

# *A Critique of the Doctrine of Constant Revolution*

Yishuang He

*School of Marxism, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, 430068, China  
893831295@qq.com*

**Keywords:** Constant Revolution Theory, Trotsky, Critique and Abandonment

**Abstract:** The three parts of the constant nature of bourgeois democratic revolution to socialist revolution, the constant nature of socialist revolution and the constant nature of international revolution constitute the basic content of Trotsky's theory of constant revolution. On the basis of combining the views of Trotsky's writings, this paper criticizes and abandons the viewpoints of the theory of continuous revolution, draws out the characteristics of the revolution under the world capitalist system, such as the late, isolated, and zigzagging nature, and tries to give a shallow idea for the problem of the direction and method of the proletariat of the backward countries in seizing the power and constructing the socialism. The article first defines the relevant concepts, then discusses the basic content of Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution, points out that the flaw of Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution lies in its partial controllability, and finally points out that continuous revolution should be self-reliant, gradually developing from underdeveloped capitalism to socialism.

## 1. Introduction

The Theory of Constant Revolution is a theoretical system of Trotsky based on the ideas of Marx and Engels about the direction and links of socialist revolutions within nation-states and in the world. However, due to historical reasons, his person and theory often appear as a negative example, and most of the commentaries on his life and ideas are negative and critical, so it is difficult for the world to know the objective and original appearance of his person and theory. Based on Trotsky's own writings and theories, and in conjunction with the discussions of Trotsky and his ideas by authoritative scholars such as Isaac Deutscher, Tadayuki Tsushima, and Mandel, this article will draw conclusions about the characteristics of socialist revolutions under the existing world capitalist system, such as their lateness, isolation, and twists and turns, and will also give some thoughts on the direction and methods of socialist construction in the late-developing countries.

## 2. Definition of Relevant Concepts and Theoretical Sources of the Continuous Revolution Theory

In order to understand and criticize constant revolution, it is necessary to understand the theoretical sources of the theory of constant revolution; it is necessary to have a grasp of the concept of socialism, and of the historical evolution of the journey from capitalism, through socialism, and ultimately to the realization of advanced communism.

## 2.1. Definition of the Concept of Bourgeois Juridical Power

The concept of bourgeois juridical rights, which was first proposed by Marx in the Critique of the Gotha Program, refers to the various abilities, talents and social relations that people are born with. Bourgeois legal rights are based on the private ownership of the means of consumption, and because of the different abilities, talents and social relations of human beings, inequality arises as a result of the advantageous realization of the above-mentioned rights in the performance of labor, which is why Marx called it bourgeois legal rights.

## 2.2. Definition of the Concept of Socialism

The German Diderot said, "What people talk about the most is often known the least." The article begins by defining what socialism is. In his Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx breaks down the future communist society: the first stage and the advanced stage. Marx describes the "first stage of communist society," what Lenin and later generations called "socialist society," as follows: "What we are talking about here is such a communist society as is not already developed on its own basis. It has not developed on its own basis, but, on the contrary, has just emerged from capitalist society, and therefore in all respects, economically, morally and spiritually, it still bears traces of the old society from which it was born." <sup>[1]</sup>In other words, it is inevitable that socialist society, as a new thing that has just given birth to itself from capitalist society, still bears many of the characteristics of capitalism, and that the distribution of the means of consumption continues to be according to the bourgeois fiat of labor as an equal measure. Only at the advanced stage of communism can each do his best to distribute according to need. Politically, Marx follows by stating, "Between capitalist society and communist society there is a period of revolutionary transformation from the former to the latter. Accompanying this period there is also a period of political transition, a period in which the state can only be the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat." <sup>[1]</sup>In other words, from a capitalist society, one must pass through such a period as a state under the dictatorship of the proletariat before entering the first stage of communism, i.e., socialist society. Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, lectured on Marx's Critique of the Gotha Program about the first stage of communism stating, "It is evident that in the first stage of communism fairness and equality cannot yet be achieved, for affluence, the degree of difference will still be different, and difference is injustice. But it is no longer possible for man to exploit man, because it is no longer possible to seize the means of production, such as factories, machines and land, for private ownership." <sup>[2]</sup>According to Lenin, in the socialist stage, all the means of production are socially owned that is, the form of public ownership owned by the whole people, so there is no exploitation of man by man, but the means of consumption still have to be exchanged through labor, and the bourgeois fiat is eliminated only in the sphere of the means of production. Deng Xiaoping pointed out that "the essence of socialism is to liberate the productive forces, develop them, eliminate exploitation, eliminate polarization, and ultimately achieve common prosperity." <sup>[3]</sup>In other words, socialism is the first stage of communism which is the transition from capitalism to advanced communism, and the purpose of socialism is for the demise of the state and the transition to a classless advanced communist society. And I believe that capitalism as written by classical theorists such as Marx and Engels refers to capitalism that is so highly developed that the existing relations of production can hardly accommodate the development of the productive forces.

## 2.3. Theoretical Sources of the Theory of Continuous Revolution

The direct theoretical source of Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution is Marx and Engels' thesis of continuous revolution. 1850 Marx and Engels wrote in the Central Committee's Letter to

the Communist League: "The democratic petty-bourgeoisie at best wishes to put an end to the revolution as soon as the above demands have been realized, whereas our interest and our task is to carry out the revolution without interruption until all the domination of the proletariat, large and small, has been eliminated. revolution until the domination of all the proletariats, large and small, has been eliminated, until the proletariat has seized the power of the State, until the union of the proletariats has grown not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world to such an extent that the competition between the proletarians of those countries has ceased, or at least until those productive forces which are of decisive importance are concentrated in the hands of the proletariats. " <sup>[4]</sup>With the "four untills" Marx and Engels described the uninterrupted socialist revolutionary process of the proletariat from the destruction of the bourgeoisie, the seizure of power to dispossess the dispossessed, until the proletariat of the most advanced and developed countries masters the most advanced productive forces and unites with the rest of the world's proletariats. This process consists of two stages, first the seizure of power and then the transformation of the existing system. This gives the proletariat control of the means of production in order to control the productive forces of the State until the exchange of commodities has ceased and the proletarians are no longer in direct opposition to each other. It is important to note that Marx and Engels particularly emphasized that socialist revolutions can only be ultimately victorious if they take place within the dominant countries of the world. This is also in line with the objective reality, because the dominant country in the world, with its highly developed productive forces and economy, has the objective material conditions for the realization of socialism, and then it can, by virtue of its own economic influence, gradually bring the rest of the world onto the path of socialism. Marx said in *The Class Struggle in France 1848-1850*: "This socialism is the proclamation of an uninterrupted revolution, the realization of the class dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary transitional stage, in order to achieve the fundamental elimination of class differences, the elimination of all the relations of production that give rise to them, the elimination of all the social relations that go with them, and the change of all the social relations that are the result of these social relations," and "the social relations that are the result of these social relations, and the change of all the social relations that are the result of these social relations." <sup>[4]</sup>In Marx's view, the seizure of power by the proletariat is the first step, and the gradual elimination of the state and classes to build a communist society by means of the dictatorship of the proletariat is the ultimate goal, and this process is continuous and uninterrupted. These two passages are the more systematic and comprehensive elaboration of the concept of "continuous revolution" in the classic works of Marx and Engels, both of which indicate that the seizure of power by the proletariat is the beginning of the socialist revolution, and the achievement of the advanced stage of classless communism is the end of the socialist revolution, and that the socialist revolution is a continuous and arduous process.

### **3. Overview of the Content of the Doctrine of Continuous Revolution**

Trotsky's theory of constant revolution was first put forward in *Summarizing and Prospecting*, published at the time of the Russian Revolution in 1905, and systematically elaborated in the book *The Theory of Constant Revolution*. The content of the theory of continuous revolution is mainly reflected in three aspects: firstly, the continuity of the transformation from bourgeois democratic revolution to socialist revolution, secondly, the continuity of the socialist revolution itself, and lastly, the continuity of the socialist revolution from one country to the world.

Any theoretical truth is valid within a certain historical period and under specific conditions. The same is true of the theory of constant revolution, which was formed at the end of the first nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the period when the contradictions and conflicts in the capitalist world were at their most intense and manifested themselves in the first and second

world wars. The weakening of the absolute ruling power of the capitalist state apparatus as a result of the intensification of conflicts within and between capitalist countries made it possible for the proletariat to seize power before the bourgeoisie in the backward countries had learned how to rule the country on a firm footing. "The proletariat in the economically more backward countries is likely to come to power earlier than the proletariat in the capitalist countries with advanced development."<sup>[5]</sup>

Under the historical conditions of Russia, the Russian bourgeoisie was relatively weak and inherently linked to the feudal tsarist system, so it could not make up its mind to launch a fatal attack on the tsarist system. The fact that the tsar repeatedly dissolved the bourgeois State Duma, which was trying to weaken the power of the emperor, and the bourgeoisie did not dare to take action was the best fact. The peasants, as the petty bourgeoisie, were the most numerous in Russia, but at the most critical moments the peasantry would be divided. The rich peasants would ally themselves with the bourgeoisie, while the poor peasants would follow the proletariat, so the peasantry also had a wavering nature and could not concentrate their strength at critical moments. Therefore, the mission of overthrowing the Tsar fell on the proletariat, which had no private property of its own, was the most seriously exploited and oppressed, and had the most resolute revolutionary will and the most thorough revolutionary demands; in this respect, the peasants possessed a certain amount of land as their private property, and so the proletariat was the most revolutionary and was able to undertake the mission of overthrowing the Tsar. However, in the feudal system, the development of capitalism was restricted, and therefore the number of industrial workers was definitely far less than the number of peasants. Of course, it is much smaller than the majority of the population of peasants, but the peasant masses are also severely exploited and oppressed as laborers. The alliance of workers and peasants under the leadership of the proletariat was a powerful coalition capable of overthrowing the feudal tsarist system, as proved by the February Revolution of 1917.

In the second stage of the revolution, it is the stage of transfer from bourgeois democratic revolution to socialist revolution. Backward Russia, because of the underdevelopment of capitalism, the number of workers is much smaller than the number of peasants, and the peasants, as a petty bourgeoisie, after a certain period of time, are bound to come to differentiation, with the emergence of a big bourgeoisie and poor peasants, and then the proletariat is bound to be overwhelmed by the petty bourgeoisie, and so the transition to the socialist revolution must be made at once rather than develop capitalism for a period of time first. If the proletariat does not fight for the leadership of the revolution, at the end of the first stage of the revolution, the bourgeoisie will be in full power and the proletariat will be reduced to the subordination of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the proletariat must firmly grasp the leadership, establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, and immediately embark on the tasks relating to the elimination of private ownership.

The ongoing nature of the socialist revolution itself is reflected in the fact that, in the process from the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the realization of socialism, because of the transformation process of transforming the private assets of the capitalists into the assets of all the people, the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat exists throughout the socialist revolution, and the acuteness of the struggle escalates with the depth of the transformation. The specific forms of the struggle and the strategies to deal with it were not much mentioned by Trotsky in *The Theory of Constant Revolution*, but were mainly analyzed in his later works, *The Revolution Betrayed* and *Literature and Revolution*, using the example of the newborn bureaucrats.

With regard to the world revolution, Trotsky argued that the socialist revolution that broke out in Russia was a product of the contradictions of world capitalism, and therefore the socialist revolution could only be accomplished on a world stage. In this dimension, the "theory of continuous revolution" is opposed to the "theory of socialism in one country". From the economic point of view,

socialism cannot be built within the narrow confines of a nation-state.<sup>[6]</sup> The construction of a socialist society based on people-centered socialized mass production will only strengthen the ties between people until the boundaries between nations disappear.

#### 4. The Abandonment of the Theory of Continuous Revolution

The theory of continuous revolution is based on the background of the era of intensified conflicts in the capitalist world at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the world had moved from liberal capitalism to the stage of ah to imperialism, and the combination of capital and state power for foreign expansion was a major feature of this era.

##### 4.1. The Basic Trend from Capitalism to Advanced Communism

Historical development is not linear but meandering and spiraling upward, so historical regression may occur locally, but the general trend of historical development is from barbarism to civilization, from backwardness to advancement, and the productive forces and relations of production are constantly advancing. This is shown in figure 1 below.

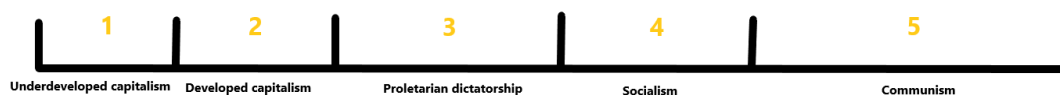


Figure 1: Map of general trends in historical development

As shown in the diagram, stage 1 is the underdeveloped stage of capitalism, that is, the stage when the proletariat seized power in Russia, stage 2 is the highly developed stage of capitalism, that is, the stage when communism can be entered into after a proletarian revolution, as envisioned by Marx and Engels, etc. The third stage is the dictatorship of the proletariat, which seizes power and gradually transfers the means of production into the hands of the working masses. Once universal ownership is achieved, the fourth stage, the first stage of communism, is entered. Socialism is characterized by the absence of private means of production, only private means of consumption, and the elimination of bourgeois decrees only in the field of production. Once bourgeois fiat has been completely eliminated in all areas of the entire process of production and consumption, one enters stage 5, the stage of advanced communism, and truly realizes a classless society in which each person does what he or she can and each person gets what he or she needs. The article's discussion and rejection of constant revolution is also based on an understanding of the above general trend of historical development.

##### 4.2. Partial Operationalization of the "Continuous Revolution Theory"

Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution depicts a historical process in which the proletarian revolution first began in Russia, where capitalism was lagging behind in its development; the revolution in Russia ignited the proletarian revolutions in the advanced countries of Europe; and the advanced proletarian dictatorships of Europe took advantage of their dominance of the world system in terms of their economies and productive forces to take their revolutions around the world and ultimately to bring about socialism on a world scale. <sup>[5]</sup>Trotsky bluntly stated that the Russian revolution depended on the European revolution, and that if the European proletarian revolution had not taken place, the Soviet Union of the dictatorship of the proletariat, surrounded by the capitalist world, would have eventually regressed.

Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution held that in Russia, where the capitalist economy was

backward in its development, the transition from bourgeois democratic revolution to socialist revolution did not need to depend too much on the material and objective conditions, but depended more on the awakening of the proletariat and the course of the revolutionary movement. <sup>[5]</sup> Lenin was also positive about the question of whether the proletariat could seize power in countries where capitalism was backward in its development. Lenin pointed out in the April Outline published after the February Revolution in 1917 that ""The present situation in Russia is characterized by a transition from the first stage of the revolution to the second stage of the revolution, the first of which is due to the insufficient consciousness and organization of the proletariat, the power of which has fallen to the bourgeoisie. The first stage was in the hands of the bourgeoisie, the second stage should see the transfer of power to the proletariat and the poor peasants." <sup>[7]</sup> History has proved that it is entirely possible to establish proletarian power in the backward countries, but it has also proved that the revolution in Europe that Trotsky expected was not ignited, and that the Soviet Union at this time had to think about how to survive in isolation from the capitalist encirclement, so that the realistic basis for its "continuous revolution" was not available from this moment on. The basis for "continuous revolution" was not there from that moment on.

The proletarian revolution has been forced to interrupt, and the lack of objective factors is the fundamental reason for this. On the other hand, the guiding theory of "continuous revolution" is not entirely operational. It was a basic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution to take place in backward Russia. This predetermined that the Communist Party of Russia could only control the form of the revolution in Russia, but had no say in the possibility of a revolution in Europe, because Russia was too backward to exert influence on the advanced European countries. The partial controllability of the theory of constant revolution led to its incomplete operability, that is to say, it fell into a kind of adventurism, and it was difficult for the Bolsheviks' initiative to be utilized in the whole course of the theory; if the European revolution could succeed, the Russian revolution would ultimately triumph, and, anyway, it would ultimately fail, which was no less than a political gamble, but, as the Communist Party of backward Russia was concerned, it was the most active already the best option.

### **4.3. Bureaucratic Problems Are the Key to the Continuity of the Socialist Revolution**

Soviet power in Russia was established on the basis of an underdeveloped capitalist economy, so it was necessary to establish a regime of conscious working masses to enlighten the rest of the backward-minded masses. At this point, then, a group of privileged people emerged, i.e., this group of people could command and manage other people, which Trotsky called bureaucrats. On the causes of bureaucrats, Mandel has an insightful passage in *On Bureaucrats: In the Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels exclaimed, "What the proletariat loses in the revolution is only the yoke but what it gains will be the whole world!" <sup>[8]</sup> But there is a part of the population that has gained far more than the yoke in the revolution, so they are unwilling to continue the revolution and refuse to accept the supervision of the masses, and the bureaucratic clique is born. The creation of bureaucrats in a nascent regime is an objective phenomenon in class society in any age, and the question is how to utilize the bureaucrats well to build socialism, while at the same time guarding against the tax problems arising from their annexation of wealth. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky raised the problem of bureaucrats by analyzing the social ills of the Soviet Union in the 1930s in the USSR, but did not give specific actionable suggestions. In China, Chairman Mao Zedong tried and launched a campaign for democracy, allowing the grassroots to take up positions in the public prosecutor's office and the law to manage themselves, but in the end, due to the objective conditions and the immaturity of the masses, the desired effect was not achieved. In terms of the situation in the Soviet Union at that time, relying entirely on the Bolsheviks themselves to



oppose corruption was not entirely reliable. It was in the nature of the hounds to eat meat, and it was not possible to expect them to eat rabbit meat but not human meat; it was necessary to put them in iron cages and release them only when hunting, so that they could maximize the guarantee that the hounds would hunt for the hunters but not harm the hunters themselves. In the Soviet Union, where the capitalist economy was underdeveloped at the time, only conscious mass organizations, semi-independent of the party and government organs, could develop the country's economy and at the same time counteract the influence of bureaucratic capitalism, and could genuinely make the bureaucrats servants of the people.

#### **4.4. 4Self-reliance out of a New Course of Continuous Revolution**

The central line of Trotsky's theory of continuous revolution was that a revolution was first started in Russia, a backward capitalist economy, which then prompted the outbreak of socialist revolutions in the developed European countries, and finally the developed European working class with its advanced productive forces in turn helped to bring about socialism in Russia and through its economic influence pushed socialist revolutions all over the world. The European revolutions did not take place, so the worldwide proletarian revolution did not take place, but the countries under the control of the USSR or under the economic influence of the USSR went on the road to socialism, which proves the partial correctness of this theory. That is, the possibility of influencing another country's system by its economy.

However, under the world capitalist system, countries with advanced productive forces essentially occupy a dominant position in the international division of labor, use this position to exploit other countries, arm their armies with advanced productive forces to maintain this system of unequal exploitation, and continue to make profits in order to safeguard the leading position of the productive forces in order to achieve a positive cycle. This leads to a positive cycle in which the advanced countries can raise the welfare level of their own working class by exploiting others, and the exploited countries have to transfer the exploitation to their own working class. In the end, the working class in the advanced countries loses the motivation for revolution because their living standards have risen sharply and may even surpass the ruling class in the backward countries, while the working class in the backward countries keeps on revolting because of the difficulty in securing a basic living due to the multiple oppressions. This is also confirmed by the history that the proletarian regime was first established in the backward capitalist countries.

The proletariat in the backward countries was able to seize power but was unable to push the revolution to the world, and the proletariat in the developed countries was able to spread the revolution but lacked the revolutionary impetus and was unable to gain power. History seems to have reached a dead end.

Only contradictions can drive the progress of history, it is unrealistic to expect the advanced countries to have revolutions by chance due to a certain crisis, the proletariat must rely on itself. The author believes that the basic core of the new line of continuous revolution should be: first, the proletariat in the underdeveloped regions seizes power to build nation-states under the dictatorship of the proletariat, then develops its own productive forces through state capitalism until its own productive forces and economy dominate the world, then utilizes political and economic influences to promote proletarian revolutions in various countries until socialism triumphs on a world scale.

The road is winding, but the future is bright. Before entering the classless society of the advanced stage of communism, bourgeois fiat exists, and then there must be the possibility of capitalist restoration, which signals that the realization of advanced communism is by no means smooth, that the battles will continue, that revolutions will continue, and that the road to the liberation of the proletariat itself is a long and arduous one.

## 5. Summary and Outlook

The abandonment of the theory of continuous revolution in this article is reflected in the subjective initiative of the proletariat in developing the material conditions of proletarian countries after they seize power in underdeveloped countries, that is, they no longer hope to help themselves after the revolution in developed countries. In the process of independently building a proletarian state and ultimately achieving socialism, objectively speaking, we will encounter the problem of coexistence and confrontation between capitalism and socialism:

When the proletarian regime is only established in some countries, then the country is threatened by capital forces from both inside and outside. As Trotsky said, once a revolution is confined within a country, Soviet Russia is surrounded by world capitalism. Armed intervention did not defeat the newly formed Soviet Union, but the long-term erosion of the capitalist world ultimately corrupted Soviet Russia. The Soviet Union, which was born in the 20th century, was essentially a proletarian dictatorship and had not yet entered socialism. It was only in the stage of transition from capitalism to socialism. Moreover, due to its material production conditions falling far behind those of developed Western countries, Russia's main task at that time was not to transition to a socialist mode of production, but to absorb all beneficial aspects of the capitalist world. That is to say, during this historical period, capitalism had an absolute advantage over the power of socialism, and there was a great possibility of capitalist restoration.

The movement of the opposite way in the Tao Te Ching also illustrates this point. If something wants to exist for a long time, it must contain its opposite. Lenin also elaborated on the idea of utilizing capitalism to develop socialism. Due to the objective conditions of backwardness, the emergence of capitalist factors in proletarian dictatorship is historically inevitable, and the key lies in how to ultimately clarify the ultimate historical direction of socialism. Therefore, there must be a group of vanguard who are not tempted and constrained by material conditions, firmly grasp the ideology of communism and occupy the leading position of the working state power. This group must have lofty communist ideals and beliefs, and at the same time, they must also have certain means. As long as it is beneficial to the construction of communism, even the products of capitalism can be used. This group of vanguard combines lofty ideals with pragmatic means, which can ensure the ultimate destination of communism and prevent it from falling into fantasy.

## References

- [1] *The Complete Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 19* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2006, 21, 31.
- [2] *The Complete Works of Vladimir Lenin, vol. 31* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2006, 89.
- [3] *Selected Writings of Deng Xiaoping, Volume 3* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993, 373.
- [4] *The Complete Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 7* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2006, 292, 104.
- [5] [Russian] Lev Trotsky, *On "Constant Revolution"* [M]. Life-Reading-New Knowledge Triad Bookstore Publishing. 1972, 30, 2, 134.
- [6] Lv Jiayi. *An Experimental Study of the "Socialism in One Country" Controversy in the Soviet Communist Party in 1925-1927: Theoretical Differences in the Context of Power Struggle*[J]. *Journal of Tangshan College*, 2016.
- [7] *Selected Works of Vladimir Lenin: Volume 3* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2012, 14.
- [8] Marx, Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [M]. People's Publishing House. 2015.