Historical Reality vs. The Stagist Concept of Revolution

The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution. By Michael Lowy. London: Verso Ed., 1981. 242 p.

Two questions have been the subject of debates with the advent of socialist revolutions in the twentieth centry: first, whether or not communists should consider as allies the national bourgeoisie and, if they should, how far they will go into an alliance with the latter; and second, whether or not socialism should be in the agenda of revolutionary movements in the underdeveloped areas of the periphery.

From the end of the nineteenth century down to the present day, a significant number of Marxists have maintained adherence to the assumption that "only where the system of capitalist production has achieved a high level of development (will) economic conditions permit public power to transform the means of production into social property." Kautsky, for instance, criticized the October Revolution on the basis of this thesis. He argued that the working class of a country so backward as Russia could not be capable of introducing socialism and should therefore refrain from installing a dictatorship of the proletariat.

From such a view logically followed the prevalent notion before and even after the 1917 Russian Revolution regarding the primary task of Communists in backward countries, namely to advance the "bourgeois democratic revolution", that is, letting these countries tread the road leading to capitalist development first before embarking on a socialist reconstruction. Through the bourgeois democratic revolution, it was held, national liberation, liquidation of slavery and feudalism, and establishment of a democratic republic would be achieved. Only after such democratic tasks are accomplished could the stage be properly set for a socialist transformation of backward countries.

Trotsky systematically debunked this stagist concept of revolution. He contended that the development of backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historical process, a dynamic grounded on what he termed the "law of combined and uneven development" which forms the historico-theoretical foundation of his theory of permanent revolution. This perspective enabled Trotsky to transcend the evolutionist view of history as a succession of rigidly predetermined stages, and to formulate a dialectical view of historical development through sudden leaps and contradictory fusions. For example, the articulation of modern industry with traditional (pre-or semi-capitalist) rural conditions creates the objective possibility for the proletariat leading at the head of the rebellious peasant masses in a revolution. The amalgam of backward and advanced socio-economic conditions is the structural foundation for the fusion of *combination of nationalist, democratic and socialist tasks in a process of permanent revolution.*

One of the most important political consequences of the uneven and combined development, argues Lowy, is the unavoidable persistence of unresolved *democratic* tasks in the peripheral capitalist countries. Despite the claim of his critics, Trotsky *never* denied the democratic dimension of revolution in backward countries nor did he ever pretend that the revolution would be "purely socialist"; what he did repudiate, however, was the apparent dogma of bourgeois democratic revolution as a *separate historical stage that has to be completed before the proletarian revolution struggle for power can commence.*

Another important argument of Trotsky was in regard to the postulation of a "revolutionary" bourgeoisie in the colonial countries, which underscored the Stalinist strategy of th "bloc of four classes". In opposition to this strategy, Trotsky held that the indigenous bourgeoisie would tend to opt for a more moderate and conciliatory policy towards capital and domestic reaction to preserve its interests rather than face the jeopardization of such interests in the wake of an immense popular upheaval. Thus a complete and genuine solution to the national and democratic tasks in the peripheral countries would be impossible under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. Only the proletariat was capable of such a role. At the same time, Trotsky maintained that in the conjuncture of revolutionary transition, the political sphere becomes dominant: the political power of the proletariat immediately becomes a social and economic power, a direct threat to bourgeois domination in the factories. By virtue of its position, the proletariat will be forced to proceed immediately with the socialist reconstruction.

Credit must be given Lowy for having been able to gather materials substantiating the aforementioned arguments of Trotsky. Interesting to note is the fact that the pattern of historical development outlined above is true even of those revolutionary movements whose leaders villified Trotsky and brushed off permanent revolution as "nonsense"; for example, the Chinese Communist Party. Mao continued to formally uphold the Stalinist doctrine of revolution by stages and alliance with the bourgeoisie while he increasingly disregarded Stalin's instructions by advocating the full autonomy of the Communist Party and the red army; setting up a "democratic dictatorship of the people" without the national bourgeoisie ever sharing real state power; and promulgating radical economic measures that quickly took an anti-capitalist, socialist content.

Probably, the most important problematique discussed in this book is the possibility of building socialism in backward countries. The evolutionists among Marxists stress the importance of bourgeois democracy in preparing the working class for socialism, while the more pessimistic ones like Rudolf Bahro argue that "industrial despotism" -- bureaucratic dictatorship -- is an *inevitable* stage along the "non-capitalist

road" in the underdeveloped, post-revolutionary societies. He insists that the divergence between material progress and socio-political emancipation was inevitable since "only a great leap in the technical and cultural level of the masses could create the precondition for socialist relations of production."

Lowy, however, castigates Bahro and other like-minded socialists for reducing the proletarian revolution to economistic prejudice. Instead, he argues that what is crucial is the political leadership, i.e., the capacity of the proletariat to assume hegemony over the movement of plebeian masses. In other words, the decisive precondition for socialist democracy -- far more important than the degree of industrialization or level of technical skills -- is the accumulated *revolutionary praxis* of the proletariat as a class, both before and after the seizure of power.

As to the supposed inevitability of bureaucratic authoritarianism, Lowy assumes that the intervention of "subjective factors" -- that participatory character of the revolutionary process, the democratic outlook of the socialist vanguard, the degree of proletarian self-activity and popular self-organization, and so on -- can, if not abolish, at least limit and counterbalance the tendencies toward bureaucratization inherent in the transition toward socialism in a poor and underdeveloped country.

At a time when a various tendencies of the Philippine Left are debating over the feasibility of putting socialism on the agenda of revolutionary struggle, Lowy's book is a rich source of lessons and insights from various revolutionary experiences. For too long, the Mainstream Left seemed to have shelved the class question and consigned it to a distant future in the name of forging "the broadest and strongest possible unity of the people", even if it meant the inclusion of the proletariat's main enemy, the bourgeoisie. From the socialist standpoint, the correct political line lies not in the subordination of the proletarian struggle to the "greater" national struggle but rather in the promotion of the national struggle to facilitate the working class' rise to power.

The resolution of this debate demands from the Philippine Left a thorough-going re-understanding of the dynamic of revolution. *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* provides an indispensable guide and framework for such a re-understanding. K

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BISIG Endorses Constitution

Eight months after the February Revolution the drive for fascist restoration shifts to high gear. Those who prostituted the law and emptied the coffers of government in the dark days of authoritarian rule have found common cause with their ideological mates in the alliance that brought the bourgeois-liberal Aquino government into power. In the guise of warning the people about the evils of communism and the need to rid the government of graft and corruption, these reactionary forces are seeking the return of authoritarianism in the Philippines.

The discussion of the proposed Constitution cannot be separated from the issue of fascist revival. The issue of the draft Constitution is no longer a non-partisan issue because the neo-fascists have taken it as an issue with which to undermine our hard-fought democratic space. They are calling for its rejection not because its contents are objectionable but because rejection is a most powerful instrument to destabilize the Aquino government. Thus, a progressive group's position on the proposed Constitution must seriously consider the impact of ratification or rejection on the democratic space we gained last February. One's position in the coming plebiscite can be grounded on the most sublime revolutionary principles; but it its effect is to destabilize a liberal democratic regime and pave the way for a neo-fascist dictatorship, such as position will be remembered in history as unpardonably reactionary.

In the light of this, the *Bukluran sa Ikauunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa* (BISIG) will vigorously campaign for the ratification of the proposed Constitution while, at the same time, pointing out its inadequacies. This critical endorsement of the Constitution is part of the efforts to protect the political gains of February. At the same time it is another opportunity to launch an education campaign to politicize the people so that they will not expect their liberation from a bourgeois state no matter how democratic and that they will not be misled into thinking that adopting this Constitution marks the end of our struggle.

From the point of view of socialists committed to the interest of the working classes, the proposed Constitution is not an ideal document. It is reflective of the balance of forces in the Philippines today. As such it is essentially conservative. reflecting the sentiments and aspirations of the bourgeoisie. Among other things it restores a bi-cameral legislature that paves the way for the revival of elite democracy and opens the economy to foreign plunder. But this is not to say that there are no pro-people articles in this document nor that there are no provisions that can be used to further the struggle for a free, democratic and socialist Philippines. This document is pre-eminently anti-fascist and recognizes people's organizations and their vital role in a democracy.

BISIG critically endorses the proposed Constitution not only because of some unquestionably progressive provisions in it and the broad arena for struggle that it makes accessible to the people but also because the ratification of this Constitution will be a severe blow to the immediate threat to the democratic space we fought so hard for--the rising tide of neo-fascism.