CHAPTER 11

Uneven Developments, Combined: The First World War and Marxist Theories of Revolution

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Introduction

The First World War was a major formative moment in the development and refinement of Marxist theory and socialist strategy. Marxists found themselves unable to respond to the horrors of imperialist war with previously elaborated concepts; as a theoretical tradition, Marxism was profoundly transformed by the concrete political problems that were thrown up amidst the turmoil of the cataclysm that began in 1914.\(^1\) In particular, the betrayals of the ostensibly ‘revolutionary’ Social Democratic movement prompted a profound rethinking of the concept of revolution itself, from Lenin’s return to Hegel in the early years of the war, the intense debates among the Bolsheviks in the interregnum between February and October 1917, the long drawn out process of the tragically defeated German Revolution, to the foundation of the Third Communist International in 1919 and beyond.\(^2\) A formulation from Lukács’s homage to the recently deceased Lenin in 1924 succinctly captures the determining coordinates of this development: ‘the actuality of the revolution’, in its imminence and efficacy, retroacted upon the concept of revolution to produce a new understanding of the nature of, and possibilities for, socio-political transformation in the epoch of high imperialism.\(^3\)

In this chapter, I examine the strategic political thought of two key Marxist figures of the period, Leon Trotsky and Antonio Gramsci, both of whom formulated novel Marxist theories in the interwar period, with their respective theories of permanent revolution and passive revolution. While Trotsky had already formulated the coordinates for his dialectically constitutive theories of permanent revolution and uneven and combined development in the crucible of the

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1. As discussed in the introduction to this collection.
2. For an analysis of the impact of Lenin’s reading of Hegel on his concept of revolution and Marxist theory more generally, see Anderson 2007, Balibar 2007 and Kouvelakis 2007a. See Lih’s contribution to this volume for a powerful case against the ‘Hegelist’ interpretation.
war-generated Russian Revolution of 1905–7, it was not until after the outbreak of the First World War and, particularly, after the Bolshevik Revolution, that he thought to find both confirmation of the correctness of his theory, and a socialist strategy that might be appropriate to other similarly ‘late-developing’ societies. It was thus only in the changed conditions of international political space that emerged from the First World War that Trotsky was able to extend and to generalise his concepts, which had originally been focused primarily on the particular, ‘exceptional’ case of Tsarist Russia. In this sense, the First World War represents a watershed in Trotsky’s political and theoretical development, and his fully elaborated concept of permanent revolution can only be understood in the context of the transformations that it produced.

For Antonio Gramsci, on the other hand, the war’s effects on both capitalist development and the organisational forms of the internationalist socialist movement also entailed a rethinking of revolutionary theory and strategy. Gramsci famously greeted the Bolshevik Revolution as a ‘Revolution against Capital’. Breaking with the ‘normal course of events’, the Bolsheviks had responded to what Marx ‘could not predict’: ‘the war in Europe’, ‘three years of unspeakable suffering and unspeakable hardship’, a war which had aroused in Russia the unprecedented ‘popular collective will’ that had made the Revolution. It was the defeat of the other revolutionary movements that emerged from the war years, however, that was decisive for Gramsci’s rethinking of the concept of revolution, as it was also for the broader international communist movement. With the rise of fascism in Italy and the generalised ‘stabilisation’ of international capitalism in the post-War period, Gramsci argued that there had been a transition from a ‘war of movement’ to a ‘war of position’. Following his imprisonment in the late 1920s, Gramsci worked in his Prison Notebooks to develop a distinctive concept of ‘passive revolution’ to describe the changed geopolitical and domestic conditions of revolutionary politics. As in the case of Trotsky, Gramsci’s renovation of Marxist theories of revolution occurs within the coordinates established by the new state system and tempo of capitalist development that emerged from the First World War.

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4 On the impact of the First World War on Gramsci’s development from ‘socialism to communism’, see Rapone 2011.
7 Gramsci 1975, Q 101, § 9. Gramsci signalled the precise date as 1921 – the year of both the rise of fascism in Italy and the transition to the NEP in the Soviet Union.