

## Anything but Marxism

*Neither social democracy nor 'official communism' offer anything in the 21st century, writes Mike Macnair*

“How can it be that in 2003 the Socialist Workers Party led what was possibly the largest demonstration in Britain ever, but in 2008 the British far left is in a dire condition of fragmentation and ineffectiveness?” One of our readers, who does not share the CPGB’s politics, posed this question to me some days ago.

Half the question is about an illusion. The massive demonstration in February 2003 owed its size not to the role of the SWP or any part of the far left, but to the (at least partial) backing of the *Daily Mirror*, *The Independent* and the BBC. Behind that backing was the fact that the British state core - the army and security services and the senior civil service - was split down the middle about whether to support US plans to invade Iraq. The role of the SWP and their allies in the Stop the War Coalition was merely analogous to that of cyber-squatters who had occupied a domain called ‘antiwar.com’, and hence could not be dispensed with.

The other half of the question is more fundamental. The left *is* massively weaker than - on some ideas of politics - it ‘ought to be’, given the global economic and political situation. Moreover, with the very partial and limited exception of Latin America, it is tending to get weaker as time goes on.

### LEFT’S WEAKNESS

Capitalism in the first decade of the 21st century is not in particularly good shape. The triumphalism which greeted the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the deepening market turn in China, is largely gone. There is increasingly widespread awareness that the free-market nostrums of the Chicago economists and the ‘Washington consensus’ produce deepening inequality both on a world scale and within individual countries. After the experience of the 1998 ‘east Asian’ and 2001 ‘dot-com’ market crashes, the ‘credit crunch’ has reminded us yet again that capitalism inherently involves bust as well as boom. Even the US army has finally realised that the extreme free-market ‘shock therapy’ imposed on Iraq after the 2003 invasion has contributed to the insurgency they seem unable to defeat.<sup>1</sup>

The political left, however, is in worse shape. This sort of statement is often made simply as a way of saying that the author’s own group’s views are not generally accepted. I do not mean to say this - though it is, of course, true that views of the sort held by CPGB comrades are shared only by a small minority. The point is that, though free-market fundamentalism is in decline, the political left *in general* has not benefited from this decline.

The Labour and Socialist parties are now as committed to free-market dogmas as the traditional parties of the right - in some cases more so. A large part of the former ‘official communists’ now fall into this camp: whether as *being* the major ‘left’ party, as in Italy, or as providing the hard core of the pro-market wing of the ‘left’, like the ex-Eurocommunist and fellow-traveller Blairites in Britain.

But this commitment has hardly benefited these parties. Though in Britain Labour has clung to office with capitalist support (now ebbing away), and in Germany, France, Spain

and Italy 'social-liberal' parties have moved in and out of office, the underlying trend has been one of declining numerical support for *all* the parties of the consensus, including those which self-identify as 'of the left'; increased abstentions; episodic surges in voting support for anything perceived as 'an alternative', usually on the right but occasionally on the left; and a widespread belief that 'they' (politicians) are all corrupt.

Hence on a global scale, religious and nationalist trends are major growing elements. The most obvious expressions are in the US - where the leverage of religious politics has not been diminished by the narrow victory of the Democrats in the 2006 Congressional elections - and the 'muslim countries' in the belt stretching from Morocco in the west to central Asia and Pakistan in the east, and in south-east Asia.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty characterises the islamist political movements as "islamo-fascist". This is misleading. The US christian right is far more like the Italian Fascisti and German Nazis. Like them, it appeals to the traditions of the formation of the nation-state in which it lives (German Romantic nationalism, Italian unification and *Italia irridenta*, American radical protestantism). Like them, it is informed by a *Dolchstoßtheorie* (stab-in-the-back theory) in which military failure (in the US case in Vietnam) was caused by the disloyalty of the left and the 'liberals'. And like them, it is affected by millenarian irrationalism (the renewed Roman empire in Italy, the thousand-year Reich in Germany, the 'end times' in the US religious right). The islamists, in contrast, are closer to the catholic-led anti-semitic movements of late 19th century Europe.<sup>2</sup> But the AWL's characterisation does at least capture the fact that, though some of the islamists are currently fighting US imperialism (and its British side-kick), their *domestic* politics are unequivocally reactionary.

Weaker versions of the same or similar phenomena can be found widely. For example, the hindu-nationalist right is in the ascendant in India; the Koizumi and Abe governments in Japan have promoted 'revisionist'-revanchist nationalism and remilitarisation; eastern Europe and the Russian Federation have seen strong growth of far-right trends; western Europe has witnessed repeated, so far short-lived, electoral 'protest votes' for far-right parties.

*Left* electoral alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy are, on the whole, far weaker. The problem is that when they have got to any size they have been sucked into the role of junior partners to the 'social-liberals' in administering the capitalist regime, and thereby undermined their claim to offer an alternative to the neoliberal consensus. The Brazilian Workers Party (PT) - in origin a left alternative party - under Lula da Silva has *become* a social-liberal party of (coalition) government. The Italian Rifondazione Comunista in 2006 entered the social-liberal Prodi coalition government, with disastrous consequences in the 2008 elections. And so on.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there perhaps seemed to be a 'non-electoral' alternative: that of the 'anti-globalisation movement'. On a small scale riots in London, Seattle and Genoa, on a larger scale the Mexican Zapatistas and Argentinean *piqueteros* were seen by anarchists and 'council communists' - and by some Trotskyists - as a sign that at last their time was beginning to come. The social forum movement was built at least partly in an anarchist image. However, with the inception of the 'war on terror' in 2001 and still more with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the destructive power of the capitalist *statel* has thrust itself rudely on the movement. The result has unavoidably been a renewed emphasis on high politics: even in Latin America, where 'networks of resistance', the Zapatistas and Holloway's 'change the world without taking power' had most influence, the left has shifted onto the electoral terrain.

The results have produced a continued social-liberal government in Brazil, and similar governments in Uruguay (Frente Amplio) and Chile - and governments which at least in

rhetoric are to their left: Chávez in Venezuela, the victories of Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador. These are all undoubtedly political defeats for neoliberalism. However, even the Venezuelan case is not sufficiently urgent for Washington to divert major attention and resources to it. To the extent that they are not focussed on the Middle East, Washington's eyes are on Havana.<sup>3</sup>

*Chávismo* has provoked enthusiastic support from a distance among a significant part of the left, and has had some influence on electoral politics elsewhere in Latin America (in the sense of increasing the political availability of left rhetoric). But it has not yet begun to reshape the left internationally, as Bolshevism did after 1917, or as Maoism and, to a lesser extent, Castroism/Guevarism did in the 1960s.

In part, this is a matter of 'wait and see'. The left internationally has seen a large number of sometimes *very* radical and left-talking nationalist and third-worldist charismatic individual leaders come and go in the last half-century. Some have themselves turned 'realist', like Nkrumah, Museveni, Jerry Rawlings or the leaders of the South African ANC; some have been ousted and/or killed by 'realists' in their own nationalist movements, like Sukarno, Ben Bella or Thomas Sankara. 'Official communists', Maoists and Trotskyists in the process of moving towards 'official communist' politics, have celebrated one and all as the next Castro; for none has the celebration been long-lived. Given this background, it is understandable that in spite of the enthusiasm of a part of the left, the broader movement should effectively suspend judgment on *Chávismo*.

In part, and more fundamentally, the problem is that *Chávismo* offers no real strategic lesson for the left beyond 'Find yourselves a charismatic leader'. (Perhaps it should be 'Try to win junior army officers to left politics'?) Bolshevism offered a worked-out strategic line for the road beyond capitalism, whether this line was right or wrong. The same was true of Maoism. The extensive international influence of Castroism/Guevarism consisted in part in the fact that Che Guevara falsified the course of the Cuban revolution into an example of the Maoists' 'prolonged people's war' strategy. In part it was due to the fact that Castro and his co-thinkers promoted third-worldism, a dilute form of the Maoists' global policy of 'surrounding the cities'. In both aspects, the Cubans' self-presentation as something *different from* the 'official communist' bureaucratic regimes and parties offered to romantic young leftists the hope of an alternative strategy. *Chávismo*, as yet, offers no equivalent.

The organised far left across the world - the Trotskyist, Maoist, etc groups - had hopes that the 'anti-globalisation movement' signalled a new rise in class combativity like the later 1960s; or at least the re-emergence of a 'new left' trend, out of which they could hope to recruit and build. More than 10 years on from the Mandelbrite Fourth International's turn to the milieu that became the 'anti-globalisation movement', and seven years since the 'Battle of Seattle', this belief has proved illusory. The organised far left has gained some ground in the trade union movement internationally. But it has done so partly through generational replacement and partly because the decline of the activist base of the socialist and communist parties has been steeper than the corresponding decline of most of the groups of the far left. At best these groups have stagnated.

The apparent novelty that allowed the far left to appear as an alternative to large numbers of radicalising youth in the 1960s and 1970s is gone - today the left has a large, hostile periphery of ex-members who remain active in the broader movement. And the far left is widely - and often accurately - perceived as undemocratic in its internal functioning, as tending to export this undemocratic practice into the broader movement and as unable to unite its own forces for effective action.

In short, capitalism unfettered has not produced the blessings the neoliberals claimed it would. Instead, it is producing deepening social inequality both within and between nations, economic instability and episodic, so far localised, crises - as Marx predicted it

would. And it shows every sign of producing an increasing tendency towards utterly destructive wars - as the 'classical Marxists' predicted it would. But the political left has not been the gainer. The main political gainer, instead, has been the 'anti-capitalist' *right*.

### **REBUILD SOCIAL-DEMOCRACY?**

A very common response of that part of the left which has not abandoned leftism altogether is to argue that the problem is simply that the rest of the left *has* abandoned leftism. Thus, since the social democrats have abandoned social democracy, it is necessary to build a new Labour Party, which will be more committed to left ideas. This is the substance of the project of the Campaign for a New Workers' Party and of Respect - but there are similar projects everywhere. The Brazilian PT originated in this way.

The problem with this policy is that it fails to ask *why* the social democrats have abandoned social democracy, when they maintained it and acted on it through the 1950s-80s. The shift of Labour and similar parties to the right then appears as a motiveless betrayal. Each such betrayal from another section of the left - from Lula, from Bertinotti, from the left trade union leaders and Labour MPs who refused to back John McDonnell's leadership bid - thus comes as a new, unpleasant surprise.

The problem is at its root the problem of 'reform or revolution'. But it is *not* the problem of 'reform or revolution' in the way in which this is usually posed by the far left: that is, that the traditional social democrats refuse to accept the use of 'revolutionary means' in the sense of political strikes, demonstrations and insurrections. Rather, it is that the traditional social democrats insisted that open struggle against the state would produce only repression; hence, that the only way to obtain immediate reforms is to form a government.

Further, the only way to get to form a government (without bringing down the state, which intervenes in its own interests in elections) is to display conspicuous loyalty to the existing *state order*, both in the form of nationalism and arguing that reforms are in the common 'national interest', and in the form of constitutionalism and legalism. The traditional social democrats thus rejected not so much 'revolutionary' *means* as revolutionary *ends*: ie, radical change in the state order and in 'who rules'.

This project worked as long as capital was willing to concede to labour an increasing share of the total social surplus. It thus worked to some extent, in successful imperialist countries, in the high period of classical imperialism between the 1870s and World War I, when imperialist capital was willing to use imperialist super-profits to make concessions to sections of the domestic working class in order to maintain social peace at home. It worked again and more generally in the cold war period, when global capital was willing to make substantial material concessions to the working class for the sake of the 'containment' of Soviet 'communism'.

However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s this global system began to fail: the leading role of the US, which was pivotal to the system, became overextended (Vietnam and the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system) and workers and other subordinate classes began to demand too much (1968, the Italian 'creeping May', 'wildcat strikers' in the US and Germany, the British struggles of the early 1970s, Vietnam and the colonial liberation movements, the Portuguese revolution ...). Capital turned to a new policy, which was in some ways a return to its policy of the late 19th century (financialisation), in other ways a return to the days *before* the high period of classical imperialism (free trade and liberal natural property rights ideology). In this global context, every capital and every state is in competition with every other capital and state to *reduce* the share of total social surplus going to labour.

Under these new global conditions the political logic of winning immediate reforms is transformed. Cutting labour's share of the total social surplus is quite genuinely *in the*

*national interest*; any concessions from capital have to be paid for, and paying for them demands maintaining the nation's 'competitive position' - which turns out to mean unemployment, speed-up, loss of pension rights, cuts in the proportion of public expenditure actually applied to the end-users of public services and, conversely, increases in subsidies to capitalist building contractors and so on who supply the public services, and all the rest of the current crap.

These new world dynamics present an intense contradiction for social democrats. If they make any promises of reforms *which will benefit the working class* through winning government office, these promises have to be either straightforward lies (Blair and co) or fantasies which will melt away when office is actually obtained (Mitterrand in the 80s, the PT, Rifondazione and so on). In reality, the most they can *really* offer is to be 'Thatcherites with a human face'. Hence the endless series of 'betrayals'. Hence also the general perception that politicians are all corrupt and liars.

But 'Thatcherism with a human face' is a pretty slight reason to bother to vote for the social democracy, and even less of a reason for activists on the ground to commit time, energy and money to *building* these parties. Hence the gradual or not-so-gradual decay of Labour and similar parties.

The consequence is that the idea of rebuilding a mass social democratic party more to the left of the existing parties, but still within the frame of nationalism and reformism, is a futile illusion. The social democracy we already have (Blair-Brown and co, and so on) is the *best and only possible* sort of social democracy, as long as present global conditions continue.

Is social democracy doomed to decline and collapse (with ups and downs in the process) or can it revive? The answer depends on whether *capital* can turn again to conceding an increased share of the total social surplus product to labour. For this there are two conditions. The first is that capital should foresee a future of continuing or increased profits *even if* the concessions are made to the working class: which in the 1870s-1900s it foresaw through imperialism, and in the 1950s-60s through the US-led world order. In my opinion this is not possible without the overthrow of the military and financial power of the USA and its replacement with a new capitalist world hegemon.

The second condition is that capital should be *put in fear* of the working class on an international scale. The concessions on the basis of imperialism followed, in Britain, the mass movements of the 1860s around the suffrage and around anti-slavery solidarity; in continental Europe, they followed the rise of the First International and the Paris Commune. The concessions in the wake of World War II followed an immense international wave of militant hostility to capitalism beginning in the latter part of that war and continuing in the first years after it.

There is thus a paradox. There is no question of reviving social democracy by attempting to build on the basis of social democratic ideas: because these ideas are precisely about *not* putting the capitalists in fear. If the capitalists are put in fear by the rise of a mass workers' movement which does *not* respect national borders and constitutional legality, they will probably turn to the social democrats to help them out; but, as long as the left clings to pretending to be social democrats, there will be no such movement.

### **TRY STALINISM AGAIN?**

The larger part of the global left which is not *simply* social democratic clings to the ideas of 'official communism'. Cuba now stands in for the former Soviet Union: it is necessary to disregard the 'economic liberalisation' moves already undertaken under Fidel, Raul Castro's expressed admiration for the Chinese sweatshop of the world, and his continuing moves to 'liberalise'.

This 'official communist' politics is now shared by the very large majority of the groups originating in Trotskyism. The Socialist Workers Party's 'anti-imperialism' has become Maoist-Castroist third-worldist in character with its effective political support for the *neoliberal, clerical-capitalist* regime in Tehran. John Rees and Alan Thornett alike - and many similar far-leftists across the globe - defend *Dimitrov's* non-aggression concept of the united front from his report to the 7th Congress of the Comintern, falsely attributing it to Lenin and Trotsky, and characterise Lenin's and Trotsky's concept of the united front as 'sectarianism'.

The idea of building a new mass social democratic party fails to face up to the change in global political-economic conditions since the 1980s. Falling back on 'official communism' fails to face up to one of the most fundamental changes of this period: that bureaucratic socialism *manifestly failed*.

It is not merely that these regimes were murderously tyrannical. The point is that all the sacrifices, both of political liberty and of material well-being, which the regimes demanded of those they ruled, *have only led back to capitalism*. As long as the left *appears* to be proposing to repeat this disastrous experience we can expect mass hostility to liberal capitalism to be expressed mainly in the form of rightism: that is, of nostalgia for the *pre-capitalist* social order.

Now the Trotskyists may argue that this does not affect them or, to the extent that it does, complain that this is unfair to them. After all, they opposed the bureaucratic regimes and called for their revolutionary overthrow. Some small minorities within this general trend - the *Critique* group, the Spartacists, the neo-Marcyites - even foresaw that the continued dictatorship of the bureaucracy would lead to a collapse, and/or back to capitalism.

Humans have no guide to action in the future other than theorising on what has happened in the past. Experiment in the physical sciences is no more than a way of *formalising* reliance on past actions as a guide to future actions. In politics, there can be no laboratory. Our only experimental evidence is the evidence of our history. Trotskyism *astheory* - and here including *Critique*, the Spartacists and the neo-Marcyites - predicted that the working class in the countries run by bureaucratic 'socialist' regimes would resist the restoration of capitalism. Trotsky - and, following him, the Spartacists and neo-Marcyites - predicted that this resistance would find a political reflection in political splits within the bureaucracy. The majority of the 'orthodox' Trotskyists used this prediction to conclude that there *could not be* a restoration of capitalism. All of these predictions were categorically false. There has been no accounting for their falsity.

The point runs deeper. Under capitalism, there is an *objective dynamic* for the working class to create permanent organisations to defend its immediate interests - trade unions and so on. This dynamic is present even under highly repressive political regimes - as can be seen in apartheid South Africa, South Korea before its 'democratisation' and so on. These organisations tend, equally, to become a significant factor in political life. It is these tendencies which support the ability of the political left to be more than small utopian circles.

Under the Soviet-style bureaucratic regimes *there was no objective tendency towards independent self-organisation of the working class*. Rather there were episodic explosions; but to the extent that the bureaucracy did not succeed in putting a political cap on these, they tended towards a *pro-capitalist* development. The strategic line of a workers' revolution against the bureaucracy - whether it was called 'political revolution', as it was by the orthodox Trotskyists, or 'social revolution', as theorists of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism dubbed it - lacked a material basis.

This objection applies with equal force to those misguided souls who (like Tony Clark of

the Communist Party Alliance) argue that the Soviet-style bureaucratic regimes were in transition towards socialism; that this inevitably “has both positive and negative features to begin with”, but that the transition was turned into its opposite by the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie “gain[ing] control of communist parties and socialist states under the banner of anti-Stalinism”.<sup>4</sup>

If we momentarily accept this analysis for the sake of argument, the question it poses is: why have the true revolutionaries, the Stalinists, been so utterly incapable of organising an effective resistance to this take-over, given that ‘socialism’ in their sense covered a large part of the globe and organised a large part of its population? This is exactly the same problem as the Trotskyists’ ‘political revolution’ strategy, only with a different substantive line. The weakness of *Stalinist* opposition to the pro-capitalist evolution of the leaderships in Moscow, Beijing and so on reveals the same problem as that facing the advocates of ‘political revolution’. There were neither institutional means in the regimes through which the ‘non-revisionists’ could resist revisionism nor any objective tendency in the regimes towards ongoing mass working class self-organisation on which opponents of revisionism could base themselves.

The Trotskyists of all varieties continue to put forward as positive socialist strategy a revolution in the image of 1917 in Russia. But, as everyone knows, what happened to the Russian Revolution was the emergence of the bureaucratic regime, which has now ended - or is in process of ending - in capitalism. Trotskyists are therefore required to account for *how* the bureaucratic regime arose, and to offer *reasons for supposing that the process would not be duplicated anywhere else which had a ‘1917-style’ revolution*.

Trotsky’s account was, fundamentally and correctly, that 1917 was a gamble on the short-term extension of the world revolution. But this gamble failed. And, given the failure of the Russians’ gamble, the Trotskyist account does not explain why any attempt to repeat a revolution in the image of 1917 would not end in the same way. It is ridiculous to imagine that the global, imperialist-led system of states would not bend every effort to isolate a ‘new 1917’. Countries which are more ‘developed’ than the tsarist empire in 1917 (now most countries) are *more* deeply integrated in the global division of labour, and isolation would therefore produce *more* scarcity and hence *more* need for a state-bureaucratic ‘policeman’.

Rather than address this problem, the Trotskyists have clung to the basic ideas of the early Comintern - especially on the party question. They insist that these have nothing to do with the rise of the bureaucracy - even as their own organisations, like the SWP, display exactly the symptoms of bureaucratic dominance described of the CPSU by Trotsky in *The Third International after Lenin*, and are in the process of adapting their organisations’ politics to the class-collaborationism and people’s frontism of classical Stalinism.

For the Russians, the bureaucratic degeneration of workers’ organisations was a new experience after 1917: before the revolution, the Okhrana helpfully forced the removal of potential career officials of the socialist parties and trade unions by jailing and exiling them. But it was not new to the western left: it was already identified by the Webbs in the British trade union movement in the 1890s, and by Michels in the German SPD in the 1900s.<sup>5</sup>

Bureaucratic internal norms, and ‘realistic’ nationalist-reformist and class-collaborationist politics, march inescapably hand in hand. This is as much a lesson of Britain and Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as it is of Russia since the 1920s. Just as Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism proves to be only a road back to capitalism, so the interpretation of early Comintern ideas by the majority of the organised far left proves to be only a road back to social democracy - the Brazilian case providing a particularly clear example.

Probably most people who come into contact with the organised left do not think about the issue at this level of analysis: ie, that the left has failed to account properly for Stalinism. What they see is something much simpler: that the left groups are massively divided; and, if they are familiar with the groups or pass through membership of them, that the groups are not really democratic but either *no more democratic than the capitalist parliamentary constitutional regime* (as is true of the Mandeliste Fourth International and its larger sections) or that they are characterised by bureaucratic tyranny just like Stalinism (as is true of the SWP and numerous other far-left groups). In reality, the division is to a considerable extent the product of bureaucratic centralism, and both are at least in part *produced* by the failure to account properly for Stalinism.

### **TRY MARXISM**

This is enough to explain why the decay of capitalism, and large episodic movements like the anti-war movement in Britain, or the movements against the EU constitution or the 'young workers reform' in France, and so on elsewhere, do not find political expression in the growth of the left. The fact is that the left is - in its large majority - clinging to strategic ideas which belong to objective conditions that have disappeared. Under the new conditions these ideas are politically paralysing.

What has not in the recent past been tried is the basic *political* prescriptions of Marx and Engels: to build the workers' movement as an independent *class* movement, not as part of a 'broader left'; for the working class to cooperate internationally *under capitalism*, not simply attempt to win power in single countries; to fight for concrete reforms, while *refusing* government office and coalitions aimed at government office; to fight for *political democracy*, both against the capitalist state order and against the labour bureaucracy.

This is not something which can be done by a small fragment of the left on its own, whether it is to be the CPGB or some other group. It needs the left as a whole or a large part of it to get out of the tramlines of social democratic and 'official communist' thought. However, as long as the left does not begin to try, it will continue to decay.

### **Notes**

1. 'To stem Iraqi violence, US aims to create jobs' *Washington Post* December 12 2006.
2. See D Kertzer *Unholy war* London 2003; and my review, 'The politics of purity' *Weekly Worker* July 22 2004.
3. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, 'Report to the president', July 10 2006, [www.cafc.gov/cafc/rpt/2006/68097.htm](http://www.cafc.gov/cafc/rpt/2006/68097.htm); signed off by co-chairs secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and secretary of commerce (and Cuban émigré) Carlos Gutierrez.
4. Comrade Clark's letter to the *Weekly Worker* on this issue was partially cut, with the cut material appearing in a further letter which charged us with "expurgating" the original: the full text can be found at [www.oneparty.co.uk](http://www.oneparty.co.uk) under 'What's new'.
5. S Webb, B Webb *Industrial democracy* London 1902, p8; *The history of trade unionism 1666-1920* London 1920, pp204, 466-70 - both describing the 1890s; R Michels *Political parties* New York 1911 (cited from the 1962 edition of the English translation)

## Trying Stalinism again?

*Can there be a repeat of Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism? Mike Macnair responds to Tony Clark*

Tony Clark's reply (Letters, May 22) to comments in my article 'Anything but Marxism' (May 1) raises some important issues, and I think it would be helpful if comrade Clark is willing to give a fuller account of his views, which are a variant form of those widely held on the far left. In the meantime I would make four points in response to the arguments of his letter.

Comrade Clark's argument about institutions is incoherent. His argument about 'bureaucracy' raises an important issue, but is misleading. His arguments about the causes of the fall of the Soviet and similar regimes reveal more clearly what is wrong with 'trying Stalinism again'.

### INSTITUTIONS

First, I do not say, as comrade Clark makes me say, that the so-called 'socialist countries' "had no institutional safeguard against counterrevolution". I say that from the date of the 1921 ban on factions, they had no institutional means by which the *proletariat as a class* could find political expression of its views and interests.

Marx and Engels claimed that only the movement of the proletariat as a class and the victory of this class over the capitalists and middle class - working class rule - can bring about a communist society; and (the other side of the same coin) that the working class can only emancipate itself by laying collective hands on the means of production: ie, by fighting for communism.

The underlying ground of this claim is that because the proletariat as a class is - unlike peasants and artisans - *separated from* individual ownership of the means of production, proletarians can only pursue their interests through *free, voluntary cooperation in collective organisation*, which foreshadows the nature of communist society ("the freely associated producers").

It follows that the proletariat as a class can only maintain control of its own organisations (trade unions, parties, states) by freedom to organise collectively for particular goals *within* them. Hence, in 1921 the proletariat was *politically expropriated* by the Russian party and state apparatus. This apparatus maintained afterwards a merely *ideological* (in the negative sense of mystificatory or apologetic) link to the idea of working class rule.

Between 1920 and the 'terror' of the 1930s, the apparatus step by step expelled from itself and from society all those elements who, in one way or another, sought a step back towards the pre-1920 Bolshevism which politically represented the proletariat. The apparatus developed its ideological opposition to working class rule, first in the form of the idea of the sanctity of the *smychka*, the worker-peasant alliance, then, from the 1930s, in the fiction that classes had already been abolished in the USSR.

There can, of course, be no institutional *guarantees* against counterrevolution. But institutional forms can make counterrevolution more or less likely, and bureaucratic

centralism made counterrevolution *more* likely. The sneer of comrade Clark - and, for that matter, those of the orthodox Trotskyists - towards institutional forms is in fact only directed against *democratic* institutional forms: they claim that purges (comrade Clark) or councils elected from workplaces (orthodox Trotskyists), combined with a bureaucratic centralist party (both), make counterrevolution less likely. But these are no less 'institutional forms' than freedom of parties and of factions, freedom of information, freedom of speech and so on.

## **BUREAUCRACY**

Comrade Clark says that "the Trotskyists outlined a struggle to 'overthrow' the bureaucracy - an ultra-left position, since bureaucracies, generally speaking, cannot be 'overthrown'". This claim seems to me to involve a slippage in the meaning of the word 'bureaucracy'.

The word 'bureaucracy' was originally coined in the 18th century by the French 'physiocrat' economist Vincent de Gournay,<sup>1</sup> and was already in use by Marx in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of right*. From its beginnings it has had two overlapping meanings. The first is 'rule over society by state officials for their own benefit'. In this sense the word is analogous to 'democracy', 'monarchy' and so on. The second is the state officials as a group (usually with a derogatory sense that they are parasites on society). In this sense the word is analogous to 'aristocracy' as a word for the landlord class.

In the second sense of the word, comrade Clark is quite correct to say that "bureaucracies, generally speaking, cannot be 'overthrown'". The fact that there are bureaucrats arises in the first place because there are 'bureaucratic' jobs which objectively need to be done (accumulating information, drafting agendas, communicating decisions, and so on), and secondly from differential access to the skills associated with these jobs. What can be said is that bureaucracy can be made to *wither away*. This is in part by returning some jobs which are now bureaucratic to the people (as, for example, trial by jury rather than trial by judge). It is in part by the restriction of official salaries to the skilled worker's wage, election and recallability, and rotation of officials.

As Lenin put it in *State and revolution*, "... we will reduce the role of the state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, modestly paid 'foremen and bookkeepers' (of course, with the aid of technicians of all sorts, types and degrees). This is our proletarian task, this is what we can and must start with in accomplishing the proletarian revolution. Such a beginning, on the basis of large-scale production, will of itself lead to the gradual 'withering away' of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order, an order without quotation marks, an order bearing no similarity to wage slavery, an order in which the functions of control and accounting - becoming more and more simple - will be performed by each in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out as the special functions of a special section of the population."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, in the first sense of the word - the *political rule* of the bureaucracy - bureaucracies certainly can be overthrown. There is a very extensive bureaucracy (second sense) in Britain or the US, but this bureaucracy 'rules' only as the servant of the capitalist class. What happened in the late 1980s-early 1990s in the former Soviet dependencies of eastern Europe was that the bureaucracy attempted to transform itself into a capitalist class - but, by and large, it did not succeed: instead the political rule of the bureaucracy was *overthrown* by the capitalist class.

I do not share the view that the Soviet (etc) bureaucracy was a 'bureaucratic collectivist' or 'state capitalist' class. Rather, the bureaucratic political rule of the USSR and 'eastern bloc' was merely a very large-scale and prolonged instance of *Bonapartism*: the temporary and partial autonomy of the state apparatus due to unstable equilibrium between the classes. On the world scale, it balanced between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; on the

national scale, between the proletariat and the petty proprietors (peasants, intelligentsia).

In this sense of 'bureaucracy', I judge along with comrade Clark that it was impossible for *the proletariat* to overthrow 'the bureaucracy'. But I make this judgment not because it is impossible for 'bureaucracies' in the sense of bureaucratic political rule to be overthrown at all. Rather, I judge that the temporary victory of the proletariat in Russia in 1917-18 reflected the *European* relation of class forces; that the *Russian* relation of class forces *in isolation* would not even support transition from feudalism to capitalism; and, hence, that the defeats of 1918-21 in western Europe and isolation of the Russian Revolution supported the creation of a *Bonapartism which froze in place a stage in the transition from feudalism to capitalism*. This, in turn, replicated itself after 1943 in countries with similar relations of class forces (China, etc).

Within this framework, the natural weight of the Soviet regime in the international workers' movement worked (a) to maintain the national isolation of the workers' movements in each individual country through the ideologies of 'uneven development' and 'national roads'; (b) to support, by defending bureaucratic centralism, the social democratic and 'pure trade unionist' labour bureaucracy in the capitalist countries, which are the main support of the capitalist class in these countries; and (c) to promote class-collaborationism. The effect was to preserve the international equilibrium of class forces which supported the Bonapartist regime, until *the bourgeoisie* brought the Bonapartist regime down.

In all these respects international capital *actively supported* 'official communism'. It did so through measures like the US 1940 Voorhis Act (which bans the affiliation of US workers' parties to internationals) and the state regulation of political parties, trade unions, etc, more generally. And it did so through the usual academic and media drip, drip of congratulations to 'realistic' national-road, bureaucratic and class-collaborationist leftists and condemnation of 'utopian' class-independence, radical-democratic and proletarian-internationalist leftists (I do not mean by this latter category Trotskyists: Trotskyists were always merely a *part* of the small surviving fully Marxist left).

## **IDEOLOGICAL DEFEAT**

Comrade Clark says that "The defeat of socialism in the 1980s and 90s was an ideological defeat, the result of a prolonged ideological struggle waged by imperialism against socialism." He explains this 'ideological defeat' by, on the one side, the long boom, the nuclear threat to the 'socialist countries', and the revisionist leadership in the USSR and its reliance on oil exports making the Soviet economy vulnerable.

On the other side, the carrot held out by the imperialists was "consumer capitalism": but this, comrade Clark argues, is now leading to ecological disaster and to a "nightmare ... soon to be visited on those in the imperialist countries, where living standards will begin to plunge towards third world levels, as the consequences of peak oil becomes the dominant reality". Although not explicitly, comrade Clark argues that this nightmare will make classical Stalinism, with an ecological twist, look like an attractive alternative.

The first part of these arguments, the characterisation of the defeat of the USSR, etc as an *ideological* defeat, is decidedly peculiar. The defeat comrade Clark describes is in substance an *economic* defeat. Put bluntly, the USSR-Comecon was not productive enough to afford both guns and butter; US imperialism, with its subordinate capitalist states, was. This economic defeat was *expressed* in the nuclear threat and the need for constant arms innovations, leading to arms expenditure dislocating the civil economy, and so on. The economic defeat was *reflected in* the triumph of 'revisionism', as the Soviet leadership recognised in private that their claims that the USSR surpassed capitalist productive capacity were proved in the hard light of military capability to be false, and turned to imitating capitalism. The attempt to use oil revenue to square the circle in the

1970s was merely a short-term expedient (and one which had been used, in relation to timber and other primary products, under Stalin).

But then why did the economic defeat happen? In the first place, the USSR started out massively behind the USA. Nationalisations and planification allowed *some* catching up - as was also true, indeed, more successfully, of Wilhemine Germany and Meiji Japan, though these started at a vastly higher productive and cultural level than the former tsarist empire. But this is precisely a test of destruction of 'socialism in a single country': it did *not* deliver overtaking the capitalist world, contrary to Lenin's tentative suggestion in 1923 - "why cannot we begin by first achieving the prerequisites for that definite level of culture in a revolutionary way, and *then*, with the aid of the workers' and peasants' government and Soviet system, proceed to overtake the other nations?"<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the political ideologies of the bureaucratic Bonapartist regime *undermined* the economy. 'Socialism in one country' and 'national roads' prevented the *planned integration* of the Comecon economies with that of the USSR itself, resulting in duplication of very similar heavy-industry complexes in every country. The information monopoly of the bureaucracy, guaranteed by top-down appointments and the ban on factions, turned into a *disinformation* monopoly, as factory and state and collective farm managers 'spun' their results to make themselves look better. This is a familiar feature of Blairism, borrowed from the ex-'official communists' and fellow-travellers in the Blairite ranks; it is less catastrophic under New Labour because there is a world outside the world of managerial 'targets'. In the 'Soviet-style regimes' there was none. The class collaborationism of people's frontism promoted the 'revisionist' illusions in supposedly neutral 'technocrats' and, in the 1970s, sucked at least the eastern European regimes into the third world debt trap.

## **GREEN AUSTERITY**

Will capitalist ecological crisis and the new oil price shock, leading to the end of 'consumer capitalism', make classical Stalinism look attractive? In the first place, it is certainly true that a nightmare for working people is coming, though how quickly is debatable. Secondly, for many working class people in the former USSR the *Brezhnevite* 'period of stagnation' looked attractive from the depths of the results of neoliberal 'shock therapy' in the 1990s-2000s. There is a similar feature of *Ostalgie* in parts of the former GDR.

This is not, however, the same thing as mass nostalgia for the *Stalin* period, when labour discipline was routinely enforced by the use of slave-labour death camps, paranoia at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy produced meaningless purges, and petty disputes about the allocation of flats, etc could lead to false denunciations to the KGB, torture and death. Nor is there any significant evidence of mass nostalgia for the 'great leap forward' or 'cultural revolution' in China.

Comrade Clark says that in the new crisis "living standards will begin to plunge towards third world levels". Is there significant evidence of mass support for classical Stalinism in the 'third world'? The answer needs to be a little nuanced. In places where there is a mass peasantry not yet integrated in market relations, Maoism can win mass support: witness Nepal, and the Naxalites in parts of India. But in third world countries with a powerful urban proletariat, classical Stalinism, and even 'official' communism ('revisionism' in comrade Clark's eyes) has *never* succeeded in winning majority support.

It has failed to do so - in spite of appalling working and living conditions - in the first place precisely because of the objective interest of the working class in political democracy. Thus the Cuban revolutionaries, for example, explicitly distanced themselves from the political forms of classical Stalinism.

It has failed to do so, secondly, because 'national roads', the 'anti-imperialist front' and popular-frontist class-collaborationism have hitched the communists to the wagons of a

series of bourgeois-nationalist movements which have continued the subordination of the proletariat and in due course, when the time was right, turned on the communists and crushed them.

It has failed to do so, thirdly, because the class-collaborationism of the labour bureaucracy is not unique to the imperialist countries, but can be found also in every colony and semi-colony to have a significant trade union movement: and the overthrowing of the *political dominance* of this bureaucracy, which requires a struggle for radical democracy, is necessary if the working class is to take political power.

In the context of the rest of his argument, comrade Clark's critique of "consumer capitalism" and assertion of the need for an "ecologically sustainable socialist society" is merely a politics of nostalgia for bureaucratically managed austerity (as much as Green politics is). Which bits of 'consumerism' are we to ask workers to give up? Cheap food available without long queues? Opportunities for information and communication through transport, telephones, the web, etc? The (very, very limited) emancipation of women from domestic labour through labour-saving devices?

Stalinism can win majority support in peasant-majority areas and countries because it is, at the end of the day, a Bonapartism socially based on the *atomised petty proprietors* seeking "rain and sunshine from above" from an all-powerful state.<sup>4</sup> Hence the natural overlap with the equally petty-proprietor politics of Green austerity.

The way out of capitalism will not be provided by either of these politics of nostalgia. The way forward is about *the working class taking over the running of society*, and making *its own decisions* about all sorts of questions. Comrade Clark's attempt to reply to my article precisely reveals why, as I said in it, 'trying Stalinism again' is no use.

#### Notes

1. 1712-59 - [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent\\_de\\_Gournay](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_de_Gournay)
2. VI Lenin *State and revolution* Beijing 1970, pp58-59.
3. 'Our revolution' CW Vol 33, pp476-80:[www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/16.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/16.htm)
4. K Marx The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte chapter 7.

## Taking Stalinism seriously

*What does 'production for need' mean? Mike Macnair responds to Tony Clark*

In this series of three articles I propose to respond to the June 19 article in these pages by comrade Tony Clark of the Communist Party Alliance (and Stalin Society?). It is worth doing so because, though comrade Clark's ideas belong in the dustbin of history, they are a version of what are probably still the *majority* views of the global left.

In the process (in the next article) I will review a recent book by David Priestland, *Stalinism and the politics of mobilisation* (2007). The combination is posed because Priestland addresses some of the same issues as Clark, albeit from a very different angle: the Weberian assumption that Marx's ideas are utopian, and the belief that this explains Stalinism.

Comrade Clark, in contrast, *adheres* to 'Stalinism'. He judges - in fact, correctly - that the 'anti-Stalinism' of Khrushchev and *his* co-thinkers was pro-capitalist, tended to undermine the USSR, and hence led to 1991. He rejects Trotsky's ideas on the basis of the standard (and false) Stalinist critiques of them, and does not consider at all Menshevik and Kautskyite or 'left' and 'council' communist critiques of the Soviet regime. Hence, 'Stalinism', in the sense of upholding *pre-1954* official Soviet ideology, is his *tabula in naufragium*, his plank to cling to in the shipwreck of 'official' communism.

In this article I will begin with a central issue in comrade Clark's arguments: the meaning of 'socialism', on which comrade Clark - like 'official communists' generally - breaks with the absolute core of Marx's ideas, the perspective of workers' power, in favour of an ethical or utopian socialism. The next step is to discuss Priestland's arguments. It will then be possible to return to three other features of comrade Clark's arguments - the question of 'bureaucracy'; judging the global role of the USSR; and the case against Trotsky.

### PRODUCTION FOR NEED

Comrade Clark writes that "the essence of socialism is production for need".

The expression, 'production for need', is a common way of expressing what the left stands for, and it has a sort of Marxist warrant in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha programme* (1875). In 1875 it stood in opposition to "the Lassallean catchword" that the workers should obtain the "undiminished proceeds of labour". The old British Labour Party clause four - "To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry" - was a variant of Lassalle's slogan. It stands opposed to - for example - redistribution of property to make everyone into a peasant or artisan, equalisation of shares through taxation and various other such utopias.

But it is necessary to quote at least the immediate paragraph of Marx's *Critique* in which it is used: "In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly - only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: 'From each according to his ability, to each according

to his needs!’”<sup>1</sup>

The flags are there - almost the whole of the paragraph - to emphasise and re-emphasise the point Marx is making: that even on the best possible assumptions we do *not* pass immediately from capitalism to ‘production for need’.

In fact, the reference to the overcoming of the division of labour in the first sentence makes clear that what Marx means by “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” is a restatement of what was already in *The German ideology* (1845): “... in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”<sup>2</sup>

As Marx makes clear, to make this possible requires that “the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly”. In other words, it requires a major *increase* in social productivity compared to where we are now, enabling a higher proportion of individuals’ lives to be spent on general education, on retraining for new tasks, and on self-chosen creative activities.

Comrade Clark advocates an “ecological perspective within socialism”, and says that the “consumerist conception of socialism” was “always implicit in the old socialist tradition”. It may be that he means by this to accept the objections to Marx’s arguments on this issue as ‘productivist’, ‘Promethean’ and ‘unsustainable’, which have been made by several greens, and from within the traditional left by Gregor Benton in 1989.<sup>3</sup>

My opinion, for what it is worth, is that these green arguments are wrong. If we break with the profit-driven system and apply resources to *democratically chosen* projects, we could, I think, within a century or two provide the material conditions globally for overcoming the ‘division of labour’ in Marx’s sense: that is, lifelong human specialisation on particular skills and tasks. And we could do so without breaking the bounds of the global ecosystem, but on the contrary could repair the damage that has already been done.

Nonetheless, this *may* turn out to be impossible. And in any case it would certainly not be the immediate result of overthrowing capitalism worldwide (let alone attempting to replace capitalism in a single country, which would result merely in another disaster like those of the 20th century). There are therefore unavoidable choices to be made about the application of limited resources.

## CHOICES

The problem which is then posed by a “society based on production for need” is: *who decides* what counts as “need”, and *which* needs are to be given priority?

“Need” is a slippery word which can have an expansive or a restrictive sense.<sup>4</sup> The expansive sense requires Marx’s interpretation of ‘production for need’: ie, a society with very high productivity, in which the division of labour is overcome. But suppose we adopt the restrictive sense, and say simply that people need food, clothes, housing, access to transport and communication, education, health services and public health measures, and so on. These *basic* needs are very extensively unsatisfied in the capitalist world. On the other hand, a great deal of what is currently offered for sale in the capitalist market cannot be said to be things we need in the most expansive sense of the word. They may, indeed, be things we *need not to have*: for example, cigarettes, urban 4x4s, and instruments and techniques of torture. In this limited sense comrade Clark’s critique of ‘consumerism’ is entirely justified.

Within the restrictive sense of need, however, there remain unavoidable choices. To give a large-scale example. Suppose that we overthrew capitalist rule worldwide. Whether the greens are right that we need to cut down the 'human footprint' on the earth and hence *reduce* resource expenditure, or whether an increase in productivity which does not destroy the earth is possible in the long run, material resources would initially remain limited. We would have to make choices about priorities. What is the relative priority between improving transport infrastructure, education or health services? What is the relative priority between improving healthcare for the old in Britain, and improving basic-level healthcare in Latin America? Either choice will be a decision to use production for need: profit would not enter into the question. But the choice will nonetheless have to be faced.

How will the choice be made? The CPGB's approach is to say that we will have to make them *democratically*; that that is the only way in which *the working class* can effectively take decisions. Hence (among other reasons) our very strong emphasis on the struggle for extreme democracy as the centre of our political programme.

But the majority tradition of the 20th century left, including the Stalinists, was that the choices should be made by 'experts'. It makes no difference whether these 'experts' are to be technical experts, or 'cadres' (political 'experts'): they have still been taken away from the people ultimately affected. A trivial example, dating back to the 1970s: a local council decided it would be beneficial to council tenants to live in an architect-designed block; the expert architect designed the block with amber windows; tenant complaints (they wanted clear windows) were unavailing.

It is an accumulation of petty 'expert' stupidities of this sort, together with real cuts in public expenditure leading to cuts in repairs, etc, on council housing, which undermined mass support for council housing and opened the *political* way for the Tory 'right to buy' legislation. *Bureaucratic* 'collective' decision-making is so unattractive as to make pro-capitalist ideologues' offer of increased *individual* decision-making - part of what comrade Clark calls 'consumerism' - look attractive.

The Soviet and eastern European regimes were, and the Chinese, Vietnamese and North Korean regimes remain, much more extreme examples of this problem: that *the broad masses* are denied the right to make decisions, and the result is bureaucratic stupidities which do not conform to people's actual needs.

The result in fact was not production for human need at all. In the Stalin-era USSR, all other needs were subordinated to the needs of the state for *arms* production: hence the priority accorded to heavy industry. It is grotesque to imagine that the Marx who in 1871 characterised the Paris Commune as "a revolution against the state itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life"<sup>5</sup> would have thought that the USSR was an example of 'production for need'.

Resentment about subordination to decisions arbitrarily taken by 'experts' is partly because of the bad results of the decisions. But it is also, in fact, *an aspect of human basic needs*. Status inequality is, independent of absolute wealth or poverty, a cause of ill-health.<sup>6</sup> Since the phenomenon is independent of absolute wealth or poverty, hierarchical relations of decision-making, in which some people are permanently subordinated to others, are implicated in this problem just as much as monetary income inequality. In addition, of course, permanent relations of domination and subordination will tend to produce income inequality, since the decision-makers will tend to favour themselves: as already appeared in the USSR in 1922, with the creation of special material privileges for 'cadres'.<sup>7</sup>

Production genuinely aimed at the basic human need for health would therefore involve

'republican equality': ie, the end of permanent relations of domination and subordination between humans.<sup>8</sup> This goal, in turn, involves - as Marx points out in the *Critique of the Gotha programme*, quoted above - the end of "the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour".

## WORKERS' POWER

In comrade Clark's account we can leap immediately from capitalism to socialism - defined as 'production for need' - in a single country. As we have already seen, this was certainly not Marx's view. So what came *before* the development of full communism for Marx and Engels?

Actually, the answer is that they spoke mainly not of what full communism would be like, but of what would immediately succeed capitalist rule. And that was: the political rule of the proletariat as a class over the other classes (surviving capitalists, petty proprietors, managers, lumpen class).

Thus, in the *Communist manifesto* we find the formula: "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy."<sup>9</sup> Of the Paris Commune, *The civil war in France* says this: "Its true secret was this: it was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour."<sup>10</sup> In 1890, Engels wrote: "Of late, the social democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words, 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>11</sup>

In 1894, a letter of Engels to Turati contains a direct quotation from the *Communist manifesto*. After this direct quotation, he paraphrases: "Consequently they [socialists] take an active part in all the phases of the development of the struggle between the two classes without in so doing losing sight of the fact that these phases are only just so many preliminary steps to the first great aim: the conquest of *political* power by the *proletariat* as the means towards a new organisation of society."<sup>12</sup>

In general - the *Critique of the Gotha programme* is an apparent exception - Marx and Engels were quite concrete about immediate proposals for working class rule, but avoided speculation about the shape of the future communist society beyond its broadest outlines; and they criticised the utopians of one sort or another for precisely such speculation and detailed blueprints. Thus in *The civil war in France*:

"If cooperative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united cooperative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production - what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, 'possible' communism?"

"The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par decret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old, collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant."<sup>13</sup>

## **'FIRST PHASE'**

An exception, which *appears to* discuss the shape of socialism, is found in a passage of the *Critique of the Gotha programme*, coming immediately before the section quoted earlier. Here Marx postulates what has been called a 'lower stage' of communism, "the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society". This "first phase" came in the Second International to be called 'socialism', and in 'official communism' a rigid distinction was drawn between this 'socialism' and 'communism'. 'Socialism', meaning the "first phase", the USSR claimed to have achieved. 'Communism', meaning exclusively the higher stage, it did *not* claim to have achieved.

In this "first phase", the means of production are owned in common, and hence "... no-one can give anything except his labour, and ..., on the other hand, nothing can pass to the ownership of individuals, except individual means of consumption".

The total social product is first allocated to common purposes: "*First*, cover for replacement of the means of production used up. *Second*, additional portion for expansion of production. *Third*, reserve or insurance funds to provide against accidents, dislocations caused by natural calamities, etc." Then, "*First*, the general costs of administration not belonging to production. This part will, from the outset, be very considerably restricted in comparison with present-day society, and it diminishes in proportion, as the new society develops. *Second*, that which is intended for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc. From the outset, this part grows considerably in comparison with present-day society, and it grows in proportion as the new society develops. *Third*, funds for those unable to work, etc: in short, for what is included under so-called official poor relief today."

What remains is then distributed, not in proportion to *need*, but in proportion to *work contributed*. "... the individual producer receives back from society - after the deductions have been made - exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labour. For example, the social working day consists of the sum of the individual hours of work; the individual labour time of the individual producer is the part of the social working day contributed by him, his share in it. He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds); and with this certificate, he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labour cost. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another.

"Here, obviously, the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is exchange of equal values ... the same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodity equivalents: a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form.

"Hence, *equal right* here is still in principle *bourgeois right*, although principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange exists only on the average and not in the individual case.

"In spite of this advance, this equal right is still constantly stigmatised by a bourgeois limitation. The right of the producers is *proportional* to the labour they supply; the equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an *equal standard*, labour.

"But one man is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labour. It recognises no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognises unequal

individual endowment, and thus productive capacity, as a natural privilege. It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right.

“Right, by its very nature, can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only - for instance, in the present case, are regarded *only as workers* and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Further, one worker is married, another is not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal.”<sup>14</sup>

There is a strong case for taking this passage less seriously than it has been taken both by Marxists and by academic Marxologists.

In the first place, the whole of this part of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is not an argument for inserting positive Marxist formulations in the programme, but for *removing* Lassallean formulations from it. In particular, this passage is part of a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Lassallean formulae that “the proceeds of labour belong *undiminished, with equal right*, to all members of society” (gehört der Ertrag der Arbeit *unverkürzt, nach gleichem Rechte*, allen Gesellschaftsgliedern) and “a *fair* distribution of the proceeds of labour” (*gerechter* Verteilung des Arbeitsertrags).<sup>15</sup> Marx is concerned to show that ‘equal right’ or a ‘fair’, ‘just’, or ‘equal’ distribution would at the end of the day be unequal, so that the Lassallean slogan is self-contradictory. He reaches the conclusion, the payoff of the argument, in the last paragraph quoted. There is therefore little reason to suppose that the ‘labour certificates’ idea is actually a positive proposal for organising distribution.

Secondly, the economic analysis is sloppy: unsurprising in a negative critique, written at speed, but a good ground for supposing that the passage is no more than a negative critique. Marx most unusually speaks of the cost of *labour* (“he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labour cost” - “und zieht ... aus dem gesellschaftlichen Vorrat von Konsumtionsmitteln soviel heraus, als gleich viel Arbeit kostet”) rather than the cost of *labour-power*. The distinction is fundamental to Marx’s *Capital*: ‘labour’ does not, in fact, have a cost, and the ‘cost of labour’ is actually either the reproduction cost of labour-power, or the price of labour-power. We *could* re-read this as the cost of the products drawn by the labourer from the social stock, assessed purely *in their labour inputs*, but such a reading would be inconsistent with Marx’s criticism, at the very beginning of the *Critique*, of the Lassallean claim that “Labour is the source of all wealth and all culture”.

The same issue has a more fundamental aspect. The analysis of the division of the total social product proceeds on the basis that the claim of the labourers on this product is a residual claim. First deduct so much for replacement of the means of production, funds for growth, insurance, administrative costs, public services and payments to those unable to work; then what remains is divided among the labourers in proportion to their work. As part of a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Lassallean slogan this makes perfect sense. But from the point of view expounded in *Capital* the total social labour-power is just as much a means of production which has to be reproduced as the material means (machines, buildings, etc).

At least the minimum cost of reproduction of social labour-power, including not merely the cost of bare subsistence, but also the cost of acquisition by workers of necessary skills, therefore should appear as a necessary deduction from the ‘distributable fund’ *before* the

“additional portion for expansion of production”. The accounting/distributive scheme of the “first phase” is therefore simply untenable (except insofar as it is internal critique of the coherence of Lassalleism on the basis of Lassalle’s own assumptions).

What, then, are we to make of “the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society”, and which is still, at least partially, within “the narrow horizon of bourgeois right”?

The answer is that it is, if it is anything at all, *the outcome of the dictatorship of the proletariat*. Marx’s argument about this “first phase” supposes the continued existence of what is, in substance, the relation of wage labour, and hence of the proletariat as a class. “It recognises no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else.” But what is meant by this is that the other classes have been absorbed into the proletariat. By virtue of the proletariat becoming and remaining the ruling class (meaning the ultimate decision-makers in society) it becomes more attractive to work for wages than to run a small family business or farm; and at the end of this process there is nothing left in society except wage-workers, with the result that classes cease to exist.

Strange as it may seem, we can already see a *tendency* in this direction in contemporary British society: according to a 2007 survey, 57% of the population think of themselves as working class, including many people who before World War II would have self-identified as middle class.<sup>16</sup> If the working class ruled, the tendency would be much stronger.

The heart and centre of Marx’s and Engels’ political arguments was the struggle for “the conquest of political power by the proletariat”. The discussion of the “first phase” of communism in the *Critique of the Gotha programme*, which appears superficially to tell a different story, turns out on close analysis to be a variant of the same story. The transition beyond class society is through working class rule, to everyone becoming wage-workers, so that classes as such cease to exist: thereby, in turn, putting us on the road to overcoming the ‘division of labour’ and “the antithesis between mental and physical labour”. Why is there this constant emphasis on working class politics?

A little earlier in the *Critique*, Marx wrote: “... equally incontestable is this other proposition: ‘In proportion as labour develops socially, and becomes thereby a source of wealth and culture, poverty and destitution develop among the workers, and wealth and culture among the non-workers.’ This is the law of all history hitherto. What, therefore, had to be done here, instead of setting down general phrases about ‘labour’ and ‘society’, was to prove concretely *how in present capitalist society the material, etc conditions have at last been created which enable and compel the workers to lift this social curse*” (emphasis added).

The point is that capitalism for the first time since the end of ‘primitive communist’ hunter-gatherer society *makes communism possible*. It does so, on the one hand, because the development of productivity makes it possible to go beyond the division of labour. It does so, on the other, because capitalism both socialises the major means of production and throws up a class - the proletariat - which *lacks* property in the means of production.

In pre-capitalist society communism is *desirable* because it is more consistent with the basics of human nature than class society. Witness the persistent reappearance in many periods and cultures of utopian communist ideas. But it is *impossible*, for two reasons. The first is that the economy is insufficiently productive to free the large majority of people from immediate labour to enable them to acquire the skills of, and participate in, social-decision-making.<sup>17</sup> The second is that communism requires *social* decision-making; and this is inconsistent with small-scale private ownership and petty family-based farming and artisan production. Capitalism removes both obstacles to communism.

The proletariat as a class is the class whose growth *expresses* this transformative

possibility. Workers, *because* they are separated from the means of production, are forced to create voluntary associations - trade unions, tenants' associations, cooperatives, political parties - to defend their interests. These voluntary associations foreshadow a future world of the "freely associated producers". It is therefore *through* the class rule of the proletariat that it is possible to pass to the end of classes and communism.

### 'OFFICIAL COMMUNISM'

'Official communism', and with it comrade Clark, breaks with this fundamental core of Marx's and Engels' policy. The process of the break will be the subject of the next article, my review of Priestland on Stalinism. The *expression* of the break has two sides. First, 'official communists' characterise the USSR and similar countries as 'socialist' when there were transparently social classes in these countries, so that the most that these regimes could possibly have been was the dictatorship of the proletariat, the political power of the working class over the other classes (in fact, they were not that either).

Second, in the politics of the capitalist countries, the immediate alternative to capitalism is *the political power of the working class*. 'Official communists' instead offer a 'socialism'. This 'socialism' *ignores* the problem of working class political rule and attempts to create a cross-class coalition for a *morally* better society. Clark's 'eco-socialist' approach is one variant; Respect is another; the 'official' CPGB's 'broad democratic alliance' was a third.

This break is in the face of overwhelming evidence confirming Marx's and Engels' original idea that it is only capitalism and the rise of the proletariat that makes communism *possible*, and that the only road to communism is through the class rule of the proletariat over the other classes. The USSR and its fall (and the fall with it of the eastern European and South Yemen satellite states), and the market turns in China and Vietnam (and most recently Cuba) are part of that evidence. It is to this question that we must next turn; and I will do so by reviewing Priestland.

### Notes

1. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm)
2. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a4](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a4)
3. 'Marxism and natural limits' *New Left Review* first series, No178.
4. Cf. my review of Ian Fraser's *Hegel, Marx: the concept of need* (1998): 'Hegelian pitfalls' *Weekly Worker* July 31 2003; and also Norman Geras's (in my opinion unsatisfactory) discussion of Marx's formula, in 'The controversy about Marx and justice' (1989): [www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/geras.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/geras.htm)
5. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/ch01.htm)
6. R Wilkinson *The impact of inequality: how to make sick societies healthier* (2005); or outline summary at [www.nationalestatechurches.org/Wilkinson%20Conf%2006.pdf](http://www.nationalestatechurches.org/Wilkinson%20Conf%2006.pdf)
7. A Podsheldolkin, 'The origins of the Stalinist bureaucracy - some new historical facts': [www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/supplem/podsheld.htm](http://www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/supplem/podsheld.htm)
8. For the use of 'republican equality' here cf P Pettit *Republicanism* (1997), though Pettit's policy prescriptions are in substance social democratic. Compare also Marx's comment in 'Instructions for delegates of the provisional general council' (1866): "We acknowledge the cooperative movement as one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism. Its great merit is to practically show that the present pauperising and despotic system of the *subordination of labour* to capital can be superseded by the republican and beneficent system of *the association of free and equal producers*."
9. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm)
10. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm)
11. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm)
12. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94\\_01\\_26.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94_01_26.htm)
13. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm)
14. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm)
15. English text at source cited above; German text from [www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/marx-engels/1875/kritik/randglos.htm](http://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/marx-engels/1875/kritik/randglos.htm). Emphases added.
16. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6295743.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6295743.stm)
17. Peasants can self-manage their villages, artisans their local guilds. But both are part of larger divisions of

labour, which they are *not* able to self-manage.

## Bureaucracy and terror

*Mike Macnair reviews David Priestland's Stalinism and the politics of mobilisation: ideas, power and terror in inter-war Russia Oxford 2007, pp487, i & 1/2 58*

David Priestland's book is a contribution to the academic study of the history of the USSR, and in particular the origins of the 1930s terror. It is distinguished by the attempt to take seriously the *political ideas* of the Stalinists and their connection to, and partial divergence from, the ideas of the Bolsheviks after the revolution. It is this, as well as the wealth of documentation in the book - especially of *political turns* within the regime - that makes it worth reading.

I am reviewing the book in the context of a reply to Tony Clark's article, 'Defending Stalin'.<sup>1</sup> The first article in this series criticised comrade Clark's definition of 'socialism' and emphasised comrade Clark's and other 'official' communists' break with the fundamentals of the arguments of Marx and Engels. A third article, to follow, will address the question of 'bureaucracy', comrade Clark's use of standard Stalinist arguments against Trotsky as a form of indirect defence of Stalin and his judgment of the role of the USSR on the world stage.

The review will, therefore, to some extent assume the arguments of the first article: that is, that Marx and Engels thought that the only road beyond capitalism was through the *political power of the working class*; that capitalism *made communism possible* because it undermined small-scale private ownership of means of production and family production and replaced it with wage labour; and that Stalinism constituted a break with these ideas.

Priestland analyses the evolution of the Stalinists' political ideas within the framework of (a broadly Weberian) supposition that *Marxism as such* is utopian. Priestland does not fully argue out this view, but merely assumes it at the outset, but then *in effect* produces evidence for it in the shape of the calamitous history of the USSR in the 1920s and 30s (and, in the final chapter, of China under Mao).

Comrade Clark identifies with 'Stalinism' because he judges - correctly - that the 'anti-Stalinism' of Khrushchev and *his* co-thinkers was pro-capitalist, tended to undermine the USSR, and hence led to the fall of the USSR in 1991. But Priestland demonstrates from the documents that what became Khrushchevite 'revisionism' was *already present within high-period Stalinism*; and that Stalin personally and his immediate co-thinkers zig-zagged between this policy and a 'leftist' policy of 'mobilising' the masses to denounce the managers, kulaks, bureaucrats, etc (in the purges period characterised as "Trotskyite-Bukharinite wreckers") who were allegedly sabotaging the economy.

On each occasion the 'leftist' policy was abandoned because it *disrupted* production. The victory of the 'revisionists' after Stalin's death, and their 'anti-Stalinism', was merely the semi-public codification of a policy choice which had already been made - briefly in the rightwards legs of Stalin's zigzags in the 1920s and 30s, and decisively with the end of the full-scale terror in 1938-39.

In other words, Priestland's arguments address issues which are immediately relevant to comrade Clark's arguments.

Priestland's core arguments are, as we shall see, almost painfully ideological-apologetic. His underlying commitment to 'liberalism' (meaning the capitalist order, rather than either theorised political liberalism or neoliberalism) and his 'cold war academic' Weberian assumptions and silences deeply deform the story he tells. They make the 57-page introduction in particular a tortuous read. Nonetheless, the book is worth reading.

Academic history is now usually written under the empirical methodological disciplines established by German academics in the later 19th century - the fullest possible use of both primary sources and existing literature, accurate citation of sources, their assessment as witnesses using techniques borrowed from the law of evidence, and the attempt to explain events as economically as possible ('Occam's razor'). This sort of history is, like the physical sciences, a cumulative science: it leads to us knowing more about the past. This is still true even where - as in the case of *Stalinism and the politics of mobilisation* - the framework offered by the author to explain the events studied is deeply problematic.

In addition Priestland is probably correct to argue that the large majority of the Bolsheviks, including much of the left, from the 1920s were trapped within utopian ideological discourses, and that the nature of these discourses shaped the development of Soviet politics and helped lead to the terror.

### **PRIESTLAND'S THEORY**

The central question Priestland poses to Marx and Marxists, on the basis of which he judges Marxism to be utopian ideology, is this:

"How could a modern industrial system, based on a system of wage incentives and coordination by a technocratic elite, be reconciled with the desire to transform work into creative self-expression and to free workers from all subordination?" (p25)

This statement is a highly ideological-apologetic formulation of a real contradiction in 19th and 20th (and perhaps 21st) century socialist politics, and it will be necessary to return to it after summarising the rest of Priestland's argument and narrative.

The same page offers a different 'contradiction' in Marx's thought: that "Marx provided different accounts of the forces that drive history forward, and in particular the relationship between economic forces and the consciousness of the working class."

This second point is in substance merely abusive. A tension between structural causal dynamics and individual and group agency is inherent in *any* historical, economic or sociological account of human society, and, for that matter, *any* proposal for political action. Marx makes exactly this point in one of his most famous quotations: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."<sup>2</sup> The tension is also up-front in Priestland's own book (pp3-4, 49-54 and elsewhere).

In any such project it is therefore possible to extract quotations which emphasise the agency side of the question and present them as "romantic" or "voluntarist", and extract quotations which emphasise structural causal dynamics and characterise them as "scientistic"; and this is what Priestland proceeds to do. This then sets up a second (non-dialectical) contradiction within Marxism between "scientism" and "voluntarism". As a result, Priestland is able to diagnose four 'Marxisms': elitist and scientistic; elitist and voluntarist; non-elitist and scientistic; populist and voluntarist (pp32-34).

In Bolshevism in power, says Priestland, these four versions of Marxism mutate into five general positions. "Voluntarism" becomes "revivalism" (pp39-44). In this view proletarian class-consciousness was a vital force in history and politics, on which the party had to

draw by mobilising workers' energy and enthusiasm. Political ideas were primary; enemies were identified as 'bourgeois' or 'petty bourgeois'; 'purging' or 'cleansing' party and state institutions was important. But there were two variants of "revivalism". *Populist* revivalism sought to rely on working class spontaneity - without conceding actual *decision-making* to the workers - and to 'proletarianise' the bureaucracy by recruiting workers to it. *Elitist* revivalism sought merely to mobilise workers under a military command and control regime; this trend became "uncomfortable with the language of class and class struggle, and in the 1930s they sometimes claimed that class differences had been overcome ..." (p44).

"Scientism" becomes "technicism" (pp44-47). This trend - particularly associated with Bukharin in the 1920s - favoured the use of material incentives and gradual development, and "tended to favour ... the technical intelligentsia" (p45). Only a few ultra-gradualists who favoured more extensive use of market mechanisms and law could be described as non-elitist technicians (pp46-47), technicians generally being elitists.

The fifth position Priestland characterises as "neo-traditionalist" (pp47-49). This idea has been applied in some of the academic literature to Stalinism in general, but Priestland reduces it to a trend within Bolshevism in power. In this view society was divided into hereditary status groups with distinct tasks, in effect pre-capitalist 'estates' - industrial workers, collectivised peasants, Soviet intelligentsia and 'loyal' nationalities on the good side; on the enemy side former bourgeois, petty bourgeois and kulaks (large farmers) and unreliable national minorities. Priestland recognises that neo-traditionalism could not be characterised as Marxist, and hence could not really be openly spoken, but suggests that *aspects* of this discourse were present throughout and that the class language used by "revivalists" could shade into it.

## **PRIESTLAND'S NARRATIVE**

Chapters 1-5 of the book attempt to 'cash out' this theoretical analysis of contradictions within Bolshevism in the form of fairly detailed historical narrative. I will summarise this in extreme outline, inevitably oversimplifying.

Chapter 1 argues that Lenin in his politics before 1917 attempted to synthesise "populism" and "scientism", but that the line of *State and revolution* was voluntarist and "populist-revivalist", though an element of "elitism" in the form of the role of the vanguard party was also present in Lenin's ideas. This policy was proved utopian by the chaos of winter 1917-18. In April 1918 the leadership, led by Lenin and Trotsky, abandoned the line of *State and revolution* in favour of an elitist position, which veered between technicism (talk of 'state capitalism') and "elitist revivalism" (subbotniks or unpaid overtime; Trotsky's efforts on militarisation and military morale). In this context 'bureaucracy' was used by leadership speakers and writers to mean 'red tape' and inefficiency rather than the anti-democratic aspect of bureaucracy.

The contradiction between the new line and Bolshevik (and wider Russian working class) traditions resulted in the emergence of a series of oppositions - the Left Communists, the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists, and the Military Opposition. These groups generally pursued a populist-revivalist line. Since they could not return to liberalism, their opposition to bureaucracy, meaning the elitist authority relations, had to blame alien classes, especially the technical specialists (*spetsy*) and suggest more promotion of workers into official positions as a remedy. This sort of approach could slide over into neo-traditionalism: workers seen as virtuous because their parents were workers. Though Stalin did not formally go into opposition, beyond an informal relationship with the Military Opposition, his political ideas were closer to those of the oppositions.

In 1920-21 the economy was still falling apart in spite of effective victory in the civil war.

The first response of the leadership was to extend the use of coercion, Trotsky being the most vigorous advocate (labour militarisation). Faced with a majority against this approach, Lenin backed off from supporting Trotsky. In 1921 there was an actual political crisis (peasant revolts, strikes, Kronstadt) and Lenin and the party leadership abandoned 'war communism' and turned to market mechanisms and the New Economic Policy. This represented a major shift towards technicism. Along with it went attacks by leadership figures on the Proletkult proletarian culture movement and extended defence of the *spetsy*. Bukharin's *Historical materialism* advocated a 'social equilibrium' theory, which could be used to support gradualism in economic policy.

After the initial successes of NEP, party discontent and opposition (and worker discontent) began to develop. The result was the creation of an alliance between elitist revivalists (Trotsky, Piatakov and others) and populist revivalists, mainly former Democratic Centralists. This appeared first in the Moscow (Left) Opposition. Then Zinoviev and Kamenev went into opposition on a much more workerist and populist-revivalist platform (the Leningrad Opposition), and these ideas dominated the United Opposition of 1926-27. The first publication of Engels' *Dialectics of nature* in 1925 spurred the growth of ideas of a policy of 'dialectical leaps forward' in the economy, most strongly argued by Strumilin and Piatakov.

Stalin and his group, though still in alliance with Bukharin against the oppositions, were already moving away from Bukharin's gradualism and towards the politics of the Leningrad/United Oppositions from 1925, while using the critique of 'Trotskyism' to distinguish themselves from the opposition. They were able to base themselves on regional 'party bosses', who were worried about NEP technicism reducing their political role, but too concerned about the threat from below to go over to the opposition.

In 1926-27 the defeat in China, the breaking off of diplomatic relations by Britain after the 'Zinoviev letter' and the French refusal to negotiate on commercial credits and expulsion of Rakovsky produced a war scare. At the same time a new and acute 'scissors crisis' (peasants refusing to sell grain because the price was too low) appeared in the economy. After disposing of the opposition with expulsions and a purge, the Stalin faction abruptly broke with Bukharin's gradualist line in early 1928 and adopted a more extreme version of the "revivalist" politics of the opposition. The result was the policy of forced collectivisation and crash industrialisation. This had an "elitist" aspect - the workers were to be 'mobilised' by the 'cadres' without really getting the right to make decisions, and there were truly massive cuts in real wages and speed-up. In this context, the large majority of the opposition "capitulated" (Trotsky's expression): ie, joined forces with the Stalinists.

But it also had a "populist" aspect, which took the form of attacks on kulaks, bureaucrats and *spetsy*, starting with the show-trial of Shakty engineers in March 1928. Priestland carefully documents the rhetorical shifts in the line of the Stalinist leadership towards 'democracy', 'socialist emulation' and so on. Proletkult was revived. Another element was a connection being made between scepticism about the plan targets, sabotage and real or supposed international conspiracies against the Soviet state - expressed in the 'Industrial Party' and 'Menshevik Union Bureau' trials of 1930-31.

In fact, the turn proved to be disastrous. Forced collectivisation resulted in famine. There were extreme bottlenecks in industrial production. The industrial output figures were falsified, not only directly, but because incomplete buildings and factories were counted as 'output'. Workers used the egalitarian rhetoric to attack managers and to create 'work collectives' which 'undermined wage incentives' by levelling differentials. Increased plan targets for production led to severe falls in quality. The 'Right Opposition' around Bukharin, though out of power, had not yet been purged and their criticisms had increasing resonance.

The result was that the Stalin group turned, from around 1931, to a much more “technicist” orientation. Plan targets were relaxed and the targeting of kulaks, bureaucrats and *spetsy* dramatically tailed off. Though the main body of the land remained ‘collectivised’, peasants were allowed private plots. In this context, there was a shift towards ‘legality’, and Stalinists began to talk about the state surviving in socialism; there was also a substantial renewal of Russian nationalist rhetoric; and the use of the language of class began to shift away from ‘Marxism’ towards neo-traditionalism.

Nonetheless, Stalin had not fundamentally broken with “revivalism”. Though the new “technicist” orientation allowed real economic growth and industrialisation through the completion of projects unfinished in 1928-31, this growth slowed in the mid-30s, just as the capitalist economies were beginning to recover. Stalin’s response was to move increasingly back towards “revivalism”. From 1935 this shift became more marked.

The language of ‘class struggle’, however, did not reappear: Priestland suggests that this was due to the leadership fearing a repeat of the partial loss of control of 1928-31. This meant that the emphasis on coercion, purges, show-trials and international conspiracies had to be all the stronger, leading to the mass-scale terror of 1937, primarily directed against *spetsy* and old party activists identified as ‘bureaucrats’ and ‘saboteurs’. But “revivalism” was just as economically irrational as it had been in 1928-31 (and similarly led to a fall in productive output). By 1938, it was clear that this ‘left’ turn, too, was failing, and the leadership brought it to an end.

Priestland’s conclusion summarises his findings, and compares them with the very similar dynamic in China under Mao: “technicism” in the 1950s, followed by the “revivalist” Great Leap Forward in 1958, followed by a return to “technicism”, followed by the “populist revivalism” of the Cultural Revolution (1966-67). “Populist revivalism”, he concludes, led to the adoption of irrational policies.

## IDEOLOGICAL

The core strength of Priestland’s book is simple. It takes seriously Stalin’s ideas, those of his immediate co-thinkers and their relationship to the ideas current in the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet Union more generally. As a result, it breaks free from seeing what Stalin said and wrote as mere lies covering for his personal character as an individual monster, or covering for the interests of ‘the Soviet bureaucracy’ as an undifferentiated exploiting group.

It thus helps explain why the Soviet regime adopted *positively irrational* policies, which actually *reduced* production and military preparedness, in 1928-31 and 1935-38, and were - as comrade Clark correctly says - opposed to the interests of the bureaucracy as such (contrary to comrade Clark’s view, they were opposed to everyone else’s interests, too). It helps us to understand why the majority of the oppositions of the 1920s “capitulated” in 1928-31; why the same pattern played out in China under Mao; and why leftists could and even today still do choose to be Stalinists (meaning real Stalinists like comrade Clark, not just ‘official communists’).

At the same time, as I said at the outset, Priestland’s broadly Weberian theory is ideological-apologetic. There is an obvious aspect to this: namely, that the *international place* of Russia, the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime is nearly wholly out of the picture (except for the war scare of 1926-27).

Boris Kagarlitsky in *Empire of the periphery* (2008) makes the fundamental point that, in terms of world systems theory, Russia before the revolution was a peripheral country, not a core country. In Leninist terms, it was a semi-colony which was also sub-imperialist: ie, the Russian core was dominated by western capital, while the colonised areas of the east and south were dominated by Russian capital. The country’s economy had been shaped since

the 17th century to fit western - mainly Dutch and British, and from the late 19th century French - interests in raw materials and capital exports. These interests had driven the 'second serfdom', the maintenance of the autocracy, and sub-imperialist geographical expansion. Russia's problem was not *isolation from the world capitalist system, but integration in it as a subordinate country.*

Immediately, the revolution of 1917 was produced in the context of World War I. The Bolshevik leaders - and not only the Bolsheviks, but also the Left SRs - thought that what they were doing was *starting the European proletarian revolution*, not creating a nationally isolated 'socialist' or 'workers' regime. The debates which Priestland discusses were - down to the late 1920s and perhaps even down to 1933 - almost entirely framed in that context.

A critical consequence of that context was that the European capitalist states undoubtedly saw the Russian Revolution and Soviet Russia as an enemy throughout the period, *did* wish for its overthrow and took concrete actions towards this end. Michael Kettle's incomplete three-volume *Russia and the Allies 1917-1920*, with all its defects, makes it clear from British documents that plots and industrial sabotage sponsored by British intelligence were quite real throughout the civil war period, as well as the Allied direct military intervention in the civil war. In the German military intervention of early 1918, Ludendorff sacrificed the chance of victory on the western front in order to 'put the Bolsheviks in their place'. After the civil war we do not have the same documentation, but there were clearly what would now be called financial sanctions against the Soviet regime.

The crash of 1929 and the ensuing slump, much deeper in the US than in Britain, led US manufacturers of producer goods to be briefly willing to break with this system of quasi-sanctions and sell industrial plant to the USSR on credit terms in spite of the risk. Even so, to raise the hard currency to pay for the equipment the regime had to halve real wages and continue exporting grain while people were starving; and it was only when there was a *retreat* from the political line of 1928-31 that the new plant could begin to be put effectively into operation and the USSR could experience rapid growth, until the new Stalinist convulsion of 1935-38.

Priestland's alternative is 'liberalism'. But the period his book studies in the USSR is one in which 'liberalism' was unequivocally *in retreat*. Horthy's coup in Hungary (1920) and the fascist takeover in Italy (1922) were followed by more overthrows of constitutional regimes: Bulgaria in 1923, Poland, Portugal and Lithuania in 1926, Yugoslavia in 1929, Germany in 1933, Austria, Latvia and Estonia in 1934, Greece in 1936, Spain in the civil war of 1936-39, and Romania in 1938. German military operations in 1939-40, coupled with local capitalist defeatism, accounted for Czechoslovakia, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, leaving Sweden, Finland and Switzerland as the only countries in continental Europe with constitutional regimes which survived the period.

With this background, Priestland's arguments make the Bolsheviks' - and even the Stalinists' - ideas look much more crazy than they actually were. They make 'liberalism' - ie, western capitalism - look much more attractive than it actually was before World War II set free the conditions for renewed capitalist development in the 1950s.

Comrade Clark (June 19) says that "Mike forgets that most of the austerity imposed on the Soviet Union was by imperialism." I do not forget it in the least. I argue precisely that any national revolution will immediately be faced with *war* from the imperialist centres - whether this war takes the form of active hostilities, as in 1918-21 and 1941-45, or of continuous war threats coupled with financial sanctions, blockade and efforts at subversion, as in 1921-39 and 1947-91. The USSR was in an unusually *strong* position to resist these operations, compared to most countries. Nonetheless, it was not able to defeat the USA, but fell. My argument is therefore precisely that - as Kagarlitsky argues -

capitalism is a world system which can only be overthrown at the global level, not by attempting to secede from it.

## INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

As I said earlier, the core of Priestland's argument that Marxism is a utopian ideology is this: "How could a modern industrial system, based on a system of wage incentives and coordination by a technocratic elite, be reconciled with the desire to transform work into creative self-expression and to free workers from all subordination?"

Now this question is at one level obviously ideological-apologetic. It implicitly characterises the City and Wall Street wide-boys who have given us the 'credit crunch', and - god help us! - British or US industrial management as a 'technocratic elite'. The characterisation of the capitalist market order as a "system of wage incentives" is similarly ideological-apologetic. It is true that the capitalist order as a whole is a system of (capitalist) incentives, which includes "wage incentives", both in the sense of the stick of fear of unemployment as motivating performance at work and the carrot of improved access to consumer goods if wages can be increased. But to focus in on wage incentives alone is to imply that the only thing that can go wrong with an economy is the loss of 'labour discipline'.

Behind this ideological scheme, however, is a real problem. It is undoubtedly true that Marx argued and Marxists argue that workers can take over running the society, and that the eventual socialism or communism will be a society without the 'division of labour' in the sense of life-long specialisation on particular jobs - and in particular the 'division between mental and manual labour': ie, the role of managers and 'technocrats'. It should be said that Priestland's "free the workers from *all* subordination" (emphasis added) was certainly not Marx's position. This can be seen from - for example - Marx's marginal notes on Bakunin's *Statism and anarchy* (1874). What was in question was, rather, to free the workers from *permanent* subordination: ie, that nobody should be permanently manager/coordinator/bureaucrat in charge of other people. Implicit in Priestland's question is the claim that this is impossible.

Actually, looking at any of the 'advanced capitalist countries' (aka the imperialist centres), Priestland's implicit argument is a lot less plausible. Looking at these countries, we see high levels of general education, and a great deal of technical information of one sort or another codified in books, available on the web and so on; and quite a lot of skilled tasks deskilled or partially deskilled by being incorporated in machines. Under these conditions the demands of *general* education increase, and the demands of *specific* skills training decrease. If people do not "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner", it is certainly true that many change jobs radically after a few years, retrain, take adult education, etc. Andy Warhol's "in the future, everybody will be famous for 15 minutes" is imaginable, if not yet an immediate prospect.

This is where we are going. It is not, however, where we are coming from; and it is certainly not where Russia was at the date of the revolution. Just for example, the urban literacy rate in Russia in 1914 has been estimated at around 45%.<sup>3</sup>

Marx's idea is that communism becomes possible because capitalism tends to socialise the means of production (a central point of the first article in this series).

Information and skills are part of the means of production. Going back to the stone age, knowing how to knap flint gives you variety of tools once you can find a flint. Conversely, if someone gave me a capstan lathe, it would be - to me - a heap of junk, not a means of production, until I learned how to work it. Capitalism *tends to* socialise information and skills - through general education, through publishing, through replacement of skills by machines and so on. But to the extent that information and skills are not socialised they

are private property.

Large property in information takes the form of technical monopolies which receive technical rents (usually patents and other intellectual property rights; but there are also unpatented 'trade secrets' in many machines, which require 'reverse engineering' by skilled engineers to allow duplication of the machine). The tsarist empire specialised in exporting raw materials, mainly grain, in the hope of gaining access to Dutch and British, and later French, intellectual property in various forms (Kagarlitsky). The USSR had to break its back exporting in 1928-31 in order to gain access to US intellectual property in the form of machines.

Under capitalism, small private property in skills or information can in some cases be used to run a small business (like plumbers, dentists or practising lawyers). Similarly, a family farm (or peasant holding) does not just consist of land. It also involves movable capital (animals, etc) and a very wide range of skills. Adam Smith made the point that the farmer or farmworker needs *more* skills than the urban specialist artisan.<sup>4</sup>

In other cases, the collective monopoly of the skill held by a group of people allows them in wage bargaining to insist on some sort of premium over the wage. This premium can be in money; or it can be in better working conditions (white-collar workers), in partial freedom from managerial control or in managerial control over others.

If we take away the capitalist market when there has not already been extensive capitalist socialisation of intellectual property (and other small production), we take away with it the dynamic which tends to socialise intellectual property rights, etc. The possessors of small property then confront the rest of the society as monopolists. Unless they are coerced, they will refuse to work until they get what they want, whether it is money, working conditions or being in charge.

## **RUSSIAN IDEOLOGIES**

This is part of what happened to the Russian Revolution. The Russian revolutionaries thought in October 1917 that they were starting the European revolution. When the German workers had not come to their aid by February-March 1918, they were in a situation like cartoon characters who have walked off a cliff and suddenly notice that nothing is holding them up: the economy was collapsing because the possessors of specialist information - whether they were civil servants and army officers, technicians, managers or peasant farmers - were withholding their services from the general economy. To meet this problem the Bolsheviks used coercion (Cheka, hostage-taking and so on). But they *also* had to provide a carrot: and this carrot was concessions to the *spetsy*, which meant the end of workers' control and a return to the subordination of the working class to the managers.

They had also sucked most of the members of the Bolshevik Party into the new state apparatus. Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks in power* (2007) provides the most detailed discussion of the consequences in their Petrograd stronghold. More generally, as of October 1917 the Bolshevik party had around 250,000 members, mostly workers. As of 1921 it had a slightly larger membership, but now two-thirds composed of state officials.<sup>5</sup> The 'cadres' had become a new section of the intelligentsia, petty private proprietors of information and skills.

If the revolutionary movements elsewhere in Europe *had* succeeded in 1918-21, all of this would have amounted to no more than short-term emergency measures, which is certainly how the Bolshevik leaders thought of it at the time.<sup>6</sup> But what actually happened was Bolshevik victory in the civil war, and defeat of revolutionary movements in the west. Under these conditions the Bolsheviks gradually slid from seeing what they were doing as

emergency measures to seeing it as socialist *construction* within the limits of the workers' state - and then to the idea of socialist construction in a separate country.

Around the time that the Stalinist core abandoned the 'Marxist' language of class struggle in 1931-35, socialist construction in a separate country mutated into *socialism* in one country and with it the claim that the state would survive in socialism, the denial of the existence of classes and class conflict in the USSR and so on.

In a separate country and especially a backward or 'peripheral' one, Priestland's objection to Marxism is true: without the prior socialisation of petty property by capital, the project of communism *is* utopian (as, in fact, Marx said ...). The result is inherent and irresolvable contradictions between the industrial workers, the intelligentsia (in the two forms of the managers and techs on the one side and the 'cadres' on the other) and the peasants. Under such conditions 'Marxist' politics *is* driven to take the utopian forms Priestland describes - elitist-revivalist, technician, populist-revivalist. What became Stalinism in the broad sense of official Soviet and later Maoist, etc ideology, is driven by this logic. Exactly the same thing happened, albeit in less extreme forms, in Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

But then - as I said at the outset - comrade Clark adopts only *one side* of Stalinism, the politics of 1928-31, of the terror and of the Chinese Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. He rejects the other side - the 'technician' arm of the zig-zags as being 'revisionism'. Priestland's book shows clearly that this side was already present under Stalin and that Stalin contributed to it; as well as the fact that each of these efforts *failed*.

#### Notes

1. *Weekly Worker* June 19.
2. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm)
3. R Wortman *Scenarios of power* Princeton 1995, p14.
4. A Smith *Wealth of nations* (1776) book I, chapter 10, part 2: [www.adamsmith.org/smith/won-b1-c10-pt-2.htm](http://www.adamsmith.org/smith/won-b1-c10-pt-2.htm)
5. E Acton *Rethinking the Russian revolution* New York 1990, pp193-94, 207.
6. T Lih, 'The mystery of the ABC' *Slavic Review* spring 1997.
7. WM Leogrande and JM Thomas, 'Cuba's quest for economic independence' *Journal of Latin American Studies* May 2002, pp325-363 provides a convenient narrative.

## Stalinist illusions exposed

*Mike Macnair explodes the myths about the 'gains' of the USSR*

This is the third part of my reply to comrade Tony Clark's article of June 19, which defended his Stalinist political line.<sup>1</sup>

In the first article<sup>2</sup> I argued that comrade Clark's idea of 'socialism', like 'official communist' ideas in general, involve a break with the most fundamental political ideas of Marx and Engels. These are, first, that it is capitalism that makes communism ('socialism') possible. Second is the idea that communism ('socialism') can only come about through the victory of the proletariat, the wage-worker class, over capitalist rule, and the class rule of the proletariat - as the majority of society - through extreme democracy, over the other classes. The 'other classes' here means, mainly, the petty proprietor class, including the technical and managerial intelligentsia. State and party/union bureaucrats are merely parts of the technical and managerial intelligentsia.

In the second article,<sup>3</sup> by reviewing David Priestland's *Stalinism and the politics of mobilisation*, I addressed the question of how this break from the fundamentals of Marxism came about. I argued that the material conditions for the dictatorship of the proletariat over the other classes did not exist in the former tsarist empire, in isolation, in 1918. As a result, the Bolsheviks were driven to concessions, especially to the peasants and the technical and managerial intelligentsia (*spetsy*). These concessions involved the subordination of the proletariat, both to the managerial *spetsy* and to a new segment of this class, the party 'cadres'. The project of socialist construction in Russia in isolation was utopian, and the more the Bolsheviks/Russian CP clung to this project, the more Bolshevik ideology gradually mutated into utopian forms (described by Priestland from an anti-Marxist standpoint). By the 1930s, clinging to 'socialism in a single country' had led to the abandonment of Marx's class-political perspective.

The utopian ideologies had both rightist technicist ('revisionist') and ultra-left voluntarist (Stalinist-proper) sides. These were repeated in the history of both China and (more mildly) Cuba. In each case, the ultra-left voluntarist side was disastrous for the country, for the workers and peasants, and even for the state apparatus; it was for this reason that in each case it was abandoned, leading to an underlying tendency for the rightist side to be strengthened and the victory of 'revisionism'. Comrade Clark adheres to the ultra-left, voluntarist side of Stalinism against the 'rightist' side of this same tendency. But, since this is utopian and can lead only to disasters, this adherence will inevitably lead only to new victories for the rightist side, 'revisionism'.

This third article concludes the argument by tackling three other aspects of comrade Clark's arguments. The first and briefest is the question of 'bureaucracy'. The second is the role of the USSR in the international class struggle - and, with it, Soviet economic development. The third is the question of 'Trotskyism' - and with it, the dynamics of global capitalism and the global class struggle.

### **BUREAUCRACY**

In my May 29 article, to which comrade Clark's June 19 article was a reply, I said that 'bureaucracy' could mean either "rule over society by state officials for their own benefit",

or “the state officials as a group (usually with a derogatory sense that they are parasites on society)”. I said that in the second sense of ‘bureaucracy’, the need to employ specialist officials, comrade Clark was correct to say that the bureaucracy could not be overthrown but only made to wither away; but that in the first sense, the *political rule* of the bureaucracy, this political rule could be overthrown.<sup>4</sup>

Comrade Clark replies simply: “This distinction between the two types of bureaucracy seems to me to be completely arbitrary.” This is merely a bald statement without any supporting argument.

There is, however, an additional and important point to be made. In making the distinction between ‘bureaucracy sense 2’, meaning the need to use specialist officials, and ‘bureaucracy sense 1’, the political rule of bureaucrats, I am implicitly arguing that *political institutions matter*. The determination of politics by economics ‘in the last instance’ does not imply that politics disappears and only economic choices have any significance. The proletariat has a class interest in political democracy.

In saying this, I am saying something which is a common CPGB position, which CPGB comrades keep ‘going on’ about, against the dominant economism of the British far left. I am also following the substantive line of Marx and Engels against the Proudhonists and later the Lassalleans, state socialists, etc.<sup>5</sup>

It is ironical that in replying to Clark’s June 29 article, which is mostly about defending ‘Marxism-Leninism’ against ‘Trotskyism’, I am also here following *Lenin* in polemical disagreements, before 1917, with *Trotsky*, and with other leftists who had common positions with Trotsky. Lenin’s case for the ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ was in part that, even though he thought the most that could be achieved by the Russian Revolution was capitalism, there was a choice available between a more democratic and a less democratic capitalism, and the proletariat should choose a strategy which would lead to a more democratic capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The same issue arose in Lenin’s polemics in 1916 over national self-determination, with the Polish left around Radek, with Trotsky and with the so-called ‘imperialist-economist’ tendency in the Bolsheviks (Bukharin, Pyatakov and others).<sup>7</sup> National self-determination, says Lenin, is a *political, democratic* demand; and the fact that *economic* self-determination is impossible in the epoch of imperialism does not alter the fact that *political* self-determination is preferable to regimes of *political* oppression of one nation by another. Whatever one may think of the merits of Lenin’s individual arguments in these debates, the idea that taking political institutions seriously is ‘Trotskyism’ as opposed to ‘Leninism’ is foolish.

The material base - the economy - in the last instance limits what is politically possible. The complete abolition of bureaucrats - specialist officials - is for this reason not possible anywhere in the world today. But it does not follow from this that the *political dictatorship of the officials over the proletariat* - expressed in the form of banning or control by officials of parties and factions, state (or union or party) censorship of what can be said, the ‘right’ of officials to control what information is given out to the ranks, the top-down appointment of local and sectoral officials, and so on - cannot be overthrown.

Moreover, since officials and ‘cadres’ are themselves a segment of the intelligentsia, which is a segment of the class of petty proprietors, to the extent that there is a political dictatorship of the officials over the working class, the *dominant* tendency will be towards accommodation with the capitalist class. Utopian leftist ‘anti-bureaucratism’ which does not tackle the institutional political forms of the dictatorship of the officials, like Stalin’s and Stalinists’, serves only as a minor-key temporary interruption to this tendency, and one which is doomed to defeat.

The USSR has fallen, and with it the satellite states. In China and Vietnam the dictatorship of the bureaucracy survives as a regime which exploits sweatshop labour in the ultimate interest of imperialism. Cuba under Raul Castro looks to be heading down the same path. The Communist Party Alliance, for which comrade Clark writes, correctly recognises that North Korea's "Juche idea" is a pure nationalism that has nothing to do with Marxism.<sup>8</sup> In this context, clinging to the memory of Stalin's 'anti-bureaucratic' rhetoric is a form of pure nostalgia politics.

However, it has serious practical consequences *in the workers' movement under capitalism*. In this movement, the political dictatorship of the labour bureaucracy over the ranks *immediately serves capital*. Capital relies - for its control over the working class majority - not only on the Blairs and Browns, but also on the Woodleys and so on, who support the Blairs and Browns (if only by blocking organised political opposition to them). Even in the small groups of the left, the political dictatorship of the bureaucracy drives towards opportunism, as we have seen recently in the Socialist Workers Party. The interest of the working class in political democracy, as opposed to the institutional forms of the political dictatorship of the bureaucracy, is thus a matter of immediate practical political significance.

### **STALIN SUPPORTS WORLD REVOLUTION?**

I have no intention of defending the view which comrade Clark attributes to Trotsky, that "the Stalinists were the *greatest counterrevolutionary agency of imperialism in the working class*, through and through a counterrevolutionary role which Lenin had previously assigned to social democracy" (original emphasis). It is frankly highly doubtful that this was Trotsky's view. It was defended by the 'International Committee of the Fourth International' in the 1950s. They were challenged at the time by their Trotskyist opponents to produce evidence for it in Trotsky's writings. They were unable to do so.

Comrade Clark's argument, however, rests more on the claim that the USSR in the Stalin period gave actual support to the world revolution, that "for Stalin's faction, building socialism in one country served the interest of the world revolution". His positive evidence for this claim consists of the following:

1. The defeat of Germany in World War II: in 1928 "A period of modernisation was set in motion, which turned the Soviet Union into an industrial power strong enough to play the leading, or at least decisive, role in the defeat of fascism."
2. "During the 1926 British general strike, Soviet Stalinists mobilised the workers to raise money for the miners."
3. "Stalinists supported anti-imperialist movements around the world, and the Soviet Stalinists gave financial aid to foreign communist parties; was this all in the name of counterrevolution?"
4. "The Soviet Stalinists gave material assistance to the republican side in the Spanish civil war - hardly the actions of a conservative regime."

On the other hand, comrade Clark argues: "The greatest defeats experienced by the working class in the period of Stalin were those in China in 1927 and in Germany, by fascism, in 1933. I would argue that, although opportunist mistakes played a role in China, and communist sectarianism made it easier for social democracy to betray the working class in Germany, this was hardly a reason to write off the communist movement, as Trotsky was to do. Above all, these defeats are a warning about trying to direct world revolution from an international centre."

We can discard at once the attempt to give material aid to the 1926 general strike, since it did not belong to 'the Stalin period'. At the date of the British General Strike, Trotsky and

Zinoviev were still members of the politburo and the international trade union work was led by Tomsky, who was factionally aligned with Bukharin in the 'right', not directly with the Stalin group.

Soviet material aid to the Spanish republic is highly ambiguous, as it was accompanied by the promotion of the people's front policy, which Trotskyists argue helped in the defeat of the republic, and with NKVD assassination operations against the Spanish left.

Soviet financial aid to foreign communist parties is equally ambiguous. Even if it is motivated by the desire to spread revolutionary ideas, such aid creates a relation of dependence of the receiving party on the source of funds. This is inconsistent with the aid-receiving party being dependent on the local working class it is supposedly trying to organise. It is thus inconsistent for comrade Clark to simultaneously laud Soviet aid to foreign CPs and damn "trying to direct world revolution from an international centre": the aid inevitably reduces the political autonomy of the national CPs.

To make this point is, of course, to leave aside the question of whether the ideas the CPSU promoted in and through the foreign communist parties were revolutionary ideas, or ones which tended to promote class-collaborationism.

Soviet support for "anti-imperialist movements around the world" - ie, left nationalists - can only be seen as a gain for the world revolution if one of two claims is true. The first possibility is that the result of the creation of replicas of the USSR in some countries, and left-nationalist one-party regimes in others, created a 'socialist camp' which could stand up to the inevitable imperialist response. But this is precisely what is disproved by the fall of the USSR and the pro-market turn in China, etc.

The second possibility is that but for this support, the classical colonial empires would have continued to exist. However, this claim is implausible. The 'neo-colonialism' of the post-World War II 'third world' merely replicates the relations between Britain and Latin America in the 19th century with a new world hegemon. The overthrow of the classical colonial empires was an interest of the US in extending its hegemony *vis-à-vis* Britain and France, and this interest was reflected in US diplomacy in the period of decolonisation.

The contribution of Soviet support was thus not mainly to assist in the overthrow of formal colonialism, but to promote 'socialism in one country' as an alternative road to 'development'. In some cases this led to Soviet-style regimes (above). In others, the people's front policy promoted by the USSR led to utter disaster for the local workers' movement, as in Indonesia, Iraq and Iran.

Moreover, the *possibility* of the so-called 'socialist camp' was, in reality, created by the results of World War II. The only *real* argument that "building socialism in one country served the interest of the world revolution" is thus the claim that the 'Stalin period' "turned the Soviet Union into an industrial power strong enough to play the leading, or at least decisive, role in the defeat of fascism".

This is also, in fact, the main argument commonly used by Trotskyist comrades to defend their belief that the USSR was a 'degenerated workers' state'. They argue that the USSR was able to defeat the German Nazi regime because of the nationalisations and the plan.

But how far is the argument true?

### **STALINISM, THE NAZI REGIME AND THE WAR**

The first point to be made is about comrade Clark's characterisation of the Nazi victory in 1933, that "communist sectarianism made it easier for social democracy to betray the working class in Germany". This is a whitewash. The KPD was not weak enough for the 1933 defeat to be the sole or predominant responsibility of the SPD. In the November

1932 election the SPD obtained 20.4% of the votes and 121 deputies; the KPD 16.9% and 100 deputies. The KPD was a party with mass support, not a marginal hanger-on of an SPD mass leadership. Moreover, the Austrian Social Democrats fought back against the 1934 fascist coup, though they were defeated. The KPD in 1933 made no attempt to organise resistance.

A KPD united-front policy in 1928-33 and resistance to the rise of the Nazis *might* have ended in defeat. But it might also have succeeded. It is clear that the 'third period' policy made this impossible. The policy was made in Moscow and subordinated the fate of the German working class to the *perceived* state-diplomatic interests of the USSR in its military collaboration with the German military right (which the SPD attacked, leading to Moscow's 'third period' turn). If the 1933 coup had been defeated, the question of the 1939-45 war would not have arisen.

Secondly, the purge of the officers in 1937-38 undoubtedly weakened the defence of the USSR. The purge was a product of the terror (discussed in the second article in this series), and this was the product of the 'leftist' variety of Stalinism comrade Clark *supports*. It was followed by the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact: the resulting Soviet occupation of Poland and the Baltics also weakened the Soviet military defence when the Nazis did attack in 1941, by drawing the Red Army forward out of partially prepared defences and into hostile, occupied territory and dislocating mobilisation plans.<sup>9</sup>

The core of the question, however, is whether the industrialisation of 1928-39 had allowed the USSR to 'catch up' and thereby be able to defeat the Nazis. There are good reasons to suppose that it had not.

It is certainly true that the industrialisation drive prevented the USSR from *falling further behind*. By 1928, the USSR had only achieved output comparable to the tsarist empire in 1914; while the capitalist countries, after a brief post-war crisis, had moved rapidly forward in the 'roaring 20s'. In 1913 the GDP per head of the tsarist empire was slightly less than half that of Germany, 30% of the UK, and 23% of the US. In 1940 Soviet GDP per head had risen by 60%. But it was still only 45% of that of Germany, 36% of the UK, and 28% of the US.<sup>10</sup>

The bureaucratically 'planned' economy characteristically had the effect that 'shock' campaigns to raise production in one area reduced production in another, causing production bottlenecks; while the system of bureaucratic targets led to reduced *quality* of output, and there was persistent underproduction in 'collectivised' agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Had the USSR been on its own in fighting the Germans, these production problems might well have led to defeat.

But the 1941-45 war was for the USSR a single-front war, while Germany was fighting on several fronts: holding down territory in western Europe; attempting to cut British supply routes, the Suez canal in the north African campaign and the Atlantic through U-boat operations; and maintaining an increasingly difficult air defence against strategic bombing attacks from the western Allies.

Moreover, the deficiencies of the 'planned economy' were partly made good by supplies of military material, etc from the Allies. Though the *absolute numbers* were not high proportional to total Soviet war production, the numbers in relation to particular production bottlenecks were high. This was both in relation to British tank, aircraft and high-tech (radar, etc) deliveries in 1941-42, when Soviet output was disrupted by the need to re-establish plants which had been evacuated from the western USSR as the Germans advanced, and in relation to US deliveries of trucks and transport equipment, high-grade steels and strategic metals, etc, and food.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, the USSR suffered enormous casualties in the war. The exact number is debated, but is in the region of 25 million in total, probably including 10 million military casualties, around twice as many as total eastern front military casualties on the Axis side.<sup>13</sup> The willingness of both regimes to take massive casualties meant that simple population, and hence mobilisable population, was a decisive factor: Germany in 1939 had a population of 87.1 million, the USSR 173.1 million.<sup>14</sup> In some ways, the Soviet role in World War II looks extraordinarily like Kagarlitsky's description of the European military role of the tsarist empire between Peter the Great and the Crimean war: a supplier of cannon-fodder to European wars in the interests of the Atlantic powers, who paid for the troops with military technology.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the USSR did not win the war because of economic superiority. It won the war because of absolute numbers, space and climate (the same way the Russians defeated Napoleon in 1812) and because it was allied to Britain and the US.

This actually explains the fact that the war gave a powerful boost to Stalinism as an ideology. The war was fought under the banner of the people's front. In the aftermath of the war, people's front governments were created across Europe. In western Europe, these provided a way for the capitalists to restabilise their position. But in eastern Europe, they rested on Soviet bayonets (in Yugoslavia and Albania, on communist partisan forces). When the western Allies began to try to take back eastern Europe, the Kremlin responded by 'sovietising' the regimes.

The US and Britain (mainly the US) had raised up the military power of the USSR in order to defeat the Axis powers. Meanwhile, the 1930s and the war had produced mass popular hostility to capitalism. The US now had to *contain* 'communism'. It did so partly by the cold war, but partly by large-scale economic *concessions* to the subordinate classes, organised through the regime of managed trade under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and Bretton Woods, through concessions to the trade unions, and through the social democracy in Europe and nationalist regimes elsewhere.

The results looked like enormous gains for 'socialism' under the banner of the people's front. They have remained ever since the fundamental reason for people to be Stalinists or more generally 'official communists'. But the Soviet victory in 1941-45 was *not* - unlike the British capitalist state's victories over the feudal-absolutist regimes between 1689 and 1776 - a result of a superior economic and social system defeating an inferior one. The USSR remained economically inferior to the central imperialist countries and continued to be economically inferior in spite of its economic growth in the 1950s (which slowed to a halt in Brezhnev's 'period of stagnation'). In the end, the fact that it was *not* a superior economic or social system led to its demise.

With the demise, one of the primary reasons for the economic concessions to the subordinate classes of the cold war period has gone. The ability of capital to take the concessions back bit by bit has revealed the *political* weakness of the working class. Stalinism contributes to that political weakness.

### **'TROTSKYISM', GLOBAL DYNAMICS AND STRATEGY**

The Soviet Union and its satellites and imitators *did not* construct socialism in a single country, *did not* catch up with the imperialist west and *did not* serve as a bastion of the international working class movement. The strategy of 'building socialism in a single country' was false, and so was the derivative strategy of Maoism of 'surrounding the global cities'.

Comrade Clark responds, in the first half of his arguments, by re-running the Stalinist argument developed in the 1920s (in fact by Bukharin and his co-thinkers) that 'building

socialism in a single country' followed from Leninism and opposition to it amounted to 'Trotskyism', meaning a revival of Trotsky's pre-1917 differences with Lenin.

As usual with Stalinist history, this argument is a pack of lies. Comrade Clark is put forward by the Communist Party Alliance website as an expert on 'Trotskyism'. But he has either not read Trotsky's central works on the dispute (*Results and prospects* and *1905*) or is lying about their content. His account of the disputes of the 1920s is not one any serious historian, even one severely hostile to Trotsky, would now defend: the 'right' of Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, and the 'Leningrad opposition' of Zinoviev and Kamenev, and a whole host of lesser figures, are airbrushed out of the picture.

In one of his pieces on the Communist Party Alliance website, comrade Clark cites an academic article which suggests that Trotsky's overt support in 1923-24 in Moscow was mainly from the apparatus and the intelligentsia, but omits one of the main conclusions from that article: namely, that the internal discussion was rigged by bureaucratic means. The result is that we have no knowledge of whether there was or was not (as Clark claims) an actual majority in the party against 'Trotskyism'.<sup>16</sup>

This is all the more true of the 1927 congress, at which Trotsky and the other leaders of the United Opposition were expelled from the party. Within months, the Stalin group was to turn on its Bukharinite coalition partners at this congress and adopt an exaggerated, ultra-left version of the policies of the United Opposition (discussed in the second article in this series). If this impending turn had been disclosed even to the (hand-picked) delegates, would there have been a majority for the expulsions?

Nonetheless, behind the screen of lies there is a heart and centre of the political problem and it is one still relevant today after the fall of the USSR, etc. This is the so-called 'law of uneven development'.<sup>17</sup> Trotsky, in fact, *accepted* this 'law' when it was thrown at him in the 1920s, and in *The permanent revolution* (1931) adapted it into the 'law of uneven and combined development'.

The blunt fact is: even if it was Lenin, rather than his successors, who developed the idea of 'building socialism in a single country' on the basis of the 'law of uneven development', he was *wrong*: as is shown by the later history of the 20th century. And Trotsky's adaptation of it was also wrong.

The 'law of uneven development' is, in fact, not a theoretical law at all. It is an abstract-empirical generalisation, like the bourgeois economists' 'law of supply and demand'. Like the 'law of supply and demand', it does not look below surface appearances, and as a result has only limited predictive power.

The appearance on which the 'law' is built is the existence in global capitalism of 'advanced' and 'backward' countries (and also, though this is considerably less important, 'advanced' and 'backward' regions and economic sectors within individual countries). In this sense it builds on Marx's comment in the preface to the first edition of volume I of *Capital* that "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future."<sup>18</sup>

However, while this was true of the relation of Germany to 1860s England, it has *not* proved to be true in the same sense of many countries outside Europe, or even in eastern Europe. The US has, of course, overtaken England. But Latin America remains 'backward' 200 years after the overthrow of the colonial regime of Spanish absolutism - and, as we have seen in this and the last article, the USSR and now the Russian Federation remained 'backward' after the revolution and 'socialism in one country'. Capitalism does not merely *inherit* uneven development, but also *produces* it.

In fact, there is not much reason for supposing that capitalism inherits uneven development either. Antique social orders (the Greek and Hellenist world, ancient Rome, pre-revolutionary China) draw a sharp line between the 'civilised' and the outside 'barbarians', but spread more or less homogenous relations of production across the domain of the 'civilised'. Feudalism in the period of its expansion in the central middle ages could be picked up and adopted within a generation or a bit more by kingdoms - for example, Poland or Scotland.<sup>19</sup> The new feudal regimes created by this means or by colonisation were not in a centre-periphery relationship of economic or political subordination to the old countries of the historic feudal 'core'.

'Uneven development' in capitalism, in other words, is not a mere matter of temporal priority in adopting new relations of production. It is a phenomenon *produced and reproduced* by the laws of motion of capital.

If uneven development between countries is to be seen as a product of the laws of motion of capital, not merely of temporal priority, the question posed is how the laws of motion of capital impose themselves on whole countries. The answer is not hard to find. Capitalism develops - rapidly - international financial markets, an international division of labour and international-level operation of the leading capitalist states: a deepening 'world market'. The 17th century 'second serfdom' in eastern Europe and Russia was not a simple inheritance from feudalism, but a product of the demands of the Dutch and British markets for food and raw materials, just as colonial plantation slavery and the *latifundistas* of 19th and 20th century Latin America served British and, later, US markets.<sup>20</sup>

But the world market has effects other than the production of uneven development. It drives labour migration, leading to the formation of an internationally mixed and linked working class (in fact, the main route by which Marxist ideas entered the US and by which Maoist ideas entered Britain). It facilitates the diffusion of cultural products and political ideas. And it produces boom-bust cycles which are - increasingly - global.

This has a result in turn. The offensive movements of the working class, and the acute political crises of capital, do not 'mature in their own time' in each individual country. They are *internationally coordinated*: 1848; the early 20th century working class offensive; the crisis and revolutionary offensive at the end of World War I; a similar crisis and offensive at the end of World War II; the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Uneven development is a real surface phenomenon, just as the 'law of supply and demand' describes a real surface effect. But if we look below the surface to the underlying dynamics, we can see why the idea of building socialism in a single country is illusory. Russia was all along, and remained throughout the Soviet period, trapped by uneven development imposed by the *global capitalist order*. That order can only be overthrown by the combined efforts of the workers in the imperialist and colonial countries, not country by country.

#### Notes

1. 'In defence of Stalin', June 19.
2. 'Taking Stalinism seriously', September 4.
3. 'Bureaucracy and terror', September 11.
4. 'Trying Stalinism again?', *Weekly Worker* May 29.
5. H Draper *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* (part 4: *Critique of other socialisms* New York 1990) has the details.
6. *Two tactics*: [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm), especially chapters 2, 6.
7. E.g. VI Lenin, 'The discussion on self-determination summed up' (1916): [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm); 'Reply to Kievsky' (1916): [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/sep/00b.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/sep/00b.htm); and other texts.
8. G Howell, 'The Juche idea in the light of Marxism-Leninism': [www.oneparty.co.uk/index.html?http%3A%2F%2Fwww.oneparty.co.uk%2Fhtml%2Ftctalk02.html](http://www.oneparty.co.uk/index.html?http%3A%2F%2Fwww.oneparty.co.uk%2Fhtml%2Ftctalk02.html)

9. D Glantz *Stumbling colossus* (Kansas 1998) is a recent detailed treatment of the state of the Red Army at the beginning of the war.
10. RW Davies, M Harrison, SG Wheatcroft (eds) *The economic transformation of the Soviet Union 1913-1945* Cambridge 1994, p270.
11. See figures in RW Davies *et al, op cit*; H Ticktin *The origins of the crisis in the USSR* (New York 1992) is the clearest explanation of why the dynamics of bureaucratic 'planning' should produce these results.
12. A Hill, 'British lend-lease aid and the Soviet war effort, June 1941-June 1942' *Journal of Military History* July 2007, pp773-808; R Munting, 'Lend-lease and the Soviet war effort' *Journal of Contemporary History* July 1984, pp495-510.
13. RW Davies *et al, op cit* pp78-79.
14. German population: [www.tacitus.nu/historical-atlas/population/germany.htm](http://www.tacitus.nu/historical-atlas/population/germany.htm); Soviet population: RW Davies *et al, op cit* p269.
15. B Kagarlitsky *Empire of the periphery* London 2008, pp145-48, 173.
16. D Hincks, 'Support for the opposition in Moscow in the party discussion of 1923-24' *Soviet Studies* 1992, pp137-151.
17. Cited by comrade Clark from VI Lenin *CW Vol 21*, p342.
18. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm)
19. R Bartlett *The making of Europe* Princeton 1993.
20. For more depth on the case of Russia, see B Kagarlitsky *op cit*.