1917 because the influence of the Soviets was more restrictive, and Tsarism had not been overthrown. Furthermore, Lenin and Trotsky had an effective unity in 1905 because of their shared emphasis on proletarian leadership in the bourgeois democratic revolution. They differed over Trotsky’s emphasis on the creation of a workers government that would go beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy. In 1917 Trotsky instantly accepted that Lenin’s approach was compatible with his own, the question as to whether Lenin’s approach was compatible with Permanent revolution was understood to be irrelevant. What was important was the struggle for ‘All Power to the Soviets’.

CHAPTER ONE: LENIN IN 1905

Lenin’s political views concerning the tasks of 1905 are outlined in his pamphlet: “Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution.”(3) His major concern is to promote the leadership of the proletariat in what he defines as a democratic revolution. This role can be expressed by the aim of a democratic republic realised by a popular insurrection, the formation of a provisional revolutionary government, and elections to a constituent assembly. Lenin insists that this strategy is not a rejection of the aim of socialism. Instead: “Whoever wants to reach socialism by any other path than that of political democracy, will inevitably arrive at conclusions that are absurd and reactionary both in the economic and political sense. If any workers ask us at the appropriate moment why we should not go ahead and carry out the maximum programme we shall answer by pointing out how far from socialism the masses of the democratically minded people still are, how underdeveloped class antagonisms still are, and how unorganised the proletarians still are.”(4) The assumption is that the very continuation of Tsarism has stifled the development of capitalism and prevented the advance of proletarian class consciousness. The idea of socialism is still mainly upheld by intellectuals and lacks a popular and democratic character. In contrast the progress of democracy via the overthrow of Tzarism will make the ideas of socialism accessible to the workers.

Lenin is making the point that the idea of socialism is not familiar to the working class but what is understood is the repression of the monarchy and the related lack of democracy. Hence the working class can be mobilised in terms of support for an insurrection that would establish a democratic republic. The very dynamic of the struggle would make workers receptive about the potential of democracy, and in this sense would also become receptive about socialism. Primarily the very popular and mass character of the struggle against Tsarism would make the working class influential in the revolutionary process. However the leading role of the working class in the revolution does not alter the bourgeois character of the revolution. The best possible outcome is the promotion of capitalism of a Western European character: “But it does not by any means follow that a democratic revolution (bourgeois in its social and economic essence) would not be of enormous interest to the proletariat. It does not follow that the democratic revolution could not take place in a form advantageous mainly to the big capitalist, the financial magnate, and the “enlightened” landlord, and in a form advantageous to the peasant and worker.”(5) Indeed Lenin argues that bourgeois democratic revolution is more in the interests of the workers than the bourgeoisie because the latter can be reconciled with the development of capitalism occurring under a repressive monarchy whilst the former benefits from the connection between democracy and capitalist economic development: “The very position the proletariat holds as a class compels it to be consistently democratic. The bourgeoisie looks backward in fear of democratic progress which threatens to strengthen the proletariat. The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains, but with the aid of democratism it has the whole world to win. That is why the more consistent the bourgeois revolution is in achieving its democratic transformations, the less will it limit itself to what is of advantage exclusively to the bourgeoisie. The more consistent the bourgeois revolution, the more does it guarantee the proletariat and peasantry the benefits accruing from the democratic revolution.”(6)

Hence whilst accepting the bourgeois limit of the revolution against Tsarism, Lenin also explains the possible dynamic of tension and conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie may be wary of democracy and reconciled to the domination of the repressive monarchy. In contrast the proletariat is a consistent defender of democracy and leads the democratic revolution despite the possible opposition of the bourgeoisie. What results from this development is the formation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants, or the most complete and principled form of the bourgeois revolution. However what is not explained is that the possible tension between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie could express the impetus for the boundaries of the revolution to be continually extended to the point that the issue of going beyond capitalism would become relevant. Lenin does not consider this to be a possibility because the peasantry, as an ally of the proletariat, is interested in land reform that would result in the expansion of commodity production or the flourishing of capitalism. He also does not consider that the proletariat has sufficient class consciousness to support the prospect of socialism in the short-term.

Lenin outlines the strategic issues in the following terms: “We cannot get out of the bourgeois democratic boundaries of the Russian revolution, but we can vastly extend these boundaries, and within these boundaries we can and must fight for the interests of the proletariat, for its immediate needs and for conditions that will make it possible to prepare its forces for the future complete victory.”(7) There are various forms of bourgeois regimes that are based on a restricted franchise and the alliance between the capitalist class and the monarchy, but there are also regimes that have something like universal franchise and are a democratic republic. This latter situation is the aim of the perspective of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The aim is to realise the maximum of political freedom that can enhance the prospects for the future transition to socialism. In other words the democratic dictatorship could be defined as a form of government that has as one of its most important aims the transformation of society in socialist terms. The left-wing character of the government will mean that it is aiming to utilise capitalist economic development in order to facilitate the advance of society towards socialism. Hence the only alternative is a type of government that is based on the conciliation of Tsarism, and so the favourable conditions for movement towards socialism will be stifled. Consequently the character of the bourgeois revolution can favour the interests of the bourgeoisie or the workers and peasants. What is at stake is the prospect of either a limited ‘revolution from above’, or a popular ‘revolution from below’.

The success of the popular insurrection is necessary in order to establish a democratic dictatorship that can repel the resistance of counter-revolution: “Without a dictatorship it is impossible to break down that resistance and repel counter-revolutionary attempts. But of course it will be a democratic not a socialist dictatorship. It will be unable (without a series of intermediary stages of revolutionary development) to affect the foundations of capitalism. At best, it may bring about a radical redistribution of landed property in favour of the peasantry, establish consistent and full democracy, including the formation of republic, eradicate all the oppressive features of Asiatic bondage, not only in rural but also in factory life, lay the foundation for a thorough improvement in the conditions of the workers and for a rise in their standard of living, and – last, but not least – carry the revolutionary conflagration into Europe. Such a victory will not yet by any means transform our bourgeois revolution into a socialist revolution; the democratic revolution will not immediately overstep the bounds of bourgeois social and economic relationships; nevertheless, the significance of such a victory for the future development of Russia and of the whole world will be immense. Nothing will raise the revolutionary energy of the world proletariat so much; nothing will shorten the path leading to its complete victory to such an extent, as this decisive victory of the revolution that has now started in Russia.”(8)

This perspective already expresses important aspects of the approach of Permanent revolution. The dynamic of the Russian revolution will be to provide an impetus for world revolution. Consequently the possible success of the upsurge of the international class struggle will be to facilitate the prospect of the victory of socialism in global terms. This process will not in and of itself bring about socialism in Russia but it obviously will hasten the tempo of development towards the transition to socialism in internal terms. Furthermore, the internal establishment of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry will also represent the most favourable conditions for the creation of a situation that facilitates advance towards socialism. The advance of bourgeois democracy, and the success of the democratic republic, will mean the maturing of the possibilities to make the shortest transition to socialism. That is why Lenin makes his confidence in the advance towards socialism in international terms more explicit: “The basic idea here is the one…..which has been stated that we must not be afraid……of Social Democracy’s complete victory in a democratic revolution, i.e.’ of a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, for such a victory will enable us to rouse Europe, after throwing off the yoke of the bourgeoisie, the socialist proletariat of Europe will in its turn help us to accomplish the socialist revolution.” (9) This is the perspective of permanent revolution, but Lenin immediately qualifies it because he is also implying that important defeats of the international struggle for socialism would delay the prospects for the advance towards socialism in Russia, and it is entirely possible that the very struggle against Tsarism will not be successful and this prospect would undermine the development of world revolution.

The point he is primarily making is that only the success of the struggle for the democratic revolution will open up possibilities for the immediate advance of world revolution, and in this context it is necessary to defeat the resistance of Tsarism and its bourgeois allies. The most urgent task is to unite the workers and peasants to oppose Tsarist reaction and for the victory of the democratic revolution, and this success will then indicate other possibilities: “If, in our fight for a republic and democracy, we could not rely upon the peasantry as well as upon the proletariat the prospect of our “retaining power” would be hopeless. But it is not hopeless, if the “revolution’s decisive victory over tsarism” open’s up such a possibility, then we must indicate it, call actively for its transformation into reality, and issue practical slogans not only for the contingency of the revolution being brought into Europe, but also for the purpose of taking it there.”(10) Only the successful realisation of immediate tasks will enable the prospect of more ambitious aims to be envisaged and contemplated. It will be the victory of the democratic revolution that will enable Social Democracy to conceive of retaining power and establish the possibility of developing a perspective of the advance of revolution within Europe. Only the success of all these tasks will mean the prospect of contemplating the progress of socialism in Russia. It is also necessary to recognise that Lenin would accept the victory of revolution in Russia if the democratic dictatorship was maintained without international revolution. It would still be possible to make progress in the advance of bourgeois democracy in these national terms.

Whatever happens, Lenin predicts that the unity of the working class and the peasantry in the struggle for the democratic republic will be replaced by antagonism when the impulse for socialism has matured:

“Beyond the bounds of democratism there can be no question of the proletariat and peasant bourgeoisie having a single will. Class struggle between them is inevitable, but it is in a democratic republic that this struggle will be the most thoroughgoing and widespread struggle of the people for socialism. Like everything else in the world, the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has a past and future. Its past is autocracy, serfdom, monarchy, and privilege. In the struggle against this past, in the struggle against counter-revolution, a “single will” of the proletariat and peasantry is possible, for here there is unity of interests.

Its future is the struggle against private property, the struggle of the wage worker against the employer, the struggle for socialism. Here singleness of will is impossible. Here the path before us lies not from autocracy to republic, but from a petty bourgeois democratic republic to socialism.”(11)

In other words the dynamics of the revolutionary process must suggest some form of interaction between bourgeois democratic and socialist tasks. The very attempt to realise the democratic revolution cannot ignore the fact that the antagonism between the capitalist class and the working class remains. Hence the worker does not ‘forget’ the actuality of class struggle between proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This provides the impulse for movement towards socialism. But the democratic revolution would be undermined and neglected if the central task of defeating the autocracy was neglected in favour of waging the class struggle between capitalist and worker. The primary task is the democratic revolution because of the historical differentiation between feudalism and capitalism. Hence the central strategic task is for the workers and peasants to achieve the democratic republic in order to advance capitalist development. Only after this task has been realised it is permissible to aspire for socialism. What Lenin does not explain is the time scale between the democratic revolution and the transition to socialism. He also does not justify the role of Social Democracy being the government of the democratic republic. Instead the implication is that Social Democratic government must lessen the period of transition between bourgeois democracy and socialism.

“Of course in actual historical circumstances, the elements of the past become interwoven with those of the future; the two paths cross. Wage labour with its struggle against private property exists under the autocracy as well; it arises even under serfdom. But this does not in the least prevent us from logically and historically distinguishing between the major stages of development. We all counterpose bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution; we all insist on the absolute necessity of strictly distinguishing between them; however, can it be denied that in the course of history individual, particular elements of the two revolutions become interwoven? Has the period of democratic revolutions in Europe not been familiar with a number of socialist movements and attempts to establish socialism? And will not the future socialist revolution in Europe still have to complete a great deal left undone in the field of democratism?

A Social Democrat must never for a moment forget that the proletariat will inevitably have to wage a class struggle for socialism even against the most democratic and republican bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. This is beyond doubt. Hence, the absolute necessity of a separate, independent, strictly class party of Social Democracy. Hence, the temporary nature of our tactics of “striking a joint blow” with the bourgeoisie and the duty of keeping a strict watch “over the ally, as over an enemy”, etc. However, it would be ridiculous and reactionary to deduce from this that we must forget, ignore, or neglect tasks which, although transient and temporary, are vital at the present time. The struggle against autocracy is a temporary and transient task for socialists, but to ignore or neglect this task in any way amounts to betrayal of socialism and service to reaction. The revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry is unquestionably only a transient, temporary socialist aim, but to ignore this aim in a period of democratic revolution would be downright reactionary.”(12)

In other words there is a definite tension between the tasks posed by strict adherence to the distinct character of historical stages when compared to the concrete dynamics of the class struggle. The recognition of the capitalist limits to the democratic revolution does suggest that the primary aim is broad unity between the proletariat, peasantry and bourgeoisie against autocracy. The attainment of this strategic task would require willingness for class compromise and agreement when confronted with the common enemy of autocracy. What is implied is that this period will not be of a short duration and instead exists for a protracted period. However what is also recognised is that the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat will be a constant feature of the democratic republic. The prospects for transition to socialism are also made more favourable by the possible existence of a government with majority Social Democratic participation. In this context the democratic republic will advance the prospects for socialism in the short-term. This perspective will be advanced further by the possibility that the Russian revolution will result in international revolution. Hence the democratic revolution will begin to merge with the socialist revolution. The point is that Lenin is effectively outlining two variants of development. On the one hand capitalism may have a dynamic and durable existence and so bourgeois democracy will become the popular justification of this historical stage. On the other hand class antagonisms may be the perpetual expression of the democratic republic. In this context Social Democracy can only uphold a principled character if it acts decisively and quickly to advance the process of transition to socialism. Lenin is aware that the second option would mean the undermining of the worker-peasant alliance but the dynamics of the class struggle would make this prospect inevitable. The option that would become practical seems to depend on the question of the outbreak of European revolution. If international revolution occurs then the internal balance of class forces in favour of socialism becomes more advanced. Lenin’s general emphasis on the antagonism between capitalist class and the working class would seem to suggest that he supports the second option, but he also makes the powerful point that predictions about the future should not undermine the priorities of the moment which is to establish a provisional revolutionary government. In other words he does not confuse or conflate strategy with reckless predictions about the future and instead his major concern is to argue what should be realised in the present. Only when the revolutionary government is established can we know more accurately what should be the priorities of the future.

This task is connected to the importance of the alliance that will bring about the successful realisation of the revolutionary government. In order to establish a principled mass movement it is necessary to construct an alliance of the proletariat and peasantry and overcome the vacillation of the bourgeoisie: “Without thereby becoming socialist or ceasing to be petty-bourgeois, the peasantry is capable of becoming a wholehearted and most radical adherent of the democratic revolution. The peasantry will inevitably become such if only the course of revolutionary events, which bring it enlightenment, is not prematurely cut short by the treachery of the bourgeoisie and the defeat of the proletariat.”(13) Thus the primary aim of the proletariat is to consolidate an alliance with the peasantry on the basis of land reform, and the gains that can be promoted by the formation of the democratic republic and revolutionary government. This process will be contrasted with the moderate liberal conception of revolution from above and the granting of land reform by the measures of a government that is also conciliating Tsarism. This development cannot possibly satisfy the peasants hunger for radical land reform. In contrast some dogmatic Mensheviks conceive of the peasants as a reactionary mass that are not reliable allies of the forces of democratic revolution. They advocate a proletarian-bourgeois alliance and repudiate militant methods of class struggle in order to realise the democratic republic. Lenin rejects this moderate strategy with contempt and instead appears to advocate a proletarian-peasant alliance in oppose to the limitations of the bourgeoisie: “For, in actual fact, the Russian revolution will begin to assume its real sweep, and will really assume the widest revolutionary sweep possible in the epoch of bourgeois revolution, only when the bourgeoisie recoils from it and when the masses of the peasantry come out as active revolutionaries side by side with the proletariat.”(14)

In other words this is one of Lenin’s most explicit formulations which suggest the bourgeois democratic revolution is carried out against the interests and attitudes of the bourgeoisie. This would imply that the revolution assumes socialist proportions if it were not for the fact that the peasants are still in favour of commodity production. The proletariat and peasant alliance would be ended if the working class prematurely acted to promote socialist measures because this would also imply that the land would have to be socialised rather than divided in terms of the interests of the peasants as a class. Thus Lenin appears to be suggesting it is not capitalist economic development which is not the most important aspect preventing rapid movement towards socialism but is instead the interests of maintaining the proletarian and peasant alliance. What concerns Lenin is the issue of the completion of the democratic revolution which requires the consolidation of the proletarian and peasant alliance. In this context the possibility of further advance towards socialism is precluded, but what is permissible is the militancy of a mass movement that may alienate the bourgeoisie from the aims of the democratic revolution. This standpoint is close to the approach of Trotsky’s permanent revolution but Trotsky ignores the sensitivities of the peasants when developing his perspective. But Lenin’s major argument in 1905 is not with Trotsky and Parvus rather it concerns those that would dilute the aim of the democratic republic in terms of accommodation of the national bourgeoisie. Only the most resolute democratic revolution led by the workers and peasants is principled. In this context Lenin’s argument becomes unavoidably connected to the prospect of socialism. The formation of the most militant democratic revolution will make the prospect of socialism more favourable and of a short-term nature: “But we Marxists should know that there is not, nor can there be, at the present time any other means of brining socialism nearer, than complete political liberty, than a democratic republic, than the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.”(15)

In an ambiguous and untheorised manner the character of the democratic republic is connected to the aim and task of socialism. The formation of a democratic republic prepares the economic and political conditions for the most rapid progress towards socialism, and so the issue that is not resolved is whether this process of change and development is permanent? Lenin’s arguments would suggest that the demarcation between bourgeois democracy and socialism is distinct and the former is not a prelude to the latter. Yet simultaneously Lenin also provides important reasons why the revolutionary process may be permanent. The very dynamic of the revolutionary process demands that it be carried to its conclusion despite the opposition of the bourgeoisie and the moderation of some so-called Marxists: “But everybody, and above all the class conscious proletariat will condemn Social Democracy if it curtails the revolutionary energy of the democratic revolution and dampens revolutionary ardour because it is afraid to win, because it is actuated by the consideration: lest the bourgeoisie recoil.”(16) Thus the importance of the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the workers may result in the revolution going beyond the limits of the democratic revolution. This is a conclusion that Lenin cannot totally avoided despite his commitment to stageism. In this context Lenin’s commitment to the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry is at odds with his description of the creativity and implicit socialist logic of the revolutionary process: “We shall be traitors, betrayers of the revolution, if we do not use this festive energy of the masses and their revolutionary ardour to wage a ruthless and self-sacrificing struggle for the direct and decisive path. Let the bourgeois opportunists contemplate the future reaction with craven fear. The workers will not be intimidated either by the thought that reaction intends to be terrible, or that the bourgeoisie tends to recoil. The workers do not expect to make deals; they are not asking for petty concessions. What they are striving towards is ruthlessly to crush the reactionary forces, i.e., to set up a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.”(17)

There is a definite tension between the historical and strategic conclusions of Lenin’s strategic approach and his description of the revolutionary process. His understanding of revolution means that it is necessary to be as militant as possible, which includes distrust of the bourgeoisie, and to strive to extend boundaries. This understanding implies that the dynamics of revolution will go beyond the limitations of bourgeois democracy and instead becomes a permanent process that involves the impulse to realise socialist tasks. But his strategy based on the proletarian and peasant alliance implies that the revolution cannot go beyond bourgeois democracy and capitalism. The essence of the democratic revolution is the construction of a republic and the carrying out of land reform. In this context the role of the working class is to subordinate its independent class aims to the wishes of the peasants. Thus socialism can only become the immediate class aim of the workers if the revolutionary government was to reject the importance of land reform. This action is inconceivable because it would mean the end of the proletarian and peasant alliance and the possible defeat of the revolution. Instead of this voluntarism the historical tasks of the revolutionary government is to facilitate the advance of capitalism, carry out land reform, and consolidate a democratic republic. Thus Lenin would be critical of Trotsky because the strategic validity of permanent revolution is based on the denial of the social importance of the peasants. Instead the peasants are conceived as a reactionary mass. Consequently Trotsky considers the revolutionary process in terms of the exclusive role of the working class. This standpoint to Lenin is an expression of a strategic impasse because it implies that the peasants could become the ally of Tsarism. However 1905 actually indicated the radicalisation of the peasants and its aspiration for land.

In conclusion we can suggest that both the standpoints of Lenin and Trotsky had tensions. Lenin was unable to avoid making concessions to a process of permanent revolution and Trotsky could only justify his approach by effectively ignoring the peasantry. What neither of them was able to envisage was the possibility that a revolutionary workers government that had socialist aims could also carry out land reform. In this sense the socialist and bourgeois revolution would be combined. The peasants would support the workers government because it had acted as their liberator and so would not oppose the development of nationalisation of the factories on the basis of workers control. However the contradiction of the low level of the productive forces would remain until the development of European revolution implied that these internal problems could be resolved by the international development of socialism. In this sense Trotsky was right to suggest that socialism could not be built in one country. But Lenin was also making a valid point that any type of revolutionary development was not possible without the support and participation of the peasantry.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)The defence of Lenin’s original position against critics has been carried out by Jack Conrad in Weekly Worker

(2)This debate was classically defined by the polemic between Jack Barnes of the US SWP and Ernest Mandel.

(3)V.I. Lenin Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution, Collected Works Volume 9, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1962 p15-140

(4) ibid p29

(5) ibid p48

(6) p51-52

(7) ibid p52

(8) ibid p56-57

(9) ibid p82

(10Ibid p83-84

(11) ibid p84-85

(12) ibid p85-86

(13) ibid p98

(14) ibid p100

(15) ibid p112

(16) ibid p113

(17) ibid p113

CHAPTER TWO: LENIN AND THE DEMOCRATIC DICTATORSHIP IN 1917

The first major response made by Lenin to the development of the revolution in 1917 was in his ‘Letters From Afar’.(1) He outlines how the development of what is an effective conspiracy by the bourgeoisie to overthrow the Tsarist monarchy in order to prolong the imperialist war has been accompanied by the mass action of the working class that has created the Soviet: “The Soviet of Workers Deputies is an organisation of the workers, the embryo of a workers government, the representative of the entire mass of the poor section of the population, i.e. of nine tenths of the population, which is striving for peace, bread and freedom.”(2) Lenin immediately maintains that no confidence should be given to the new government, which cannot even overthrow the monarchy in an emphatic manner, and instead the working class should support the ultimate aim of extending the role and power of the Soviet. The very bourgeois character of the new government means that it should not be trusted and instead the workers should only trust their own strength and organisations. The government cannot provide peace because it supports imperialist war, and is unable to supply bread and rejects land reform.

This analysis does not mean that Lenin immediately rejects the approach of 1905. Instead he still calls for the alliance of the workers and peasants in terms of the building of Soviets, and for support for the development of international revolution. What he is suggesting is that in some sense the bourgeoisie has carried out its limited form of revolution from above. This means the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution will not be carried out. But, simultaneously the working class has established Soviets which represent a rival form of political power. Hence the workers, via the action of the Soviets, should place no confidence in the bourgeois government and instead need to act in order to carry out the bourgeois democratic revolution in a principled manner. However the prospect of struggle between the Soviet and bourgeois government implies that the revolutionary process will no longer be limited to the bourgeois democratic stage. This is why Lenin suggests: “Only a proletarian republic, backed by the rural workers and the poorest section of the peasants and town dwellers, can secure peace, provide bread, order and freedom.”(3) These slogans are still not being outlined in explicitly socialist terms but nor are they outlined as mere continuation of the approach of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The dynamic of struggle between the bourgeois government and the Soviets does mean that what are demands that seem to correspond to the stage of bourgeois democracy will acquire the aspect of movement to a new and higher stage of republic. But, at present, Lenin does not articulate what is meant by the term proletarian republic. This definition is not merely repetition of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry but nor does it simply refer to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Lenin’s strategy of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ suffers a quick setback when the existing Petrograd Soviet decides to support the bourgeois government despite the commitment of this government to imperialist war and its vacillation about ending the role of the monarchy: “The proletariat cannot and must not support a war government, a restoration government. To fight reaction…..it is necessary not to support Guchkov and co., but to organise, expand and strengthen a proletarian militia, to arm the people under the leadership of the workers. Without this principal, fundamental, radical measure, there can be no question either of offering serious resistance to the restoration of the monarchy and attempts to rescind or curtail the promised freedoms, or of firmly taking the road that will give the people bread, peace and freedom.”(4) Lenin argues that the role of the Supervising Committee of the Soviet should be to oppose the actions of the government via the importance of the armed militia, but he is concerned that this organisation will actually support the bourgeois administration. Instead of this tendency to compromise and collaboration he calls on the Soviet to form armed peoples militia’s that can act as an alternative type of state, and so realise the participation of the working class and poor peasants in a democratic manner in relation to the resolving of urgent tasks like feeding the people: “These measures do not yet constitute socialism. They concern the distribution of consumption, not the reorganisation of production. They would not yet constitute the “dictatorship of the proletariat” only the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and poor the peasantry”. (5)

In other words the first formulation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry is a modification of the original conception. The first approach generally described a democratic republic that did not go beyond the boundaries of capitalism. But in new and changing circumstances the new definition is connected to the potential for the Soviet to act as a rival to the bourgeois state. Instead of the justification of the coercive role of the bourgeois state, via the importance of the police force, the Soviet acts to establish a popular armed militia that brings about the participation of working people in the administration of society. Hence what is the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasantry’ is a rival to the functioning of the bourgeois state. This political form is not socialist, because what is proposed is not the administering of socialist economy, nor is it the defence of capitalism. What is being suggested is a form of transitional state that would supersede the domination of the bourgeois state: “The immediate task is organisation…in the sense of drawing unprecedented broad masses of the oppressed classes into an organisation that would take over the military, political and economic functions of the state.”(6) The process of change is defined as being peaceful, but the role of the armed militia would be required if counterrevolution occurred. In other words the strategic aim is to replace the existing bourgeois state with the state established by the Soviets. Formally this may still be defined as the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and (poor) peasants. But its character has changed. The immediate aim of this new state will not be socialism and instead it is preoccupied with resolving urgent economic issues like the distribution of food, but the Soviet state is not capitalist because of its popular working class character. Thus it could be described as having a potential for socialism and so is a state that prepares society for socialism.

But in his fifth letter from afar, Lenin is more emphatic that the measures the workers and poor peasants will carry out in order to resolve the problem of consumption will start to acquire a socialist character: “These steps are dictated, with absolute inevitability, by the conditions created by the war, which in many respects will become still more acute in the post-war period. In their entirety and in their development these steps will mark the transition to socialism, which cannot be achieved in Russia directly, at one stroke without transitional measures, but is quite achievable and urgently necessary as a result of such transitional measures.”(7) In an unqualified manner Lenin is suggesting that the aim of the Soviet state, or democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasantry, is the realisation of socialism. He accepts that Russia is not immediately mature for socialism but the political aim of the Soviet state would be socialism. However the strategic problem with this perspective is that the existing Soviet effectively supports the bourgeois government. It does not aspire to create a Soviet state. Hence it would seem that Lenin’s strategy is at an impasse because the leadership of the Soviet rejects his revolutionary approach. In order to try and resolve these problems Lenin would define the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in new terms. He would try to come to terms with the collaboration between bourgeois government and Soviet in order to provide a strategic alternative. This would mean the end of this emphasis on the possibilities of the Soviet under its existing Menshevik and S-R leadership. Instead he would attempt to indicate the importance of the Bolsheviks for resolving his strategic impasse.

In the famous ‘April Theses’ Lenin glosses over his strategic impasse by suggesting that the role of revolutionary politics is to criticise the compromise made by the existing leadership of the Soviets with the bourgeois government, and to call for a Soviet republic that would nationalise the land, form a national bank and for the overall supervision of the economy by the Soviets.(8) Lenin in the article: ‘Dual Power’ suggests that there are two potentially rival centres of power, the bourgeois government and the Soviets.(9) He now defines the Soviets as a potential Commune state because its features are similar to those of the Paris Commune. Hence the strategic aim becomes to realise the complete power of a commune state. (10) In the ‘Letters on Tactics’ he now considers that the formula ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ has become anachronistic. Instead:

“This formula is already antiquated. Events have moved it from the realm of formulas into the realm of reality, clothed it with flesh and bone, concretised it and thereby modified it.

A new and different task now faces us: to effect a split within this dictatorship between the proletarian elements (the anti-defencist, internationalist, “Communist” elements who stand for a transition to the commune) and the small proprietor or petty-bourgeois elements….(who are opposed to moving towards the commune and are in favour of “supporting” the bourgeoisie and bourgeois government).

The person who now speaks only of a “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” is behind the times, consequently, he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle; that person should be consigned to the archive of “Bolshevik” pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archives of “Old Bolsheviks”).

The revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has already been realised, but in a highly original manner and with a number of extremely important modifications…..For the present, it is essential to grasp the incontestable truth that a Marxist must take cognisance of real life, of the true facts of reality, and not cling to a theory of yesterday, which like all theories, at best only outlines the main and the general, only comes near to embracing life in all its complexity.”(11)

Lenin is not suggesting that the conception of the ‘revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ no longer has explanatory significance. On the contrary it still contributes to our understanding of events. However, this approach has changed into its opposite. What has occurred is that the formula no longer expresses historical progress in terms of the formation of a democratic republic. Instead the realisation of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ occurs in the reactionary terms of the opportunist defence by petty-bourgeois elements within the Soviet of the bourgeois government. The ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ is making itself an appendage of the bourgeois government. Hence what has occurred is an alliance of the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, via the role of the Social Revolutionaries, and the most radical forces of the working class are excluded from this effective coalition. The Soviets remains a rival government because the present administration cannot do anything without the permission of the Soviets. But the Soviet leadership voluntarily cedes its power to the bourgeois government. Hence the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has taken the reactionary form of supporting an alliance between the bourgeoisie and peasantry. It is important to recognise the necessity of the present reactionary character of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ and to wage struggle against it in terms of ending its alliance with the bourgeois government and instead bringing about complete Soviet power in terms of the formation of a commune state.

However Lenin also asks an important question: “A practical question. Who knows whether it is still possible at present for a special “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, detached from the bourgeois government to emerge in Russia? Marxist tactics cannot be based on the unknown.”(12) Lenin is arguing that tactics should be based on what is happening at present. That is we know the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ is being realised in the reactionary terms of Soviet support for the bourgeois government. But it is still not beyond the bounds of possibility that the revolutionary elements within the Soviets could exert pressure that would result in the Soviets breaking with the bourgeois government and then taking complete power. This process would constitute the actions of a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, but we cannot predict with certainty that this will occur. Instead the character of present reality is that the actions of the democratic dictatorship prop up the bourgeois government. Hence the role of the revolutionary Communists is not to indulge in antiquated speculation about the possible progressive role of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry and instead it is necessary to recognise the differences that are emerging because of the dynamics of class struggle. The peasantry is being split in class terms and the working class is increasingly supportive of the aim of Soviet power. It is an ideological diversion to suggest like Kamenev that Russia is immature for socialism instead we should understand why the democratic and participatory character of the Soviets can begin to resolve economic problems more effectively than the bourgeois government. This development will not realise socialism but it will indicate the Commune state is able to establish the process of transition to socialism: “I am deeply convinced that the Soviets will make the independent activity of the masses a reality more quickly than will a Parliamentary republic….They will more effectively, more practically and more correctly decide what steps can be taken towards socialism and how these steps should be taken. Control over a bank, the merging of all banks into one, is not yet socialism, but it is a step towards socialism….Tomorrow the Soviet will be able to take these steps more effectively for the benefit of the people if the state power is in its hands.”(13)

The point being made is that past strategic emphasis on the role of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has been made antiquated by events. The significance of this type of dictatorship made not be over but this issue is entirely secondary when compared to the importance of trying to establish the complete power of the Soviet. The Soviet represents a potential commune state and this character is more progressive than the potential of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. Instead the importance of the latter is increasingly reactionary and is about defending the influence of the bourgeois government. Consequently whilst the tasks of the revolution are not yet socialist they are about the establishment of the political power of the Commune state. It is unlikely that the existing form of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry can have a progressive role in this struggle for Soviet power. Instead we have to replace the influence of the democratic dictatorship with that of the revolutionary proletariat.

But Lenin in: “Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution” seems to have modified his opinion about the relevance of the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’.(14) He suggests that the democratic dictatorship is not reactionary and an expression of something that belongs in the past and is instead the basis to resolve dual power in favour of the soviets: “The dual power merely 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.”(15) In other words there are effectively two types of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. There is the reactionary variant that upholds the domination of the bourgeois government and there is the more revolutionary type that acts to end dual power and instead assume Soviet power. The prevailing influence of the peasantry or petty bourgeoisie has been to support dual power and to undermine the influence of the proletariat. The result has been the formation of the opportunist form of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. Hence the assumption being made is that the process of realisation of the Soviet as the commune state will be the expression of the revolutionary form of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. In order for this possibility to occur the advanced working class has to argue in favour of a programme for the Soviets that includes the introduction of the nationalisation of land as the basis of land reform, the formation of peasant soviets, food for the cities and soldiers, national self-determination, nationalisation of the banks and major companies. The implementation of this programme will require that the soviets take power.

However the analysis of imperialism and its relation to the struggle for socialism also results in Lenin modifying his analysis for a second time. He elaborates how the development of capitalism as imperialism has led to world war and the generalised decay of capitalism. There is no future for Russia in terms of bourgeois democracy and so: “The only way out is through a proletarian revolution.”(16) Lenin’s comment would seem to suggest that the strategic emphasis on the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry is anachronistic. This understanding seems to be confirmed by the following comment: “But we are out to rebuild the world. We are out to put an end to the imperialist world war into which hundreds of millions of people have been drawn and in which the interests of billions and billions of capital are involved, a war which cannot end in a truly democratic peace without the greatest proletarian revolution in the history of mankind.”(17) However between April and May 1917 the emphasis of Lenin was not on the character of the revolution but instead about providing propaganda as to why the Soviets should take power, even under its existing opportunist leadership. His view was based on the understanding that Soviets were unique institutions that could not co-exist with a bourgeois government. He considers that the Soviets even under their existing reformist leaders are a type of state that can only properly function when the bourgeois state is replaced by the power of this new state form: “The Soviets of Workers and Soldiers deputies are a form of state that does not exist and never did exist in any country. This form represents the first steps towards socialism and is inevitable at the beginning of a socialist society. This is a fact of decisive importance. The Russian revolution has created Soviets. No bourgeois country in the world has or can have such state institutions. No socialist revolution can be operative with any other state power than this. The Soviets must take power not for the purpose of building an ordinary bourgeois republic, nor for the purpose of making a direct transition to socialism. This cannot be? What then, is the purpose? The Soviets must take power in order to make the first concrete steps towards this transition, steps that can and should be made. In this respect fear is the worst enemy. The masses must be urged to take these steps immediately; otherwise the power of the Soviets will have no meaning and give the people nothing.”(18)

Lenin is not making a direct call for insurrection but is instead still envisaging the importance of putting pressure on the Soviets under their existing leadership to begin the preparation for the seizure of power. This is why he is against the slogan ‘down with the Provisional government.’ Instead the task is still that of propaganda in favour of Soviet power, and to that end increasing the influence of the Bolsheviks within the Soviets. However, Lenin recognises that the situation becomes increasingly polarised with the effective integration of the major Soviet parties into what has become a coalition government. Then the Mensheviks and S-R’s support the suppression of the July demonstrations. Lenin comments: “The slogan “All Power to the Soviets” was a slogan for peaceful development of the revolution which was possible in April, May June, and up to July 5-9 i.e. up the time when actual power passed into the hands of the military dictatorship. This slogan is no longer correct; for it does not take into account that power has changed hands and that the revolution has in fact been completely betrayed by the S.R.s and Mensheviks.”(19) The implication is that the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has become transformed into an expression of counterrevolution because of the role of the Mensheviks and SR’s within the Soviets and instead the task is to realise proletarian revolution supported by the poor peasants. The role of the party is to organise to realise this aim. In the article: “On Slogans” Lenin elaborates this change of perspective.(20) He contends that between February-July 1917 the peaceful transfer of power to the Soviets could have been possible. But the increasing counterrevolutionary role of the Mensheviks and SR’s has made this perspective impossible: “Now, after the experience of July 1917, it is the revolutionary proletariat that must independently take over state power. The only solution is for power to be in the hands of the proletariat, and for the latter to be supported by the poor peasants or semi-proletarians.”(21) This process may lead to the formation of new Soviets but they will be different from the existing and opportunist Soviets: “The Soviets at present are powerless and helpless against the triumphant and triumphing counterrevolution. The slogan calling for the transfer of power to the Soviets might be construed as a “simple” appeal for the transfer of power to the present Soviets, and to say that, to appeal for it, would mean deceiving the people.”(22)

This is the major strategic modification in the approach of Lenin. His approach between February-July 1917 was based on the perspective of the peaceful transfer of power to the Soviets. In this context the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry – as an expression of the role of the Soviets – retained its progressive character. After the July days the strategic emphasis drastically changed and the aim was now for direct proletariat revolution. The assumption was that this process would be more directly led by the party and the organisations that would facilitate revolutionary developments would be flexible in character. In his ‘Lessons of the Revolution’ Lenin argues that an opportunity has been squandered. The Soviets had the opportunity to realise state power: “Pending the convocation of the Constituent Assembly there should have been no other power in the state than the Soviets. Only then would our revolution have become a truly popular and truly democratic revolution.”(23) It would have been possible to end the imperialist war and begin to tackle the economic problems with the realisation of Soviet power. But the majority parties within the Soviet supported the bourgeois government. The result of this situation was that these parties supported the state repression of the working class in July and ensured the realisation of a period of counterrevolution. But the fact that Lenin was not actually enthusiastic about his new standpoint led him to return in late August and September to the call for ‘All Power to the Soviets’ on the basis of their existing SR and Menshevik leadership. (This change of stance was related to the influential role the Bolsheviks had in opposing the Kornilev coup) He argued that the conditions had re-emerged for peaceful development of the revolution and that if realised major advances in the struggle for world socialism could be promoted. However the Bolsheviks would still be critical of this government: “The compromise would amount to the following: The Bolsheviks without making any claim to participate in the government (which is impossible for the internationalists unless a dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasants has been realised), would refrain from demanding the immediate transfer of power to the proletariat and poor peasants and from employing revolutionary methods for fighting for this demand.”(24) In order to consolidate this approach of critical support for the Soviets it would also be necessary to hold elections for the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets.

This standpoint would seem to suggest the despite the role that the Mensheviks and SR’s had played in supporting the counterrevolution It was still possible to promote the realisation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry as a progressive advance of the Russian revolution. What was not explained was the issue as to whether the transfer of power to a Soviet led by the SR’s would be envisaged as temporary, and to be quickly followed by Bolshevik led revolution. In the ‘Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it’ the Bolsheviks outlined an economic programme that they argued the Soviets should adopt. However they also emphasised that the only principled basis for the implementation of this policy was that the Soviets should take power: “This requires a revolutionary dictatorship of the democracy, headed by the revolutionary proletariat; that is, it requires that the democracy should become revolutionary in fact. That is the crux of the matter. But that is just what is not wanted by our Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who are deceiving the people by displaying the flag of “revolutionary democracy” while they are in fact supporting the reactionary bureaucratic policy of the bourgeoisie who as ever are guided by the rule…..after us the deluge.”(25) The point is that the character of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry will continue to be stifled and unable to carry out a progressive programme as long as it accommodates to the bourgeoisie. The only manner in which it can realise itself as revolutionary democracy is to take power. If this task was to be realised it would represent progress towards socialism. The existing bourgeois state is already based on considerable state intervention into the economic and society and so if the state became revolutionary-democratic it could promote the transformation of state regulation of the economy into measures that are transitional towards socialism: “Now try to substitute for the Junker-capitalist state, for the landowner-capitalist state, a revolutionary democratic state, i.e., a state which in a revolutionary way abolishes all privileges and does not fear to introduce the fullest democracy in a revolutionary way. You will find that given a really revolutionary-democratic state, state monopoly capitalism inevitably and unavoidably implies a step, and more than one step, towards socialism!”(26)

In other words the formation of a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry could utilise the state monopoly character of the economy in order to promote the transition to socialism. But instead the support of the Mensheviks and SR’s for the bourgeois revolution suppresses the potential for the revolutionary democratic promotion of the formation of a state that could transform state monopoly capitalism into an economy moving towards socialism. The revolutionary democratic state of the Soviets would be able to promote the transformation of state monopoly capitalism into the preparation for socialism. Instead the Mensheviks and SR’s utilise the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in the most reactionary manner to support the bourgeoisie, or the alliance of the bourgeoisie and peasantry, and so oppose the only principled alliance which is that of the workers and peasants. However Lenin also increasingly prefers the formula of the alliance of the revolutionary proletariat and poor peasantry as the basis of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. He is emphatic that the this strategy is the only one that can promote peaceful development of the revolution and ensure the most effective form of economic organisation of the country in a manner that advances the prospect of socialism: “Power to the Soviets means the complete transfer of the country’s administration and economic control into the hands of the workers and peasants, to whom nobody would dare offer resistance and who, through practice, through their own experience, would soon learn how to distribute the land, products and grain properly.”(27)

The effective ascendency of the Bolsheviks to a majority in the Petrograd Soviet by mid September results in Lenin modifying his perspective. He is confident that the present situation means an immediate insurrection can be planned. (28) Lenin’s approach suggests that the conception of party revolution is identical to that of the realisation of Soviet power. Lenin does not deny the possibility of civil war but he argues that this prospect is utilised by the bourgeoisie in order to undermine the aspirations of the proletariat to seize power. Instead of listening to this scare mongering the party should be aware that the revolution of the workers and poor peasants is maturing and so it was wrong of the Bolsheviks to conciliate petty bourgeois opinion by participation in the Democratic conference. Instead preparations should be advanced for the insurrection. (Lenin seems to be unaware of the work carried out by Trotsky and the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Soviet in this regard) In the ‘Tasks of Our Revolution’ Lenin insists that a peaceful development of the revolution is still possible.(29) He is assuming that the Mensheviks and SR’s will be unable to oppose the popular and militant mood of the workers and poor peasants in favour of the seizure of power. But there is also impatience in his viewpoint when he accuses the Bolshevik Central committee of betraying the cause by ‘waiting’ for the Soviet congress in order to proclaim the insurrection: “They would be traitors to the cause, for by their conduct they would be betraying the German revolutionary workers who have started the revolt in the navy. To “wait” for the Congress of Soviets and so forth under such circumstances would be a betrayal of internationalism, a betrayal of the cause of the world socialist revolution.”(30) Lenin even offered to tender his resignation from the Central Committee.

However this rash action must have been withdrawn because his next articles concern the retaining of state power. In the pamphlet: “Can the Bolsheviks retain State Power” Lenin describes the establishment of state power by the Soviet as an act of proletarian revolution. A proletarian state has been established in terms of the organisation of the economy by the Soviets: “if the creative enthusiasm of the revolutionary classes had not given rise to the Soviets, the proletarian revolution in Russia would have been a helpless cause, for the proletariat could certainly not retain state power with the old state apparatus.”(31) But whilst Lenin maintains that a proletarian state has been established, he does not suggest that socialism has been realised. Instead it is an important task of the proletarian state to promote the realisation of socialism. It is very interesting that he insists that the Soviets have an important role in encouraging the creative role of working people such as supporting workers control of production. In this context the conception of socialism has not yet been reduced to state centralisation and nationalisation. Instead the point is being made that the role of the Soviet is crucial to the development of the prospect of socialism. The state takes the form of the Soviet and in this manner promotes the transitional measures that can advance the prospect of socialism.

The issue of the character of the 1917 revolution was comprehensively tackled in Lenin’s polemical reply to Kautsky entitled: “The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky” (32) Lenin suggests that the Russian events of 1917 began as a bourgeois revolution but it could not be stabilised in these terms. Instead the devastating economic conditions and the discontent of the workers and peasants meant the revolution could not be limited to this stage. The resolution of these tasks meant the necessity of new forms of higher development: “Beginning with April 1917, however, long before the October revolution, that is long before we assumed power, we publicly declared and explained to the people that the revolution could not stop at this stage, for the country has marched forward, capitalism has advanced, ruin has reached fantastic dimensions, which (whether one likes it or not) will demand steps forward to socialism. For there is no other way of advancing, of saving the war weary country and of alleviating the sufferings of the working and exploited people.”(33) However the October revolution occurred in the form of the alliance of the workers and peasants which meant one of its central tasks was to carry out land reform. Thus a proletarian state carried out a bourgeois democratic revolution. Then the revolution took the form of assuming the realisation of socialist tasks in the form of the alliance between the workers and the poor peasants who promoted class struggle in the countryside. There was not a historical epoch between the two forms of revolution instead the tasks of bourgeois democracy became the prelude to the assumption of more socialist goals: “To attempt to raise an artificial Chinese wall between the first and second, to separate them by anything else than the degree of preparedness of the proletariat and the degree of its unity with the poor peasants, means to distort Marxism dreadfully, to vulgarise it, to substitute liberalism in its place. It means smuggling in a reactionary defence of the bourgeoisie against the socialist proletariat by means of quasi-scientific references to the progressive character of the bourgeoisie in comparison with medievalism.”(34)

It is interesting that Lenin does not refer to the role of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in this context. Instead he indicates that because of the historical exhaustion of the bourgeoisie the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution are carried out by the Soviets, or commune state, in alliance with the peasantry. It is the proletarian state, or working class that acts to promote the bourgeois democratic revolution. He implies that the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants was also historically defunct because of the vacillation of the Menshevik and SR leadership of the Soviets. Only the Bolshevik revolution could resolve the impasse, but this meant the proletarian revolution replaced the anachronistic democratic dictatorship: “The victorious Bolshevik revolution meant the end of vacillation, meant the complete destruction of the monarchy and landlord system (which had not been destroyed before the October revolution). We carried the bourgeois democratic revolution to its conclusion. The peasants supported us as a whole. Their antagonism to the socialist proletariat could not reveal itself all at once. The Soviets united the peasants in general. The class divisions among the peasants had not yet matured had not yet come out into the open.”(35) Thus the point that is being made is that the classic period of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants is when the Soviets under Menshevik and SR control were united with the peasants as a whole. However the aims of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants could not be realised because of the effective alliance between the bourgeois government and the Soviets. Only after the October revolution could the aims of the democratic dictatorship and peasants be realised because of the implementation of land reform by the Commune state. But this process was itself temporary because the genuine ally of the Commune state was the poor peasant. Hence the bourgeois democratic character of the revolutionary process had to be superseded by the implementation of socialist tasks in the countryside.

Lenin is making the point that in his opinion the alliance of the workers and all of the peasants could not be sustained because the character of the Soviet state is based on the relationship of the workers with the poor peasants. Hence it is unavoidable that the Soviets will become the ally of the poor peasants in relationship to the class struggle in the countryside: “But the state of the Paris Commune type, the Soviet state, openly and frankly tells the people the truth and declares that it is the dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasants; and by this truth it wins over scores and scores of millions of new citizens who are kept down in any democratic republic, but who are drawn by the Soviets into political life, into democracy, into the administration of the state. The Soviet republic sends into the rural districts detachments of armed workers, primarily the more advanced, from the capitals. These workers carry socialism into the countryside, win over the poor, organise and enlighten them, and help them to suppress the resistance of the bourgeoisie.”(36)

We may actually consider that this policy was voluntaristic and ultimatist because of its failure to recognise the basic solidarity within the peasantry. Hence it could be argued that what actually was required was the revival of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry as the most important form of the proletarian and soviet state. Instead of this approach of recognising the importance of unity between the proletariat and peasants as a whole, the Soviet government preferred to undermine this alliance in favour of class struggle in the countryside. This standpoint did little to promote socialism in the rural areas and instead alienated many peasants from the Soviet regime. However despite these limitations of policy Lenin was making the basic point that only a proletarian regime could carry out bourgeois democratic tasks like land reform. The historical experience between February 1917 and October 1917 was that the bourgeois regime was based on an alliance with the landowners, and so lacked any progressive dimensions. Only the Soviet regime under the leadership of the Bolsheviks could carry out land reform and so fulfil the aims of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. However the Bolsheviks were not prepared to halt the revolutionary process at this point. Instead they made tragic mistakes in their agricultural policy. This was represented by the perspective of class struggle in the countryside. The Bolsheviks denied the alternative of conciliation of the peasants as a whole. It would not have represented the rejection of socialist tasks to have accepted moderate limits on the implementation of land reform. This understanding could have consolidated the worker-peasant alliance which was undermined until the introduction of the NEP in 1921.

In other words Lenin could not envisage the combination of the proletarian or commune state with the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in 1918. Instead he argued that the proletarian state would have to quickly resolve uncompleted bourgeois democratic tasks like land reform and then advance to the realisation of more socialist aims such as encouraging class struggle in the countryside. What was actually achieved was to unite the peasants against the proletarian state and to undermine the actual advance of socialism in the rural areas. Thus Lenin’s definitive acceptance of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution did indicate that this approach ignored the importance of the peasantry. The peasants were treated as a reactionary mass and the Bolshevik conception of the unification of bourgeois democratic and socialist tasks of the revolution rejected the historical significance of land reform. Hence the proletariat and peasant alliance was undermined in order to supposedly establish the socialist tasks of the revolutionary process.

Lenin makes the confident claim that: “A year after the proletarian revolution in the capitals, and under its influence and with its assistance, the proletarian revolution began in the remote rural districts, and it has finally consolidated the power of the Soviets and Bolshevism, and has finally proved there is no force that can withstand it.”(37) But these boasts do not tackle the fact that the countryside had not yet matured for the introduction of the standpoint of the proletarian revolution. Instead land reform was effectively of a bourgeois democratic character, and Bolshevik acceptance of this situation would have been more effective in consolidating the worker-peasant alliance. Instead of this moderation: “Having completed the bourgeois democratic revolution in alliance with the peasants as a whole, the Russian revolution finally passed on to the socialist revolution when it succeeded in splitting the rural population, in winning over the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, and in uniting them against the kulaks and the bourgeoisie including the peasant bourgeoisie.\*(38) But what was glossed over with this analysis was that the initial land reform created a majority of the middle peasant stratum and the kulaks were a minority. This meant the peasants had the tendency to act in unitary class terms. Their major goal was to remain owners of the land. Hence the Bolshevik policy of class struggle in the countryside was resented and opposed. Thus Lenin does not recognise that it was perfectly principled to halt at the bourgeois democratic stage of the revolutionary process in the countryside. The realisation of the bourgeois democratic tasks, or land reform, would be sufficient in order to unify the majority of the peasants behind the Soviet regime. Consequently, the socialist character of the regime would not have been undermined if the Soviets accepted that the peasants were satisfied with land reform. This situation would mean that the socialist character of the revolution in the towns would have been combined with bourgeois democratic revolution in the rural areas. Lenin rejects this analysis and instead insists that only socialist revolution in the countryside can uphold the proletarian character of the Soviet regime.

Consequently, Lenin rejects the importance of unrest in the countryside and instead suggests that the Soviet regime was successful in both realising bourgeois democratic and socialist tasks in the countryside: “Now if the Bolshevik proletariat in the capitals and large industrial centres had not been able to rally the village poor around itself against the rich peasants, this would have indeed proved that Russia was “unripe” for socialist revolution. The peasants would then have remained an “integral whole” i.e., they would have remained under the economic, political and moral leadership of the kulaks, the rich, the bourgeoisie, and the revolution would not have passed beyond the limits of a bourgeois democratic revolution. (but let it be said in parenthesis, even if this had been the case, it would not have proved that the proletariat should not have taken power, for it was the proletariat alone that carried the bourgeois democratic revolution to its conclusion, it is the proletariat alone that has done something really important to bring nearer the world proletarian revolution, and the proletariat alone that has created the Soviet state, which after the Paris Commune, is the second step towards the socialist state.”(39)

The aspect of truth in the above comment is the reference to the importance of the creation of the Soviet state. He understands that this development can enable the commune state to introduce measures that will facilitate movement towards socialism like workers control of production, nationalisation and the importance of trade union participation in the administration of production. But he does not recognise that in the countryside the situation is different. The countryside is not maturing for socialism, and is instead at the level of individual production and this situation was recognised by the process of land reform. In other words the countryside is at the level of bourgeois democracy or petty commodity production. The land reform introduced by the Bolsheviks has united the peasants as a whole and made it opposed to the policy of class struggle in the countryside. This difference between the city and countryside means that the proletarian character of the revolution is not undermined by the demarcation between proletarian and peasant aims and interests. Instead it would actually undermine the Soviet state to try and introduce proletarian measures in the countryside because this action can only unite the peasantry against the workers and socialism. Lenin did accept that it was premature to try and introduce proletarian revolution into the countryside immediately after the October revolution. It was instead necessary to introduce land reform before class struggle in the countryside could begin. But what he did not accept was that the condition of upholding land reform, via the nationalisation of the land, might have to be a long term measure because of the immaturity of the countryside for the introduction of socialist measures. This measure of expediency and caution would not in any sense have compromised progress within the city in relation to the introduction of measures that would promote the transition to socialism. Instead in his impatience to justify the proletarian revolution in the countryside, Lenin argues in a dogmatic manner that the very social validity of the continuation of the Soviet state depends on the extension of the proletarian revolution from city to countryside. This view is dogmatic and glosses over the differences between the social structure in city and countryside. Hence he should have been satisfied that for the short-term the most that the Soviet regime could carry out in the countryside was the bourgeois democratic revolution. However because he was not satisfied with this prospect he instead suggests that the bourgeois democratic revolution in the countryside was transitional to the socialist revolution: “The nationalisation of the land that has been effected in Russia by the proletarian dictatorship has best ensured the carrying of the bourgeois democratic revolution to its conclusion….In addition the nationalisation of the land has given the proletarian state the maximum opportunity of passing to socialism in agriculture.”(40)

This latter view is wishful thinking. The implementation of the nationalisation of the land did promote the ability of the peasants to divide the land. Consequently the result of this development was that the peasants were opposed to the socialisation of the land. Hence the dialectic of the revolutionary process in the rural areas was that the realisation of the bourgeois democratic revolution meant the prospect of the socialist transformation of agriculture in the short-term was undermined. This is precisely why the supposed introduction of socialist measures in the countryside had to be carried out by the workers of the cities and in opposition to the resistance of the peasants. This unsatisfactory situation could have been entirely avoided if the Bolsheviks had accepted that the effective completion of the proletarian revolution could have been based on the combination of the formation of the Soviet (Commune) state in the city and the realisation of the bourgeois democratic revolution in the countryside. Hence the idea that the very validity or survival of the proletarian regime depended on the extension of the socialist revolution to the countryside was absurd. The only possible justification for this view was that capitalism would develop in the countryside and become a rival to the domination of the Soviet state. But this prospect could have been avoided by the Soviet state offering favourable prices for the goods produced by the peasants. This would have helped to overcome the shortage of food in the cities and prevented the decline in agricultural production caused by the introduction of war communism.

A possible reason why these dogmatic views were justified was the rigid inheritance of the conception of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry from 1905. In this period Lenin was emphatic that the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry could not go beyond the limits of capitalism. This would be expressed by the development of land reform in the countryside and the promotion of commodity production. Hence the formation of what would be a proletarian regime in the cities would be content with the introduction of land reform in the countryside because of the overall bourgeois democratic character of the revolutionary process. But this perspective was radically modified by world war and the fact of the success of the February revolution that led to the formation of the Soviet. Thus in a discredited manner the Menshevik and SR leadership of the Soviet represented the continuation in a unique form of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. This approach represented strategic impasse which only the transfer of power to the Soviets could resolve. The formation of the Commune (Soviet) state meant the revolutionary process was no longer limited to bourgeois democracy. Lenin applied this conclusion to both city and countryside and so the introduction of land reform, or bourgeois democracy, in the countryside could only be an interlude. It would not be a long period before the Soviet regime would attempt to introduce socialist measures in the countryside and part of the justification was because the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had been rendered anachronistic. Lenin justified his standpoint by suggesting the very validity of the proletariat regime would be questioned if the bourgeois democratic revolution in the countryside did not quickly become the basis for socialist measures. Instead he outlined his standpoint in the following terms: “The workers say to the peasants: We shall help you reach “ideal” capitalism for equal land tenure is the idealisation of capitalism by the small producer. At the same time we shall prove to you its inadequacy and the necessity of passing to farming in common.”(41) Thus the dynamic of the revolutionary process (permanence) did not allow for any stability in the exercise of land ownership based on the nationalisation of the land. Instead this lower form of economic development was considered to be the prelude to movement to a higher and more socialist form. Ultimately the realisation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry was to be conceived as temporary and increasingly opposed to the socialist character of the revolutionary process. Land reform had to be replaced by collective forms of farming.

What was not recognised by this rash rejection of the conception of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry was that it was both principled and possible to combine the proletarian (Soviet) regime with the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry in the countryside. To Lenin it was one of the tasks of the Soviet state to complete the Bourgeois democratic revolution in the countryside a manner that prepares the prospect for socialist transition. What would have been more sensible was acceptance of the long term character of the bourgeois democratic changes within agriculture. Acceptance of the co-existence of the proletarian regime and the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would have been more sensible when compared to the effective demise of relations between these classes because of war communism. Indeed it was accepted in 1921 that war communism was no longer tenable and the New Economic Policy to some extent restored the relations between proletariat and peasantry. Lenin was right in his polemic with Kautsky to reject his scepticism that capitalism could not be overcome in Russia. The Soviets could introduce transitional measures that promote progress towards socialism. But it was premature to accept that land reform could quickly enhance the process of socialisation within agriculture. The co-existence of economic forms did not mean the downfall of the workers state and instead the very interaction of the proletarian regime and petty bourgeois commodity production could benefit the former and advance the prospects of transition to socialism.

The above analysis is meant to indicate that Lenin effectively agreed with Trotsky about the internal process of permanent revolution. Did he also suggest that socialism could be built internally? Lenin was careful to argue that the Commune state could only promote socialism. Certain of the features for enhancing the prospects of the realisation of socialism such as state monopoly capitalism were considered to be present even in backward countries like Russia. But Lenin also considered the success of socialism in Russia was related to the development of world revolution. In his ‘Report on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’, Lenin argues the following: “If we, as a separate contingent of the world proletariat, have been the first to go forward, it is not because that contingent has been more strongly organised than others. No, it is worse, more weakly and less organised than others, but it would be the height of stupidity and pedantry to argue as many do: well, if things had been begun by the more organised contingent, and if it had been followed by one less organised, and after that by one with a third rate organisation, then we should willingly have been supporters of the socialist revolution. But since things did not go according to the book, since it turned out that the leading contingent was not supported by other contingents, our revolution is doomed to perish. We on the other hand say: no, our task is to transform the organisation in general; our task, since we are alone, is to maintain the revolution, to preserve it for at least a certain bastion of socialism, however weak and moderately sized, until the revolution matures in other countries, until other contingents come up to us. But to expect history to set the socialist contingents of the various countries in motion in strict sequence and according to a plan, means to have no notion of revolution or, out of stupidity, to renounce support for the socialist revolution.” (42)

This approach seems entirely compatible with the views of Trotsky because Lenin is suggesting that the sequence of revolutions is not in correspondence with the level of development of the productive forces. Thus the revolution in Russia was in a country with a low level of material conditions for socialism. Hence the major task of the Soviet regime was to maintain its existence until the revolutions start to develop in the more economically advanced countries. It is important to recognise that what has occurred in Russia is part of an international process of revolution and the aim should be to create the conditions for the continuation of the Soviet regime as long as the delay in the world revolution is evident. However it is also necessary to understand that the act of revolution in Russia should become the impulse for revolution in global terms. So what is crucial is to establish the most appropriate economic policy that will consolidate the regime and enable the conditions to be generated that will maintain the Soviet regime until the development of world revolution. Lenin considers that this policy is state capitalism, or an encouragement of the development of large scale industry in relation to the role of bourgeois experts: “If in approximately six months time state capitalism becomes established in our Republic, this would be a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have regained a permanently firm hold and will have become invincible in our country.”(43) This virtual support for socialism in one country raises the point as to whether Lenin is being totally precise or alternatively is emphatically supporting a policy that will uphold the regime until the advance of world revolution occurs. On the one hand he continues to repeat that the success of state capitalism will bring about the success of socialism and on the other hand he also contends that: “A successful proletarian revolution in Germany would immediately and very easily smash any shell of imperialism (which unfortunately is made of the best steel and hence cannot be broken by the efforts of any…chicken) and would bring about the victory of world socialism for certain, without any difficulty, or with slight difficulty – if, of course, by “difficulty” we mean difficult on a world historical scale, and not in the parochial philistine sense.”(44)

In other words Lenin is flexible and upholds two related but contrasting policies. Firstly the international revolution, especially in Germany, will make it easier to make the transition to socialism in Russia. However there is immense difficulty in trying to bring about revolutions in countries like Germany and so it is also important to develop the most appropriate policies that will advance socialism in Russia. In this context it is not ruled out that socialism can be built by the Soviet regime before the definitive victory of the international revolution. But the short-term victory of International revolution would create the most favourable conditions for the building of socialism by the presently isolated proletarian state. This standpoint does not reject Trotsky’s approach but it is also less ambiguous about the prospects for socialism in national terms. Lenin is emphatic that socialism can be built by the Soviet state, but his major perspective is based on the favourable possibilities for creating socialism that are connected to the success of world revolution, especially in Germany. However Lenin’s approach is explained it is not identical to Stalin’s, even if his standpoint also does not represent a direct repudiation of the 1928 Comintern programme. What Lenin’s position indicates is that the polarisation between Trotsky and Stalin became to justify an either/or variant of international revolution or socialism in one country. Lenin’s strategy was more realistic because it was less dogmatic and was based on relating national developments to the international balance of class forces. Lenin’s standpoint indicates that the polarised oppositions between socialism in one country or international revolution could have been avoided. This legacy is testimony to the strengths of his leadership despite making important mistakes and tragic errors such as the justification of one party rule, dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, and the failure to have a consistent agrarian policy.

FOOTNOTES

(1) V.I.Lenin : Letters From Afar: In Collected Works Volume 23, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964 p295-342

(2) ibid p304

(3) ibid p310

(4) ibid p316

(5) ibid p329-330

(6) ibid p331

(7) ibid p341

(8)Tasks of Proletariat in the Present Revolution, collected works Volume 24 p21-26

(9)Dual power p38

(10Ibid p39

(11)Letter on Tactics p45

(12) ibid p50-51

(13) ibid p53-54

(14)The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution p55-92

(15) ibid p61

(16) ibid p87

(17) ibid p88

(18)All Russian Conference p241-242

(19)V.I. Lenin: The Political Situation Collected Works Volume 25, Progress Publishers, 1964 p179-180

(20) ibid p185-192

(21) ibid p191

(22) ibid p192

(23)Lessons of the Revolution p233

(24)On Compromises p311

(25)The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it p359

(26) ibid p361-362

(27)One of the Fundamental Questions of Revolution p377

(28)V.I. Lenin: The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power, In Collected Works volume 26 Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964 p19-22

(29)Tasks of Our Revolution, p59-68

(30)The Crisis has Matured p81

(31)Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power? p104

(32)V.I Lenin: The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, in Collected Works volume 28, Progress Publishers, 1965p227-326

(33) ibid p300

(34) ibid p301

(35) ibid p302

(36) ibid p303-304

(37) ibid p304

(38) ibid p304-305

(39) ibid p305

(40) ibid p316

(41) ibid p314

(42)V.I. Lenin Report on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government, Collected Works, Volume 27, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965 p290

(43)Left-wing Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality p334-335

(44) ibid p340