

On the Uneven Development of Nimpism

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Bill [Logan]: You think that when Trotsky says Czechoslovakia was imperialist because it was highly economically developed, that implies that because Russia is on the whole not so developed, it is therefore not imperialist. We do not follow your logic.

Tom [Riley]: Nor Trotsky's either, at least on this question.

In that exchange we have the nub of the problem. We are agreed, and Trotsky is too, that highly economically developed countries are all imperialist. We are **not** agreed, and Trotsky and Lenin do not agree, that imperialist countries are **all** highly developed. Indeed Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* is explicitly based on the idea that **not all imperialist countries are highly developed**. As Adaire [Hannah] has recently shown, Lenin makes it quite clear that whether an imperialist country's power is predominantly economic or military is a secondary question.

The reason we keep harping on about pre-Revolutionary Russia, despite having reached agreement that it was imperialist, is that the Nimps do not yet understand **why** Lenin and Trotsky considered it to be imperialist.

The Nimps originally argued that Russia then and now were comparable:

“It does not seem unreasonable to see 'Russian imperialism' circa 1914 as being roughly analogous to the present situation—a society ‘somewhere halfway between’ a fully fledged imperialist predator and a semi-colonial victim. While it is not precisely accurate to designate such a society ‘imperialist,’ neither is it simply a dependent semi-colony.” (Tom, 19 September 2008 [...])

This was based on an assumption that Russia's “imperialism” was not modern imperialism, but a remnant of pre-capitalist imperialism:

“Lenin was not concerned with the **backward semi-feudal 'imperialism' of the Tsarist** and Ottoman rulers, but rather with the transformation of the system of ‘free competition’ into monopoly capitalism within the world's richest and most powerful countries in the last decade of the 19th Century, that heralded a new (imperialist) epoch” (*Ibid.*, emphasis added)

Eventually the Nimps came to accept that Russia was imperialist before the Revolution, after they'd been presented with incontrovertible textual proof that their arguments were contrary to both Lenin and Trotsky on the matter. Lenin and Trotsky explicitly characterised Russia as both thoroughly imperialist in the modern sense **and** extremely backward. We became aware of the Nimp change of mind when Tom produced the document “Combined and Uneven Development & Russian Imperialism Circa WWI”, which was later approved by the IEC, with Imp comrades relieved to see this political development.

However, it became apparent that the Nimps supported this newfound orthodoxy with a logic different from Lenin and Trotsky's. The IEC-agreed document states:

“During the emergence of the modern imperialist world order it was not only backward countries, but also some characterized by leading Marxists as imperialist, that combined backwardness with advanced capitalist structures. The outstanding example was Russia under the Romanoff dynasty”.

The Nimps fail to recognise that it is not only in the early years of the imperialist age that imperialist states can be characterized by combined and uneven development, but, as described by Lenin and Trotsky, this is a feature of modern imperialism in general.

Since their change of position, the Nimps have shown a chronic incapacity to understand why Russia in 1914 was imperialist and in 2014 is not. In his recent document "Why Russia is not Imperialist", HaPe [Breitman] makes some attempt to do so, but his argument is entirely based on the assertion that Russia in 1914 was comparatively more developed than Russia today, ie. that Tsarist Russia was somehow "advanced" after all: "In 1914 Russia's advanced sectors of the economy could provide important leverage internationally.... Russia's industry is not modernising in a way that could allow for stable economic growth as that a hundred years earlier". In their discussion of Russia today, Nimp arguments consistently focus on the absolute strength or weakness (advancement or backwardness) of the Russian economy, rather than its combined and uneven role in the world system as a whole.

In contrast, Trotsky focused not on the advanced development of Russia in 1914 but on its **backwardness**, with patches of high-level development. The original Nimp position on Tsarist Russia had its origins in a failure to understand the theory of combined and uneven development, and their position on Russia today continues to be based on that failure.

Imperialism comes out of the high **and uneven** development of capitalism **as a world system**, and although the unevenness is particularly between different countries, as an exception some countries which overall are backward can be imperialist. Thus neither Lenin nor Trotsky ever, anywhere, say that imperialism equates to a high organic composition of capital in a given country. Let me repeat that. Nowhere do Lenin or Trotsky say that a country is excluded from the category of imperialism because it has a low level of productivity or a low organic composition of capital. This criterion is a figment of Nimp imaginations. To the extent that Lenin and Trotsky focus on the economic structure of individual great powers, it is monopoly they tend to stress rather than the absolute strength of the economy.

You can say many things about the development of Bolshevism, but one of the most important is that it grew out of the programmatic consequences of two fundamental propositions: that Russia was a backward country steeped in barbarism, and that Russia was an imperialist power. Trotskyism integrated those two conceptions in a consistent theory. Combined and uneven development is perhaps the most important characteristic of our age. It is fundamental to imperialism and to the processes (and therefore the theory) of permanent revolution, and in Trotsky's brilliant exposition it was the foundation for both the success and for the later degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

So to Trotsky the important thing was that Russia was a **backward** imperialist country. Almost the first lines of *Results and Prospects* declare that:

"the main characteristic of Russian social development is its comparative primitiveness and slowness." [*Results and Prospects*, in *Permanent Revolution*, p 37]

And this becomes the foundation for our understanding of the Russian Revolution:

"Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity, their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of combined development-- by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of a journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms." [*History of the Russian Revolution*, v 1 p 22-23]

The idea is re-expressed on the first page of the first chapter of *Revolution Betrayed*:

"Russia took the road of proletarian revolution, not because her economy was the first to become ripe for a socialist change, but because she could not develop further on a capitalist basis. Socialization of the means of production had become a necessary condition for bringing the country out of barbarism. That is the law of combined development for backward countries." [*Revolution Betrayed*, p 5]

I'm deliberately quoting from the beginning — from the foundation — of each of the three primary texts of Trotskyism to make the centrality of this idea inescapably clear.

So when our comrades changed their mind and decided that Tsarist Russia was imperialist after all — on the grounds that they had just made a mistake because they hadn't realised how advanced the Russian economy was — they essentially counterposed themselves to Trotskyism as a body of thought. Trotsky grew to political maturity in the Russian Marxist movement knowing that Russia was **both** profoundly backward **and** thoroughly imperialist.

In *Revolution Betrayed* Trotsky at great length analyses the economy of the degenerated workers state in which the unevenness of development is ever-sharpened. Huge strides forward were made on the basis of the social ownership and central planning of production, while crippling bureaucratic deformations limited and undermined that productive advance. The workers state took control of Russia in 1917 in a condition of profound uneven and combined development, and it lost control of Russia in 1991 in a condition of far **more** profound combined and uneven development.

Failing to understand the combined character of Russian imperialism today as both advanced **and** backward, or even to conceive of such a possibility in the modern period, our Nimp comrades attempt to collapse the dialectical complexity to either backwardness **or** advancement, and then choose to say that Russia is merely a backward country as measured on the scale of organic composition of capital or the global competitiveness of its products or whatever. This procedure, incorrect on its own, leads to further absurdities like the dismissal of those elements of Russian society that are today advanced. In other words, the side of Russia that is advanced is seen as not really advanced at all, since Russia is merely backward, the sort of country that bourgeois economists lump in with other exploited countries. But arms manufacture, optical instruments, telephony, information technology, space technology and shipbuilding in Russia are in fact today advanced.

When it is impossible to simply dismiss the side of Russia that is advanced, the Nimps discount it anyway on the grounds that it is primarily the product of its history as a degenerated workers state. But of course everything about Russia and its economy arises out of its history as a degenerated workers state, as everything about every other imperialist state arises out of its pre-imperialist history.

The comrades' focus on measuring Russia on a linear economic scale from under-development to advanced capitalism disconnects them dangerously from the Leninist-Trotskyist method, and blinds them to all the evidence of the significant role Russia plays in the international system, economically, militarily and politically. Taken as a whole, Russian capitalism combines backwardness and advancement in such a way that Russia is fundamentally an independent power, an exploiter of weak, neo-colonial countries and a major force in the world.