



THE NEXT STAGE OF AFRICA LIBERATION IS SOCIALISM

BY

Joseph Choonara & Leo Zeilig

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Published by **Iva Valley Books**

2nd Floor, Labour House

Central Area-Abuja.

07037163465

Iva Valley Books

2ND FLOOR, LABOUR HOUSE, NLC

BUILDING, CENTRAL AREA , ABUJA

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1 The Relevance of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution Today

Joseph Choonara¹

Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution formed in its author's mind during Russia's 1905 Revolution—between 9 January, when workers marched to the Winter Palace to petition the Tsar, and the mass strikes of October that gave birth to the Petrograd Soviet.¹

In early 2011 the practice of permanent revolution once more became a burning question as workers took centre stage in movements that swept away dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. These uprisings seemed to show the relevance of many of the key features described in Trotsky's theory. The working class in less economically developed societies played a crucial role in fighting for democracy; the struggles showed the potential to grow over into a challenge to capitalism; the international dimension necessary to allow the achievements of the revolution to become permanent was clear as struggles spread across different Arab states.

In analysing these events a key point of reference for those associated with *International Socialism* was the theory of permanent revolution. Indeed, this theory, along with that of “deflected permanent revolution” developed by Tony Cliff in the early 1960s,² has been deployed in almost all our writing on struggles in the Global South for over half a century. I will attempt to set out, as clearly as possible, what I think the theory means and what is left when the general aspects of the theory are disentangled from the context in which they were formulated.

Why do we need the theory?

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels stressed that capitalism itself was developing the various prerequisites for communism. These boil down to two key elements. First, the forces of production must be sufficiently developed to allow the emergence of a society capable of meeting human needs. Second, the working class, the “gravediggers” of capitalism, must have sufficient weight to be able to enact the “forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions”.⁴

¹ International Socialism 131, 2011: <http://isj.org.uk/issue-131/>

If these criteria are applied mechanically, a more economically backward society, possessing a low level of material development and in which the working class are a tiny minority, is in no way ripe for socialism.

According to this argument, in such a society the best one can hope for is a revolution that secures favourable conditions for capitalist development, leading, eventually, to a potential struggle for socialism.

This “stagist” approach—first the “bourgeois-democratic revolution” to establish a modern capitalist state and then, at some later stage, a fight for socialism—was a commonplace of Stalinist theory.⁵ It is still widely accepted on the left internationally today. I will give just one especially striking example. It is from an interview with Bolivia’s vice-president Álvaro Marcelo García Linera, who, along with President Evo Morales of the MAS party, was carried to power on the back of two major waves of struggle in 2003 and 2005:

Interviewer: Is it your thesis that socialism is not viable in Bolivia today?

Linera: There are two reasons why there is not much chance of a socialist regime being installed in Bolivia. On the one hand, there is a proletariat that is numerically in a minority and politically non-existent, and you cannot build socialism without a proletariat. Secondly, the potential for agrarian and urban communities is very much weakened. There is an implosion of community economies into family structures, which have been the framework within which the social movements have arisen...

Interviewer: In that case, what kind of system does the MAS want to build?

Linera: A kind of Andean capitalism.

Interviewer: What is Andean capitalism?

Linera: It is a question of building a strong state... It is a question of transferring a part of the surplus of the nationalised hydrocarbons in order to encourage the setting up of forms of self-organisation, of self-management and of commercial development that is really Andean and Amazonian... Bolivia will still be capitalist in 50 or 100 years.⁶

What was Trotsky’s alternative to such a bleak perspective?

Trotsky’s theory

One of the strengths of Neil’s article is his detailed discussion of the theory of uneven and combined development.⁷ The term was introduced by Trotsky in *The History of the Russian Revolution*,⁸ published in 1930, but the concept is, contrary to Neil’s suggestion,⁹ present in a more or less complete form in his earlier writings on permanent revolution— notably *1905* and *Results and Prospects*.

Late developing capitalist nations do not simply replicate their predecessors. Russia in the early 20th century would not follow the path of pre-existing capitalist powers such as France or Britain. There would not be centuries of painstaking growth of handicrafts and manufactories before the rise of the great factories of the industrial revolution. Under the pressure of external competition—military and economic—from more advanced economies Russia would implant the most sophisticated machinery and techniques. By squeezing the peasantry to raise taxes and by borrowing from European financiers, the Tsarist bureaucracy could import the most advanced factories and railroads onto Russian soil. This created, as Trotsky writes:

The most concentrated industry in Europe based on the most backward agriculture in Europe. The most colossal state apparatus in the world making use of every achievement of modern technological progress in order to retard the historical progress of its own country.¹⁰

The uneven development of the world system led to combination, in which the modern and the archaic fused in novel ways. Neil writes that this “usually involves what Michael Burawoy calls ‘the combination of capitalist modes of production with pre-existing modes’”.¹¹ However, he adds, there can be extreme disparities in the development of the forces of production *within* the capitalist mode of production itself. So Neil writes of the “immense difference between *industrial* capitalism and previous modes of production”.¹²

Uneven and combined development affects not only the shape and pace of advance of the means of production of a society, but also the class structure. In the Russian case it meant a small and weak domestic capitalist class, heavily penetrated by external financiers, a colossal and repressive bureaucracy, and a freshly formed and small, but potentially powerful, urban working class.

This had implications for the coming Russian Revolution. The largest social group, the peasantry, lacked the cohesion or commonality of interest necessary to lead a revolution. It could play a revolutionary role only inasmuch as it could connect to a revolutionary class in the cities. The bourgeoisie would not play a revolutionary role, because it feared and was antagonistic towards the working class that it oppressed and exploited.

This posed a problem for the country’s socialist movement, which was divided between its Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. For the Mensheviks, the coming revolution would be bourgeois in character. Therefore, it would be made by the “democratic bourgeoisie”. Workers

might assist as part of a democratic coalition of forces, but could at best act as a kind of ginger group assuring certain rights for workers in the ensuing democratic regime.¹³ The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, recognised the need for a militant struggle by workers. In their formulation there would be a “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” which would drive the revolution through. The proletariat would, according to this rather vague scenario, limit itself to the tasks appropriate to a bourgeois revolution.¹⁴ This formulation persisted until 1917, when, in the course of the revolution, Lenin won the Bolshevik Party (which Trotsky had by then joined) to a perspective remarkably similar to that of permanent revolution.¹⁵

For Trotsky the solution to the problems faced by Russia—an agrarian revolution to resolve the land question, the overthrow of Tsarism and the introduction of democracy, and so on—could only be brought about by workers. This struggle might begin with tasks common to the bourgeois revolutions of the past (the English Revolution of the 17th century or the French and American revolutions of the 18th), “but the principal driving force of the Russian Revolution is the proletariat, and that is why, so far as its methods are concerned, it is a proletarian revolution”.¹⁶ Faced with this, “the proletariat is driven by the internal progress of events towards hegemony over the peasantry and to the struggle for state power”.¹⁷ Having established a workers’ state, it was implausible to suggest that the workers would accept a self-denying ordinance and stop at purely “democratic” or “bourgeois” tasks. On the contrary, they would use their power to wrest economic, social and political control from the old ruling class.¹⁸

In other words, the revolution could pass directly over into a social revolution leading towards the establishment of socialism and becoming “permanent”.¹⁹ However, having made such a revolution the working class would face a potentially hostile mass of peasantry, who, having taken control of their land in alliance with the workers, would now have quite different interests. This would mean the eventual overturning of the revolution unless the workers could prove that socialism offered greater potential than private capitalist agriculture. But that meant accessing far greater material and cultural resources than were available in Russia. Successful revolution would again run up against the limits of the pre-requisites for socialism.

For Trotsky, the pre-requisites did not exist on the national terrain. He insisted on the international nature of revolution because the

prerequisites only existed on a world scale. Russia must provide the prologue for the European, and ultimately the world, revolution.

As capitalism is an international system, connected both through imperialism and the world market, crises provoking revolutionary situations were likely to be regional or global in scale. The other dimension to the “permanence” of the Russian Revolution was, therefore, that revolutions would have to follow in major European countries. The revolutionary wave that followed 1917 was confirmation of the viability of Trotsky’s theory; the ultimate defeat of this wave, which paved the way for Stalinist counterrevolution, was, in a negative sense, also a confirmation.

As the capitalist system develops on a world scale and capitalist political domination becomes the norm, subsequent “bourgeois revolutions” can take on an even more disjointed and episodic form in late developing capitalisms. Often it is difficult to specify a moment or even a decisive period in which quantity transformed into quality. At what point, for example, did Bolivia cease to be “feudal” and become “capitalist”? Along with a long societal process of economic development, a whole series of upheavals were required, combining blows struck from below and manoeuvres at the top, through successive political revolutions with a social dimension. This must include the great indigenous struggles of 1780-82 and the liberation from colonial rule in the early 19th century, the various coups and countercoups at the start of the 20th century to the great popular nationalist revolution of 1952 and beyond.

However, it is certainly true that there is no society today where capital does not rule politically and economically (whether or not members of the capitalist class *directly* exercise their political power). Indeed, according to Trotsky, writing in 1930, this has been the case for some time:

Then wherein lies the distinction between the advanced and backward countries? The distinction is great, but it still remains within the limits of the domination of capitalist relationships. The forms and methods of the rule of the bourgeoisie differ greatly in different countries. At one pole, the domination bears a stark and absolute character: *The United States*. At the other pole finance capital adapts itself to the outlived institutions of Asiatic medievalism by subjecting them to itself and imposing its own methods upon them: *India*. But the bourgeoisie rules in both places. From this it follows that the dictatorship of the proletariat will also have a highly varied character in terms of the social basis, the political forms, the immediate tasks and the tempo of work in the various capitalist countries.²⁸

Today uneven and combined development is best conceived as a drawing together of successive phases—including, crucially, capitalist phases—in novel forms within countries of the Global South. Uneven and combined development poses *peculiar* problems for those societies that may require *revolutionary struggle* in their resolution. This involves a broadening of the scope of the theory, but not a break from it. Trotsky, again and again, uses the terms “peculiar” and “peculiarities” in his writings on permanent revolution. He stresses the need, for instance, to make a “genuine study of the peculiarity of a given country, ie the living interpenetration of the various steps and stages of historical development in that country”.²⁹

Permanent revolution in this conception involves the combination of democratic and socialist challenges to the existing order of things. The former covers a range of potential demands, including the dissolution of large landed estates across much of the Global South, the introduction of parliamentary democracy in Egypt or Tunisia today, the resolution of the “indigenous question” in Bolivia in the struggles of 2003 or 2005, or the overthrow of colonialism in India in 1946-7. None of these demands are, in themselves, incompatible with capitalist social relations, but achieving these in the context of uneven and combined development can lead to an anticapitalist dynamic raising the possibility of social revolution.

The particular interweaving of the political and social is here a dialectical and fluid “blend”, to use Draper’s term. Permanent revolution begins, Trotsky writes at one point, with “a far-reaching and burning problem ‘for the people’...in the solution of which the majority of the nation is interested, and which demands for its solution the boldest revolutionary measures”.³⁰ It is in this sense that the theory is general to both the early examples that Trotsky deals with and the instances we are faced with today.

It follows that Trotsky and Cliff are quite justified in discussing bourgeois or democratic “tasks”, provided such tasks are seen as fluid, as part of a dynamic historical process, rather than a fixed and mechanically applied set of criteria. In this context it is tempting to talk about the “uneven and combined consciousness” of those striving for revolutionary change.

While it is quite true that the introduction of parliamentary democracy with universal adult suffrage was not achieved by any of the classical bourgeois revolutions, it is today a feature of many of the most advanced capitalist countries. For the Egyptian masses to demand this is in the tradition of permanent revolution—they have made it their “democratic task”. It may well be that, due to the instability of any liberal

parliamentary regime faced with the agrarian problem, the weakness of Egyptian capital, the Palestinian question, etc, a further social deepening of the revolutionary process is required to force through such a change. It may be that, out of such a struggle, a higher form of democracy emerges, leaping ahead of the parliamentary democracies of the Global North. Surely this too is part of the tradition of 1917, which, Trotsky wrote, was “in its initial task...a democratic revolution. But it posed the problem of political democracy in a new way”.³¹

We need to remain true to this, the spirit of Trotsky’s theory, rather than seeking to apply it formalistically and, inevitably, finding it wanting. Neil Davidson seems to come to a similar conclusion towards the end of his piece:

Uneven and combined development is therefore likely to be an ongoing process, which will only be resolved by either revolution or disintegration. But in the meantime, China and other states like India and Brazil where growth has been less dramatic remain both inherently unstable in their internal social relations and expansive in their external search for markets, raw materials and investment opportunities. *It is in this inherent instability that the possibilities for permanent revolution lie.*³²

Cliff’s contribution

From this standpoint, Cliff’s contribution to the problem of permanent revolution is clear. Cliff’s starting point was the insight that “an automatic correlation between economic backwardness and revolutionary political militancy does not exist”.³³

While it is true that uneven and combined development is one factor destabilising the Global South, and so creating potentially revolutionary situations, this is only one part of the story. Cliff focuses on societies where these kinds of processes lead to revolutionary crises but where workers do not play a revolutionary role. We do not require a single special explanation for the failure of workers to “be revolutionary” in any particular context—a whole range of economic, political and ideological factors will dictate whether this is the case.

Cliff’s second point was that, in contexts in which workers do not take the initiative, the sizeable revolutionary intelligentsia could impose a solution to the problems thrown up by uneven and combined development. They could do so alone, as in Cuba in 1958, or, as in China in 1949, at the head of a peasant rebellion. Trotsky claimed that China was dominated by capitalist social relations in the 1920s, as was Cuba by the 1950s.

Cliff was also more orthodox in his Trotskyism in identifying the intelligentsia as a potentially revolutionary force than is sometimes realised. In 1905 Trotsky contrasts the middle class who, he argues, were central to the French Revolution with the Russian, "new middle class", the professional intelligentsia: lawyers, doctors, engineers, university professors, schoolteachers".³⁷ However, in the Russian context, this was a relatively small layer. Trotsky argues that they were in fact drawn behind the organisation of the liberal landowners, who resented the Tsarist state's industrial protectionism and the burdens it imposed on the countryside. The Kadet party was "a union of the oppositional impotence of the *zemtsy* [landed constitutionalists] with the all-round impotence of the diploma-carrying intelligentsia".³⁸ When in 1905 the landowners swung behind the Tsar in the face of rural unrest, the intelligentsia:

With tears in its eyes, was obliged to forsake the country estate where, when all is said and done, it had been no more than a foster child, and to seek recognition in its historic home, the city. But what did it find in the city, other than its own self? It found the conservative capitalist bourgeoisie, the revolutionary proletariat, and the irreconcilable antagonism between the two.³⁹

In the societies examined by Cliff, where the proletariat was not in a revolutionary mood, and where the intelligentsia was sufficiently developed to play an independent role, things were rather different. They also had a model of capitalist development to look to—in its purest form the state capitalist model giving rise to "deflected state capitalist permanent revolution".⁴⁰ The more common form involved a combination of private and state capitalism. Sensitivity to these possibilities was of profound importance to the International Socialist tradition. It allowed us to give unconditional support to struggles for national liberation without falsely painting the leadership of such movements as socialists:

For revolutionary socialists in the advanced countries, the shift in strategy means that while they will have to continue to oppose any national oppression of the colonial people unconditionally, they must cease to argue over the national identity of the future ruling classes of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and instead investigate the class conflicts and future social structures of these continents.⁴¹

Chris Harman's *The Prophet and the Proletariat* is an important analysis of the contradictions of political Islam.⁴² But Iran's 1979 Revolution cannot be an example of deflected permanent revolution—because here,

as Harman shows, the level of revolutionary energy and the potential for self-organisation of the proletariat were magnificent. I would see this as an aborted process of permanent revolution, which failed to break through for subjective political reasons.

The same applies to John Newsinger's account of the 1952 Bolivian Revolution, which was marked by workers holding effective power in streets of the major cities.⁴³ The kind of class forces Cliff discussed played an important role in Iran and Bolivia. But here the absence of a revolutionary party with sufficient size and experience is the central problem rather than the non-revolutionary nature of the working class. Trotsky would have recognised the problem of the absence of the subjective element of the revolutionary party.⁴⁴

Many of the other revolutionary struggles in recent years can still be usefully situated within the framework of Trotsky's theory. This is no substitute for concrete analysis, but permanent revolution, liberated from some of the immediate context in which it was first formulated, remains relevant in guiding our understanding of struggle in the Global South today. In the second chapter, Leo Zeilig applies this theory to the struggles in sub-Saharan Africa.

Notes

1: Trotsky, 1973, p8. Thanks to Alex Callinicos and Esme Choonara for their comments on the first draft of this article, and to Peyman Jafari and Anne Alexander for helpful discussions.

2: Cliff, 1990.

3: Davidson, 2010, p195.

4: Marx and Engels, 1985, pp221-231, 246.

5: Cliff, 2000.

6: Stefanoni, 2005.

7: Davidson, 2010, pp182-195.

8: Trotsky, 1985, p27.

9: Davidson, 2010, p184.

10: Trotsky, 1973, p53.

11: Davidson, 2010, pp187-188.

12: Davidson, 2010, p192 (my emphasis). The implication that "industrial capitalism" is a distinctive mode of production is probably a slip of the pen.

13: See Trotsky 1973, pp290-329.

14: See Trotsky, 1973, pp329-333.

15: On the question of whether Lenin ever actually read Trotsky's writings on permanent revolution, see Trotsky, 1982, pp42-43. In Trotsky's assessment, prior to the 1917 Revolution Lenin was probably only

familiar with the theory indirectly, through its citation by other writers. However, Trotsky recalls that Adolph Abramovich Joffe, a member of Trotsky's left opposition in the 1920s, claimed a conversation with Lenin in which the latter acknowledged the correctness of Trotsky's insights. Just before his suicide in 1927 Joffe wrote to Trotsky making the same claim. See Trotsky, 1979, pp558-561.

16: Trotsky, 1973, p66.

17: Trotsky, 1973, p72.

18: Lenin makes a similar point in one of his famous "April Theses" of 1917: "Not a parliamentary republic-to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviets of Workers' Deputies would be a retrograde step-but a republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Labourers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom"-Lenin, 1917.

19: The term "permanent" has an odd ring to it, implying "perpetual" to the modern reader, rather than implying an uninterrupted continuation. A recent collection of writings on permanent revolution clarifies this: "In Russian, the words 'permanent revolution [permanentsnaya revolyutsiya]' and 'uninterrupted revolution [nepreryvnaya revolyutsiya]' are semantic equivalents and completely interchangeable...in his foreword to Marx's essay on the Paris Commune...[Trotsky]...spoke of a 'revolution in Permanenz, or an uninterrupted revolution'" -Day and Gaido, 2009, pp449-450.

20: Neil is not the first to question the relevance of the theory on this basis. A similar piece by David Whitehouse in the US-based International Socialist Review in 2006 prompted a response by Paul D'Amato that vigorously defended Trotsky's theory. Although I agree with much of D'Amato's reply, his claim that "all countries...need a permanent revolution because though the material prerequisites for socialism exist on an international scale, they do not within a purely national framework" robs the theory of any specificity. See Whitehouse, 2006; D'Amato, 2006.

21: Trotsky, 1973, p90.

22: Davidson, 2010, pp170, 171.

23: Draper, 1978, pp18-19.

24: Draper, 1978, p19.

25: Draper, 1978, p20.

26: Davidson, 2010, p175.

27: Callinicos, 1989, pp116, 151-159.

28: Trotsky, 1982, p129.

29: Trotsky, 1982, p129.

30: Trotsky, 1982, p130.

31: Trotsky, 1983, pp35-36.

32: Davidson, 2010, p197 (my emphasis).

33: Cliff, 1990, p22.

34: Davidson, 2010, p182.

35: Davidson, 2010, pp174-175.

36: Cited in Davidson, 2010, p188.

37: Trotsky, 1973, p58.

38: Trotsky, 1973, pp58-59.

39: Trotsky, 1973, p59.

40: Cliff, 1990, p25.

41: Cliff, 1990, p26.

42: Harman, 2010. Harman's analysis was to be especially crucial in the development of Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists who played an important role in the 2011 struggles against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak.

43: Newsinger, 1983, p82.

44: For instance, in his 1932 speech "In Defence of October", he situated the need for a revolutionary party in the context of 1917 and permanent revolution-Trotsky, 1932.

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2 Deflected permanent revolution in Africa

Leo Zeilig²

If Tony Cliff credited the theory of permanent revolution as Trotsky's most outstanding and original contribution to Marxism, then Cliff's own revisions to the theory in 1963 were similarly remarkable. An appraisal of Cliff's work, ten years after his death, must include his theory of deflected permanent revolution.

This article is not intended simply as a restatement of that theory.¹ While it is outlined, the article seeks to explain the centrality of the theory for understanding the struggle for national liberation and, subsequently, the role of the intelligentsia in the developing world. The case studies, drawn from Africa, are intentionally chosen, as Cliff wrote, as "deviations from the norm". I argue that the theory of deflected permanent revolution remains a vital tool for analysing historical and contemporary developments in the "third world".

Trotsky's theory

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution turned the received wisdom of Marxism on its head when it first emerged. This "wisdom" made a number of fundamental revisions to both Marx's writing and the Marxist method. First, most Marxists at the turn of the 20th century believed that the struggle for socialism would be preceded by a distinct "bourgeois-democratic" stage that would establish the domination of capitalism. Only in countries that had fully developed capitalist relations and production could the working class lead and win the fight against capital. This seemed to stand to reason: since the modern working class arose with the growth of factory production, only in those countries where the remnants of the old order had been destroyed could socialism be built as a working class project.

At the time of the Russian Revolution in 1905 most Russian (and European) Marxists believed in some version of this stagist approach. As Menshevik spokesman Martynov wrote before 1905, "The coming revolution will be a revolution of the bourgeoisie... The struggle to influence the course and outcome of the bourgeoisie can be expressed

² International Socialism, 126, 2010: <http://isj.org.uk/tony-cliff-deflected-permanent-revolution-in-africa/>

simply in the proletariat's exerting revolutionary pressure on the will of the liberal and radical bourgeoisie".² Socialism could only arise once capitalist industry had been built. The class that would lead the struggle against feudal relations was the bourgeoisie. If the French Revolution had been led by this class of business owners, merchants and nascent capitalists they would then continue to play a revolutionary role in the 20th century.

There were, of course, important differences among Marxists. Lenin never thought that factory owners and businessman in Russia could lead the revolution, the position held by the Mensheviks. Instead he saw the working class as the social force that would break the fetters on capitalist development in Russia and lead the struggle for agrarian change, universal suffrage, the eight-hour day and democratic freedoms. The working class, Lenin said, would do this in an alliance with the peasantry. He envisaged after the revolution a "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasantry". But still Lenin maintained that "the democratic revolution will not extend beyond the scope of the bourgeois social-economic relationships".³

Trotsky was scathing about this notion of revolutionary change. For him 1905 was evidence of the impotence of the Russian bourgeoisie, who were terrified at the militancy of the working class, the mass strikes, occupations and organisation of the soviets (workers' councils). Fear of working class revolution had made the bourgeoisie turn to and support the *ancien régime*. But there was a second element to the 1905 Revolution identified by Trotsky. The working class were not "delimiting" in their reforms, rather they raised the slogans of socialism and in the soviets that emerged they started to move towards a new order.

The actual revolution challenged the sloppy theorising of old Marxists. But Trotsky maintained that there was a profound theoretical error at the heart of their analyses. Marxism could not be reduced to technological determinism that saw history developing in neat chronological steps according to the even growth of productive and technical capacity. Marx himself rejected this approach.

Instead Trotsky posited a more contradictory reality. Capitalist (and indeed historical) development is combined and uneven. As Trotsky explained:

A backward country assimilates the material and intellectual conquests of the advanced countries. But this does not mean that it follows them slavishly, reproduces all the stages of their past... Although compelled to follow after the advanced countries, a backward country does not take

things in the same order. The privilege of historic backwardness...permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specific date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages while at the same time combining a series of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms.⁴

The quick growth of industry in certain urban centres in late 19th and early 20th century Russia was a case in point. This unevenness meant that the Russian working class had a militant readiness that was untempered by the conservatism of a more “advanced” proletariat. In Britain, for example, working class politics might be hampered by the experience of defeat, the role of a trade union bureaucracy or the dominance of ruling class ideas. But these elements might not exist as sharply in developing “backward” societies. So in countries where the institutional edifice of social democracy was weak ruling ideas might have less hold on the minds of the oppressed.

Trotsky argued that the starting point for analysing the contemporary world was the global economy. He stated this position most clearly in the week before the second revolution in 1917: “National autonomy no longer suffices. Economic evolution demands the abolition of national frontiers.” Only the concerted action of the popular masses internationally could save the Russian Revolution and “give peace to the world”. The fate of national revolutions in the modern world depended on the international “revolutionary response”.⁵ A victory for socialism and the working class was inconceivable unless it conquered large swathes of the globe, seizing and utilising the massive productive capacity of capitalism. This, Trotsky argued, was restating a basic proposition of Marx’s. In an 1850 address to the Central Council of the Communist League Marx had said,

While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible... it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been displaced...not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world.

He finished his speech by declaring that the working class’s “battle-cry must be: the permanent revolution”.⁶ This fact, in Marx and Trotsky, proceeded from an understanding of the inherently uneven (and combined) nature of capitalist development.

The “permanent” in Trotsky’s theory of revolution was twofold. Socialist revolution, led by the working class, would only be victorious once it had spread over national borders, and fought for the same victories in diverse geographical regions, in developed capitalist countries as well as colonies.

The revolution would have to become permanent across the world and no national victory could be considered real and lasting.

But revolution was “permanent” in a further sense. In developing countries, where capitalist relations were limited and the working class was a small minority, the revolution would also become permanent. The working class, leading other oppressed classes, would fight not only for agrarian reform, an eight hour day and legal trade unions but also the seizure of factories and socialism. Permanence here acquires a deeper sense. The working class, as the only truly revolutionary class, would carry out the historical tasks of an enfeebled national and cowardly bourgeoisie, but simultaneously its own liberation. The national democratic and socialist tasks would be carried out by the working class minority.

Without this dual permanence—the struggle for international socialist revolution across nation states and the joining of democratic and socialist stages within the national borders of developing states—no revolutionary struggle in the modern world is conceivable.

Problems (and Cliff’s solution)

The brilliance of the theory is still striking. It decentred European Marxism. Trotsky’s theory became an indispensable tool in revolutionary struggles which took place in parts of the world that were considered “backward” and “undeveloped”. The successful Russian Revolution in 1917 seemed to confirm Trotsky’s analysis, as did the Chinese Revolution in 1925-7 (a negative demonstration of the theory).

But there were problems. Trotsky’s theory, as we have seen, posited the leading and revolutionary role in “peripheral” countries for the working class. Only this class, in the face of a weak national bourgeoisie, could lead the permanent revolution. However, after the Second World War there were a number of dramatic developments that seemed to contradict the theory. Tony Cliff outlined two: the revolutions in China in 1949 and Cuba in 1959. Both these events had taken place with the complete absence of working class involvement.⁷ In China Mao’s conquest of cities and towns revealed, in Cliff’s words, “more than anything the Communist Party’s complete divorce from the industrial working class”.⁸ In Cuba two elements were key. Castro’s guerrilla movement excluded any involvement of the urban working class, while organised labour was seriously compromised by a Stalinised Communist Party that had long sought collaboration with the Batista regime.

In these cases there was no proletarian engagement, let alone an enraged and revolutionary working class forcing the “democratic” revolution towards socialist liberation. China and Cuba were the main examples, but Cliff was careful to point out that in most struggles for liberation from colonialism, similar processes occurred: “Other colonial revolutions—Ghana, India, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria, etc are deviations from the norm...they can best be understood when approached from the standpoint of, and compared with, the norm”.⁹

Cliff asked what went wrong with the theory. He identified elements of the theory which could be regarded as constant, and others which were contingent. One constant was the spinelessness of the emerging bourgeoisie:

The bourgeoisie which arrives late on the scene is fundamentally different from its ancestors of a century or two earlier, it is incapable of providing a consistent, democratic, revolutionary solution to the problem posed by feudalism and imperialist oppression.

But Cliff argued it was no longer correct to state that, therefore, the “decisive revolutionary role falls to the proletariat, even though it may be very young and small in number”.¹⁰ If this was the case, the theory of permanent revolution collapses since it was only the working class (in developing capitalist countries) who could move beyond private property, forcing the “democratic revolution” to grow over “immediately into the socialist, and thereby...a permanent revolution”.¹¹

Cliff summarised the theory in the light of the experience of China and Cuba and the emerging processes of decolonisation: “While the conservative, cowardly nature of a late-developing bourgeoisie...is an absolute law, the revolutionary character of the young working class is neither absolute nor inevitable.” Cliff goes on to describe some of the serious weaknesses of a young working class in colonial settings: “In many cases the existence of a floating amorphous majority of new workers with one foot in the countryside creates difficulties for autonomous proletarian organisations; lack of experience and illiteracy add to their weakness”.¹² These factors tend to result in a dependence on a non working class leadership.

Cliff identified other factors that weakened working class self-activity:

The last, but by no means least, factor determining whether the working class in the backward countries is actually revolutionary or not is a subjective one, namely, the activities of the parties, particularly the Communist Parties that influence it.¹³

But the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism after 1945 had a profound influence on many colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, and the attempts to build revolutionary working class organisations.

On this point Duncan Hallas observed that the theory of permanent revolution was developed early in Trotsky's life, when he did not see the centrality of the revolutionary party. Without the "piston box" of a revolutionary organisation, working class action can be dispersed and disorganised. Anti-colonial struggles faced a working class that was poorly organised, young and small in number. Where there were communist organisations these were often hopelessly Stalinised—dividing up the "democratic" and socialist tasks into distinct stages. This subjective element is missing from Trotsky's original statement of permanent revolution. But surely after 1917 he would have accepted that the revolutionary potential of the working class was contingent in large part on the presence of Bolshevik parties?¹⁴

If Cliff had stopped here he would have contributed valuable and startling insights to Trotsky's original work. But it was in the following development of deflected permanent revolution that Cliff's theory made a vital breakthrough: "It is one of the tricks of history that when an historical task faces society, and the class that traditionally carries it out is absent, some other group of people...implements it".¹⁵

For Cliff this group of people was the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia played a central part "as the leader and unifier of the nation, and above all as manipulator of the masses" in the colonial world. The desire of this group is always to rise above society. These tendencies can be checked when the intelligentsia are involved in mass politics, but when they are free of the constraints and discipline of a wider movement, "they show clearer and much more extreme tendencies towards elitism, arbitrariness, as towards vacillation and splits". In a period of nationalist struggles a revolutionary intelligentsia is a "cohesive factor" and an "obvious source of a professional elite". Members of this group have various advantages over other social groups in society. They are able to pose as the neutral arbiters of the nation against sectional interests, with a clear concept of what the nation means when "the peasants and workers [have] neither the leisure nor education for it".¹⁶ But this group also has an organisational coherence, lacking in other classes. Organisational life was visible in the clubs, associations and student unions across the colonial world prior to decolonisation.

The intelligentsia also see themselves as the exalted agents of political transformation. Cliff wrote:

They are great believers in efficiency...they hope for reform from above and would dearly love to hand the new world over to a grateful people, rather than see the liberating struggle of a self-conscious and freely associated people result in a new world for themselves.

Their relationship to those below them is inherently contradictory, a simultaneous debt and feeling of guilt towards the “masses” and a sense of distance, divorcement and superiority to them. Cliff argued that the intelligentsia is “anxious to belong without being assimilated, without ceasing to remain apart and above.” In conclusion, the intelligentsia’s exaggerated power derives directly from the “febleness of other social classes, and their political nullity”.¹⁷

If the working class fails to carry out the permanent revolution in emergent nations and join the national and socialist tasks, other social groups will assume control. So permanent revolution becomes its opposite, bureaucratic state capitalism. As we shall see, in many cases this is exactly what happened. After the victory of national liberation an intelligentsia assumed the place of the old ruling classes. But in the context of weak private capital the state was the only lever on power and the Soviet Union became the model, par excellence, for national development.

Cliff’s theory offers us the clearest explanation of how change in the colonial world actually occurred, and the role of the intelligentsia in this transformation. The rest of this article will focus on the experience of nationalist struggles and the role of the student-intelligentsia in Africa.

Africa: the student-intelligentsia

If the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia and the 1925-7 revolution in China were the *pur sang* confirmation of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, then China in 1949 and Cuba in 1959 and are the purest examples of Deflected Permanent Revolution. The case studies in this article are what Cliff regarded as “deviations from the norm”.¹⁸ But these “deviations” can only be usefully understood with reference to Cliff’s theory.

In general it was not the African working class that led the struggles for independence. But trade union and labour mobilisations, especially after the Second World War, were crucial elements in triggering nationalist movements. In West Africa there are two significant examples. The first general strike in Nigerian history, in 1945, crippled the colonial state for six weeks leading to a period of labour nationalism for the rest of the decade. The period sparked the left wing Zikist movement. In Senegal the

railway strike of 1947 was a vital factor in the birth of nationalist struggles in French West Africa. Southern Africa was also shaken by strikes. In Zambia trade union struggles predated the nationalist Northern Rhodesian Congress and maintained a critical distance from the leaders of nationalism.¹⁹

The African working class suffered, as Cliff suggested, from certain weaknesses related to its youth and inexperience, though Femi Aborisade is correct when he argues it was not only the weaknesses of an African working class but the “lack of a visionary and strategic labour leadership”.²⁰

In the absence of working class leadership the intelligentsia played a leading role. There are precise reasons. In contrast to the presence of an African capitalist class, the colonial state in colonial, Francophone, Lusophone and Anglophone Africa promoted an important layer of functionaries and bureaucrats to operate the state machinery, local administration and services. By the 1940s this group was made up of civil servants, teachers, nurses and clerks. In part this was a desire by the state to “civilise” a stratum of bureaucrats, though as decolonisation approached the *évolués*—meaning literally “evolved” in French—became the mediators between popular desires for radical change and the colonial state. By the 1950s this group, though numerically small, had started to develop a coherent political and social identity. Peaceful and negotiated independent settlements were secured in alliance with the intelligentsia. Still the colonial machine could not always control these processes. So occasionally young and handpicked natives became unruly subjects leading militant nationalist movements (in the Congo, but also, for example, Guinea).

Importantly this social group frequently grew out of a student milieu. So trade union bureaucrats and colonial staff had been, and sometimes still were, university students educated abroad on scholarships. Often these students became imbued in the left wing and Communist milieu at American, British and French universities in the 1930s and 1940s. From an early period students from African colonies built their own organisations. In London the West African Student Union (WASU) was founded in 1925 and became a “training ground for Nigerian nationalists”.²¹ In France a similar structure for African students in Paris was the *Fédération des Etudiants d’Afrique Noire en France* (FEANF). One ex-member described brilliantly how FEANF worked as a cadre school for nationalist politics in which “one learnt to live, to think and to act together FEANF was a school where we took our first political lessons.

It was within FEANF that African students formed a concept of African nationalism”.²²

A generation of African nationalists, who led their countries to independence, hailed from what we can term the “student-intelligentsia”— Amilcar Cabral in Portugal, Leopold Senghor in France and Kwame Nkrumah in the US and Britain. Nkrumah was Ghana’s first leader. He studied and travelled in the US and UK, and became inspired by socialist ideas and the presence of black Marxists in those countries. He boasted that during his stay in London in the 1940s he would read the paper of the British Communist Party on the London underground.²³

But there was another element to the intelligentsia that Cliff noted: the inspiration for many of these politically organised and militant student-intellectuals was the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union represented to them, as it did for millions around the world, a Communist state that seemed to offer the possibility of real existing communism: equality, solidarity and struggle. Not implicated in the plunder of the colonies, and offering bellicose denunciations of imperialism, the Soviet Union and Communist Parties seemed also to pose a genuine political alternative. Perhaps more importantly, Russia appeared to offer a tantalizing model of development. Here, after all, was a country which only a few decades before had shared some of the features of the colonial world. At the turn of the 20th century Russia was still semi-capitalist, with a large peasantry and a small proletariat limited to certain industrial centres. Massive industrialisation after 1929 propelled the Soviet Union into the major league. By the 1950s the Soviet Union was a superpower, only surpassed by the United States.

This remarkable transformation was secured through mass industrialisation and rural collectivisation. The devastation is well documented, but for the African student-intelligentsia the lessons were clear. Again Nkrumah led the group. He was extravagant in his praise for the Soviet Union. The Russian Sputnik launch in 1957 seemed to be confirmation that the country could escape debilitating and humiliating (especially for this nascent class of nationalist leaders) underdevelopment. “In a little over thirty years [it] has built up an industrial machine so strong and advanced as to be able to launch the Sputnik... I pose it as an example for Africa”.²⁴

In most of Africa during the 1950s there was no discernable national bourgeoisie. The colonial state had sought to limit the growth of this class. The experience of the Congo was not untypical. As one study explained, the “profitable sectors of the economy were already cornered by foreign...corporations. Therefore all that they could sell was their political

power and influence in the state machinery”.²⁵ The absence of even a cowardly bourgeoisie heightened the centrality of the student-intelligentsia in the struggles that were taking place.

The African student-intelligentsia had a high degree of organisational coherence, political identity and, in the Soviet Union, a coherent model for national independence. Independent movements propelled the student-intelligentsia into the existing state machinery. When they assumed control over states, Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere, for example (the Ghanaian, Senegalese and Tanzanian leaders respectively), saw socialism as the state ideology. “African socialism” was presented as the authentic African ideology that justified early attempts at state capitalist development. African socialism raised the state above class antagonism, while declaring class to be a European phenomenon unknown to African societies.²⁶ After independence, with the mass movements against colonialism demobilised, the state became the only lever of power. Soon this enfeebled group, owning nothing and privileged only in its access to the old colonial apparatus, became, in Frantz Fanon’s prophetic words, “a sort of little caste, avid and voracious...only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it”.²⁷

In summary we can say that the absence of “strategic” organisations in the working class was in dramatic contrast to the impressive political and organisational unity among the student-intelligentsia on the continent. Both the Congo and Zimbabwe illustrate many of the elements in Cliff’s theory.

The Congo

While the Belgian Congo prevented the formation of a national bourgeoisie, a class of junior clerks, civil servants and students grew in the decades before independence. These *évolués* became an organised force in the Congo. However, their development was problematic. The Belgian Congo consistently discriminated against the Congolese, both granting and restricting the space for the intelligentsia to emerge and develop. But by 1956, four years before independence, there were 313 friendly associations, clubs and societies with a membership of approximately 15,000 members drawn from the *évolués*.²⁸ These organisations became the seedbeds of nationalist politics in the Congo.

However, the state was determined to limit the education of the Congolese intelligentsia. For example, strict censorship meant that no Marxist literature could be found in the country on the eve of independence and training was limited to the seminary and vocational

courses. George Nzongola-Ntalaja describes the *évolués* in the struggle for independence; it “was basically a continuation of their fight for equality of opportunity in the colonial political economy where they experienced discrimination with respect to career and other economic opportunities, in addition to the daily humiliations of colonial racism”.²⁹ From January 1959 the Congo entered a period of revolutionary turmoil.³⁰ Colonial relationships broke down and the deference towards white authority, priests and colonial officers dissolved. There was an explosion of protests and strikes by the working class.

Since the late 1930s the Congo had seen roads, schools and cities grow on the back of the exploitation of the country’s extraordinary mineral wealth. At the same time there was a growing militancy in the working class. From 1941 to 1947 the copper rich province of Katanga saw a wave of strikes in the mines and revolts, including mutinies, by soldiers. The country’s working class, working in mines and factories and living in new cities and towns, had grown considerably. By 1956 approximately one in five of the population was engaged in productive work, or just over 750,000 out of a Congolese population of 13 million.³¹

By the late 1950s popular radicalisation gravitated towards Patrice Lumumba’s *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC). The MNC became the voice for popular demands for liberation and independence. Lumumba expressed the dialectical relationship between a population in revolt, and a cautious and conciliatory leadership: “The masses are a lot more revolutionary than us... They do not always dare to express themselves in front of a police officer, or make their demands in front of an administrator but when we are with them it is the masses who push us, and who want to move more rapidly than us”.³² But despite Lumumba’s own radicalisation the nationalist struggle was still firmly organised and channelled into organisations and parties riven by squabbling *évolués*.

A political orientation on the self-organisation of the Congolese, and specifically of the working class in mines and factories, simply did not exist. But it was the generalised revolt after January 1959—pulling in new and radicalised layers of the population beyond the ranks of the *évolués*—that determined the character and pace of the struggle for independence. Tragically, the *évolués* could not be dislodged from their leadership of Congolese nationalism. Lumumba realised too late the stranglehold of this class on the country’s independence.

If the Congo’s intelligentsia led the struggle for independence, they also destroyed that freedom. Possessing no capital of their own, the Congolese elite craved access to wealth. But the country’s mining houses were owned

by the Belgian state and foreign companies. The *évolués* saw their role as mediators with the old colonial powers, distributing and negotiating rights to mining dividends.

After independence in June 1960 Lumumba became an obstacle to this project for the Belgian state and the Congolese *évolués*. His assassination six months later, organised by Belgian, US and UN forces, snuffed out the illusions of autonomous independence. With their power to withdraw capital and personnel, European powers turned independence into an empty shell. Though the Congo was an extreme example much of the continent followed a similar course. Freedom from colonial tutelage became, in Fanon's words, "the curse of independence...the colonial power through its immense resources of coercion condemns the young nation to regression".³³

It took four years to finally break the resistance of the Lumumbists. General Joseph Mobutu's second coup in 1965 signalled the dawn of dictatorship, supported by the West, with a programme of largely illusionary state intervention and Africanisation (labelled Zaireanisation under Mobutu).

Zimbabwe

Similar processes took place in Zimbabwe, though at a different pace. Zimbabwe won independence in 1980, after a guerrilla war had fought the Rhodesian settler state to a standstill. The struggle for independence from white minority rule was led by a self-conscious intelligentsia informed by Stalinist and Maoist ideas. But the control of the liberation war involved the conscious marginalisation of the country's working class. This was a dual process that saw the history of working class struggle in Rhodesia ignored, and no real involvement of townships, factories and mines in the liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. But the class existed, with its own politics, history and traditions.

Growth in the Rhodesian economy had reached 10 percent a year in the early 1950s. By 1950 the African working class had swollen to 469,000 in the urban areas and factories around present day Bulawayo and Harare. This impressive and relatively rapid increase of a new social force was expressed eloquently in the general strike of 1948.³⁴ But the strike represented both the militancy of the working class and its organisational and political weaknesses. The inexperience and immaturity of working class politics exposed the strike to the alien and elitist leadership of the shop owner Benjamin Burumbo. Burumbo posed as a mediator between the strike's demands and the colonial government. This non working class

leadership, described in Cliff's 1963 pamphlet, was not untypical of trade union organisations in the period. In Zimbabwe it spoke not only of the youthful inexperience of the working class, but also of the failure to build what two historians of Southern Rhodesia describe as a "single organisation which was able to co-ordinate and unify the struggles of Africans".³⁵

These weaknesses in class organisation, leadership and experience enlarged the space for a self-glorifying intelligentsia. This was evident in the 1948 strike, but also in the second most significant wave of working class action. The 1960-61 Zhi strike movement was captured and capitalised upon by the nationalist intelligentsia in the absence of working class leadership.³⁶ Joshua Nkomo was a central figure of the early nationalist movement. After the 1948 strike he was sponsored by the Railways to study in South Africa's Jan Hofmeyer School of Social Work. In 1954 Nkomo headed the Southern Rhodesia Trade Union Congress (SRTUC). By the end of the decade the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) was founded, also led by Nkomo. The creation by the colonial state of an intelligentsia leading and shepherding a nascent working class was regarded as an effective way of defusing radicalism.

In 1963 a new nationalist organisation was born. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was led by, among others, Ndabaningi Sithole, Herbert Chitepo and Robert Mugabe, the eventual victor in the internal struggles of the next 15 years. ZANU was a model of nationalist organisation headed by an intelligentsia made up of teachers, civil servants and students. If anything it was more adjusted to the intelligentsia. As Fay Chung has noted, "when ZANU was first formed it was labelled as a party of intellectuals cut off from the masses...intellectual and professional development...were seen as necessary to overthrow the settler regime".³⁷

By the 1970s control of the guerrilla struggle was in the hands of two organisations, ZANU and ZAPU, both of which sought a rural armed fight against the Rhodesian state. With the expulsion of militant students from the University of Rhodesia in Salisbury (today's Harare) after student action in 1973, their only outlet for political action was exile in neighbouring countries and the guerrilla movement. School and university students became the backbone of the guerrilla struggle in the 1970s, forming most of the fighters and later in the decade much of the senior cadre. Fay Chung, who was an overseas student herself, notes that the "university intelligentsia" were not only students from Rhodesia but also intellectuals from across Africa, Britain and the USA. "Dozens of

young university graduates followed, from Britain, Sierra Leone and Rhodesia.³⁸

Cliff's characterisation of the intelligentsia as a non-specialised section of society dedicated to national development and independence made the group the obvious source of a "professional revolutionary elite".³⁹

The argument here is not that this tactic was a failure. Independence was won in 1980 largely because the guerrilla struggle had succeeded in paralysing the settler state. By the end of the 1970s the combined nationalist forces were approximately 40,000 and they were engaging the enemy on six fronts. But this success was predicated on supplanting the organised self-activity of the existing working class by a student-intelligentsia committed to national liberation, deferring the socialist revolution to another distant stage when the new nation was "ready".

Those forces in cities and towns that were committed to the liberation struggle had no alternative but to abandon urban centres for the guerrilla movement. Though there were strikes and student protests, these were paralysed by the limitations of a rural-based struggle. Leo Cefkin lamented at the time the absence of "effective nationalist organisation in the townships which could utilise campus demonstrations to touch off, spread and direct revolutionary actions".⁴⁰ There was no urban based mass movement which could have connected bread and butter demands with a political perspective based on the agency of the urban working class.

In 1980 the legal and institutional edifice of the colonial state moved seamlessly into independence. The nationalist intelligentsia assumed control over the old levers of power. Several years of state-led development saw the growth of schools, health centres and housing projects, which succeeded in shoring up ZANU-PF support. Yet the repressive state apparatus remained intact. In the first years of independence the suppressed energy of the Zimbabwean working class exploded in a strike wave against racist bosses and poor pay and conditions. 200 strikes were officially recorded between 1980 and 1981. The ZANU-PF government called for workers to show patriotic commitment to the new state. However, the 1980s did, as Cliff had predicted, force workers to "fight against their 'own' ruling class... The slogan of 'class against class' [became] more and more a reality".⁴¹

Soon the state-led project of development caved in to the demands for market reform. In 1991 ZANU-PF introduced the Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), a systematic attempt to restructure Zimbabwe's economy along neoliberal lines.

Deflected permanent revolution today

Cliff's theory of deflected permanent revolution is indispensable for understanding the processes that were at work during national liberation struggles. Principal among these is how the failure of workers in emergent nations to lead the democratic/nationalist revolution "onto socialist rails" can result in another section of society assuming control. Across Africa and much of the developing world this was the intelligentsia. Cliff described how this group were "sensitive to their country's technical lag", and were afflicted with feelings of privilege over the majority of the people, yet subordination to the former colonial powers.⁴² As the revolutionary subject that could have led the socialist revolution is absent, an intelligentsia led the nation to state capitalism.⁴³

Some of the continent's most profound Marxists attempted to reconcile the centrality of working class self-emancipation in Marx's thought with the invisibility of this class in their political strategy. Amilcar Cabral, the brilliant leader of independence in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, made a virtue out of a self-imposed necessity. He turned the petty bourgeoisie (Cliff's intelligentsia) into an "ideal proletariat" because the real working class were absent from the guerrilla struggle he was organising against the Portuguese. Still, Cabral clearly saw the intelligentsia as:

the stratum which most rapidly becomes aware of the need to free itself from foreign domination... This historical responsibility is assumed by the sector of the petty bourgeoisie which, in the colonial context, can be called revolutionary... In place of a "real proletariat" an ideal one would be comprised of a class of students and intellectuals who would help create unity between the oppressed classes and combat ethnic divisions.⁴⁴

A real proletariat existed but not in the organisation of national liberation. But Cabral was conscious of how this "class of students and intellectuals" could become an avid and voracious caste, ready to accept crumbs from the former colonial power. He advocated the "class suicide" of the student-intelligentsia to ensure they saw the world from the angle of workers and peasants. Needless to say, this plan did not succeed.

The attraction of state capitalism was not accidental. It spoke of the reality of the Soviet Union's rapid development. In an era of state-led development, independence represented a race for top-down, autonomous industrialisation in scores of emergent nations. But the attraction of state capitalism also expressed the student-intelligentsia's elitism and sense of humiliation at the lack of national development. This attraction was bolstered by separation from the masses and control over the state machinery after a process of largely negotiated decolonisation.

State capitalism offered the magic key to development and expressed the real urges of the intelligentsia.

Yet the illusions of autonomous national development were dispelled in most countries soon after independence. When Ghana attempted to industrialise with an aluminium works powered by the Akosombo Dam on the Volta River, the US aluminium industry ensured that Ghana could not establish a basis for economic independence. By the mid-1970s state capitalisms had lurched into recession. Loans turned to debts, which helped transform the World Bank and IMF into institutions of global restructuring. In return for loans these organisations now insisted on structural adjustment in the 1980s and the 1990s. Neoliberalism transformed and impoverished the continent.

There are some pertinent questions for Cliff's theory today. What happens to the theory after the immediate post-independence period? Is deflected permanent revolution only a historical tool for the independence period, after which the "slogan of 'class against class' will become more and more a reality"? What happened to the student-intelligentsia?

Though these questions cannot be answered thoroughly here, some discussion will help to draw out the contemporary relevance of deflected permanent revolution.⁴⁵ I have argued that African university students in the post-colonial period "inherited" a politically privileged status linked to their organisational coherence and their role in political change. Sharing many of the same characteristics of the pre-independence intelligentsia, they have been at the forefront of the struggles for social and political transformation since the 1960s.

This speaks to Cliff's theory. Just as workers were unable to fill the vacuum of leadership in the colonial revolutions, many of the same reasons also preclude them from taking a leading role in the ensuing struggles against the newly installed petty bourgeois nationalist ruling class. For more than a generation it has been students rather than workers who have the pressures and "privileges" compelling and enabling them to think, criticise and initiate forms of struggle. This does not mean that the African working class have not been central to political change since 1960 but their struggles, in the absence (or with the failure) of leadership, have often gone down to defeat.

Cliff's theory has not been left redundant by the collapse of state capitalist development and the disintegration of the eastern bloc. In the era of neoliberalism and state collapse new models are sought. The student-intelligentsia have often played the leading role in this process: in both

the Islamic revival and secessionist movements the student-intelligentsia was prominent, but also in advocating neoliberal reforms.

Cliff, with characteristic vision, saw how in a crumbling order where “the traditional pattern is disintegrating [the intelligentsia] feel insecure, rootless, lacking in firm values. Dissolving cultures give rise to a powerful urge for a new integration that must be total and dynamic if it is to fill the social and spiritual vacuum”.⁴⁶ The result, according to Cliff, was a combination of religious fervour and militant nationalism. When the nationalist project is exhausted, new movements emerge from the crisis of neoliberal adjustment and state collapse. These movements are frequently led by the student-intelligentsia and several political trajectories can be charted.

From 1990 to 1994, during what are referred to in academic texts as the “democratic transitions”, 35 regimes across Africa were swept from power by movements involving a coalition of forces frequently energised and led by the continental working class that had been impoverished by more than a decade of economic austerity. This created an immense paradox within the continent-wide resistance. Without a language of social transformation, the working class could do nothing to counter the politics of adjustment. The inability of the working class to assert its own politics over the coalitions and movements emerging on the continent thrust the student-intelligentsia into the centre of the political maelstrom, often after a period of militant struggle.

In the Congo student support galvanised the main opposition party, the UDPS led by Étienne Tshisekedi, during the country’s second revolution from 1990 and triggered a wave of strikes and trade union militancy. But these processes took place in what the Congolese intellectual Loka Ne Kongo described in 1995 as the failure of the opposition to “organise itself to install across the country a parallel administration, police force and justice system”. There was simply no independent politics and organisation based on the working class that could have expressed the popular desire for the immediate departure of Mobutu’s dictatorship and an end to foreign domination.

In those countries where the working class did lead the “transitions” it was unable to impose a project of radical political change on these movements. When the working class dominated the mass movements against Mugabe for a brief moment between 1998 and 2000, the voices and activism of the student-intelligentsia were softened. Cliff described how historically the student-intelligentsia have been accountable to “the workers’ collective, and notwithstanding their inherent tendency to

divorce themselves from, and rise above, the masses, they were checked by this collective.” But with the failure of the workers’ collective to maintain (and aggressively assert) political hegemony in Zimbabwe the influence of the “middle classes and NGOs” soon dominated the Movement for Democratic Change.⁴⁷ In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa that experienced successful transitions during this period (Zambia, Senegal and Mali, for example) or frustrated ones (in Zimbabwe, Cameroon or Swaziland among others), the experience after massive mobilisations was often simply the “circulation of elites”.⁴⁸

The period of turmoil generated by structural adjustment from the mid-1970s saw the student-intelligentsia resume a central role in political transformation in Africa, but also in movements, occurring for distinct reasons, in other parts of the developing world.⁴⁹ As Cliff showed, university students, graduates and foreign educated and organised intellectuals were able to play a leading role. The student-intelligentsia helped set-up, lead and organise the democratic forces that were gathering momentum against structural adjustment and dictatorship in the 1980s and 1990s. While working class involvement often provided the real coherence to these movements, the failure to supply or, in some cases, maintain political hegemony over the opposition led to a resumption of neoliberal reforms advocated by other social groups.

In this context, the democratic opposition in the 1990s was dominated by a student-intelligentsia (many with impressive credentials) who were bewildered by the end of Stalinism. Many became the apostles of a renewal of the structural adjustment programmes that these mass movements had been a reaction to.⁵⁰ So the political and economic renaissance that the “transitions” seemed to promise the continent quickly fell back onto the neoliberalism advocated by an incumbent and opposition elite alike.

But outside these political protests—or in the aftermath of their defeats—there are other, more dramatic examples of the continued and heightened importance of the student-intelligentsia. Their strength lay in their capacity to organise, whether in national and international student unions, or politically through access to a conceptual and intellectual world denied to most sections of society. The student milieu generated conditions that were at once internationalist—giving them access to international organisations and funds—while pulling students into hyper-politicised spaces, in college and on university campuses. Organisations could flourish without the rigid discipline of the workplace or the state-controlled streets.

Over the last 30 years the student-intelligentsia have been propelled into new roles, under very different circumstances, but benefiting from the same organisational opportunities.⁵¹ But during this period there has been an unprecedented transformation in Africa's political economy, often connected to structural adjustment. This has seen state industries and businesses collapse. These changes have often exacerbated processes of state decline leading in some cases to total collapse.⁵²

Under these conditions, the student-intelligentsia maintained a level of cohesion in contrast to the working class. So while structural adjustment (and the collapse of the international left) has worked against the consolidation of working class organisation and politics, it has, to some degree, strengthened the hand of the intelligentsia first described in Cliff's theory.

The student-intelligentsia are able to organise and lead rebel movements that follow (and help precipitate) state collapse. The cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone are revealing. Paul Richards described an alienated intelligentsia composed of ex-students who made up Sierra Leone's rebel armies.⁵³ In Liberia the same processes have taken place. The wave of resistance to Samuel Doe's brutal and corrupt regime saw students act as the de facto opposition from 1980 to 1984, when all opposition parties were banned. Students helped to organise Firestone workers but their leaders, together with trade unionists, were viciously repressed. Many spent years on death row. With the collapse in the rubber market in 1985 and the end of the Cold War, Liberia had lost its strategic importance. The economy was destroyed and the US, which had been the country's chief backer, could ignore the war that descended on the state. The war did not represent the "primitive" or "barbaric" nature of West Africa as some commentators described it at the time.⁵⁴ On the contrary, it demonstrated how the region was connected to a globalised economy that was at the same time criminal and informal.

Behind the war and rebel groups was a student intelligentsia that had been active in the anti-Doe opposition in the early 1980s. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) was a rebel group that fought Charles Taylor's government after elections brought him to power in 1997. It had been a faction in Taylor's original war against Doe. The majority of the rebel leaders were also former student activists who had been involved in resistance to Doe in the 1980s.⁵⁵

The student intelligentsia played numerous roles during the period of state decline and collapse. Perhaps most notably, university students have been active in the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. They have been

key players in the Islamist movements that are now demonised around the world, partly as a result of the collapse in graduate employment and the erosion of the same certainties that have transformed many regions in the world. Chris Harman explained in 1994 that Islamism had arisen in “societies traumatized by the impact of capitalism”, and crises in the world economy over the last 30 years had seen a rapid increase in these ideas.⁵⁶ Harman emphasised that it was frequently students who formed the backbone of Islamist movements:

[These were] students, the recent Arab speaking graduates and above all, the unemployed ex-students who formed a bridge to the very large numbers of discontented youth outside colleges who find that they cannot get college places... And through its influence over a wide layer of students, graduates and the intellectual unemployed, Islamism is able to spread out to dominate the propagation of ideas in the slums and shanty towns as a “conservative” movement.⁵⁷

It was the dominance of Islamic ideas on the campuses of Algeria in the 1980s and 1990s that ensured that the Islamists were able to step into the “impoverished streets of the cities where students and ex-students mixed with a mass of other people scrabbling for a livelihood”.⁵⁸ The convergence of forces—between an impoverished student and ex-student body and the mass of other people—has manifested itself in a multiplicity of movements. But this happened in the context of the weakening of working class organisation and politics, disorientated by the confluence of factors including the apparent end of socialist “alternatives”, the hegemony of neoliberalism and the restructuring and mass sackings that heralded structural adjustment.

Similarly, student suicide bombers carried out the 11 September attack on New York in 2001 and led many subsequent terrorist attacks. The leading figure in the September 2001 attacks is illustrative of these trends.

Mohammad Atta was born in Kafr el-Sheikh in the Nile Delta, a slightly down at heel Cairo suburb of Giza. His family belonged to a branch of the intelligentsia that was angry at Anwar Sadat’s opening up of Egypt to the West in the late 1970s. Atta graduated from a university that had, by the early 1990s, seen a ferment of fundamentalist activity. He joined the Engineers Syndicate, one of the few Muslim Brotherhood controlled professional associations in Egypt. He became appalled by the creation of what he regarded as a new class of Egyptian “fat cats”. Volker Hauth, who studied with him in Germany, remembers, “One of the main points of his critique was the contrast between a few rich people and the mass of people with barely enough to survive”.⁵⁹ Mohammed Atta is a portent of the movements for Islamic revival, inspired by the desire to reverse real

injustices that have emerged violently across the Third World in the last 40 years, but in the absence of secular alternatives.

A student-intelligentsia has played a pivotal role in these movements as the ideological champions of Islamic reform and rebel movements during state collapse. In each case they act as disgruntled victims of the economic and political disintegration going on around them. While students in the Muslim association of Senegalese students in the 1950s, for example, could envisage a radical Islam and a revivalism linked to a progressive agenda for radical social change, the collapse of this agenda has transformed today's student activists. As Mamadou Diouf has written, these students, rather than being the agents of progressive social transformation, see themselves as the custodians of tradition: “[They] assign themselves the role of guardians of a Muslim morality which justifies punitive expeditions against drugs, drunkenness and thieves”.⁶⁰ Senegalese students, for example, have not generally assumed the ideological mantle of religious change that has characterised North African and Middle Eastern universities, nor have they spearheaded a Senegalese version of the Islamic revival. But they have played a crucial role in the separatist movement in the Casamance.⁶¹

The collapse of state-led development meant that the student-intelligentsia of Cliff's theory drew on a myriad of confused political and ideological ideas, which gave them a decidedly hybrid identity. They were at once Guevarists and Islamists, drawing on a peculiar mixture of Islamist teachings from Pakistan or Sudan fused with ideas associated with Third World revolutionaries. This student intelligentsia often acted out of despair; as Georgi Derluguian wrote about this group in Chechnya, “they have neither the resources nor a real programme of socioeconomic reform”.⁶² The political transitions in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s occurred in a world fundamentally altered by global geopolitics. But internationally the student-intelligentsia was involved in “an increasingly desperate search for a renegotiated identity and a dignified position within the reconfigured world-system”.⁶³

While state capitalism fell away as a coherent ideology for the intelligentsia in the 1970s, the central role played by this group in political struggles in the developing world did not. Yet this should not lead us to discount the working class. In the wave of democratisation and mass politics in Africa from the late 1980s, trade unions and the working class sought in the words of one commentator to not simply “protect the workplace interests of their members but have endeavoured to bring about a restructuring of the political system”.⁶⁴ But the ability of the

working class to impose political hegemony on the mass movements that challenged old regimes was severely compromised. A new or recycled elite filled the vacuum.

While the central role of the intelligentsia in the absence of a self-conscious working class subject is an absolute law in Cliff's theory, the importance of state capitalism for the deflected permanent revolution is neither absolute nor a requirement.

Conclusions

The arguments made in Cliff's original pamphlet built on and developed Trotsky's original theory. But both Cliff and Trotsky developed their ideas from Marx's own writings. Marx saw the world developing in a contradictory way. In one respect he saw the world was moving in a single direction towards an integrated global economy, though he was also conscious of the unevenness in this process. He rejected an "all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical".⁶⁵

Marx was therefore deeply suspicious of the idea that capitalism would plough an even path. But he was clear on the fact that both western and colonial countries could only be understood as part of a total system of social relationships. At times he actually saw India and China as sparking and even leading the "advanced" countries. In Marx's writing on India he posed the necessity of revolution among colonial people and those in the west. "The Indian will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them...till in Great Britain itself the now ruling class shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat or till the Hindoos shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether".⁶⁶

Trotsky extended these ideas. He argued that not only was there "equality" between the struggles in the colonial and developed capitalist worlds, but that the revolution may start in peripheral societies. The centre of revolutionary activity could be in Asia or Africa and not Europe or North America. It was here, he argued, that the working class was less bureaucratized and conservative and where there was a crisis of capitalist penetration.

It was the task of revolutionary socialists in the developed West to extend and spread these revolutions. As Russia showed, revolutions might be easier to win in peripheral countries, but harder to defend and sustain. So Third World revolutionaries could only build a lasting socialism in

alliance with successful struggles in the developed world. This was the heart of Trotsky's permanent revolution.

But Cliff elaborated by demonstrating that in the absence of a revolutionary working class, different social forces with distinct projects would lead and deflect liberation struggles from permanent revolution. Cliff's theory of deflected permanent revolution showed us how national liberation would not bring freedom, which can only be achieved if the working class continues its revolutionary struggle the world over. But without the involvement of Bolshevik parties in the developing world and the West liberation cannot be won.

Notes

[1:](#) For such a restatement, see Cliff, 1999.

[2:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[3:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[4:](#) Trotsky, 1930.

[5:](#) Reed, 1919.

[6:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[7:](#) However, the working class was a significant social force in both countries.

[8:](#) It was not simply the absence of the working class in Mao's project but also the determined effort to ensure that industry and business were uninterrupted by the revolution. This theme comes through in the propaganda film *The Founding of a Republic* produced for last year's sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

[9:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[10:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[11:](#) Trotsky cited in Cliff, 1963.

[12:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[13:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[14:](#) Hallas, 1979.

[15:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[16:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[17:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[18:](#) Cliff, 1963.

[19:](#) For a general overview of some of these movements see Zeilig, 2009.

[20:](#) Zeilig, 2009, p31.

[21:](#) Federici, 2000, p90.

[22:](#) Chambrier Rahandi, 1990, p16. Interestingly, FEANF sat at the summit of approximately 14 African student organisations in France from 1947 to 1956.

23: It is hard to exaggerate the role played by Nkrumah as an exemplary radical nationalist, and model for a generation of African students in the 1950s. Diané writes that, for students active in FEANF, “Nkrumah is an older brother, a precursor and a sort of mirror to the new class of engaged intellectuals”-Diané, 1990, p29.

24: Nkrumah, 1985, pp166-167.

25: Panaf Great Lives, 1973, p196.

26: This was the opinion of famous African socialists, but also those who had no socialist inclinations. So Lumumba stated in 1956, “Let poor Belgium keep its ideological squabbles. The Congo needs something other than petty wranglings. Let us all unite, Catholics, Liberals, Socialists, Christians, Protestants, Atheists, to achieve real peace in this country... Our country has much greater need of ‘builders’ than of squabblers, pamphleteers and purveyors of communist slogans”-Zeilig, 2008, pp81-82.

27: Fanon, 1967, p174. Fanon’s book *The Wretched of the Earth* is a fascinating-and complementary to Cliff’s-critique of nationalist movements and the national bourgeoisie.

28: Gibbs, 1991, p57.

29: Cited in Zeilig, 2008, p42.

30: The nationalist demonstration in Leopoldville (today’s Kinshasa) on 4 January was savagely smashed, leading to a period of mass upheaval that lasted until approximately 1964.

31: Renton, Seddon and Zeilig, 2006, p110.

32: Van Lierde, 1963, p45.

33: Fanon, 1967, p77.

34: Phimister, 1994, p64.

35: Cited in Raftopoulos and Phimister, 1997, p71.

36: There were many reasons that prevented the emergence of socialist politics, not least the dominance of a Stalinised Marxism among those nationalist leaders who orientated to the left.

37: Chung,1995, p146.

38: Chung, 1995, p141.

39: Cliff, 1963.

40: Cefkin, 1975, pp157-158.

41: Cliff, 1963.

42: Cliff, 1963.

43: It is not, as we have seen, simply a question of the absolute weakness of the pre-independence working class. Rather it was the marginalisation of class politics under a hegemonic nationalism organised by the student-intelligentsia.

44: Cabral, 1969, pp88-89.

45: I have looked at some of these questions in Zeilig, 2007.

46: Cliff, 1963.

47: Gwisai, 2002.

48: See Abrahamsen, 2000.

49: See Jafari, 2009, for an interesting discussion into how these processes played out in Iran. For an overview of “democratic” struggles in this period in the developing world see Walton and Seddon, 1994.

50: Even when these “apostles” hailed from the trade union movement, many became religious converts to the Washington Consensus. Most astonishing, perhaps, is the case of Frederick Chiluba, leader of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and then President of Zambia after the transition in 1991.

51: This statement, of course, must be tempered. Student movements in sub-Saharan Africa suffered in the 1980s and 1990s from extraordinary repression, which was a testimony to their important role in the mass movements mentioned in the text. See Federici, 2000.

52: Bond, 2007.

53: Richards, 1996.

54: Kaplan, 1994.

55: Interview, Ezekiel Pajibo, 28 August 2003.

56: Harman, 1994, pp9-10.

57: Harman, 1994, pp16-17.

58: Harman, 1994, p19.

59: Observer, 23 September 2001, "The Men who Brought the World to Brink of War".

60: Diouf, 2002, p160.

61: Foucher, 2002.

62: Derluguian, 1999, p18.

63: Derluguian, 1999, p19.

64: Wiseman, 1996, p49.

65: Marx, 1989, pp196-201.

66: Marx and Engels, 1962, p336.

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