

## THE ORIGINS AND BASIS OF STATE COLLECTIVISM

Theories arguing that there is a 'third mode of production,' have become more prominent in recent years as Marxists have tried to come to grips with the enduring reality of Eastern European and other societies. Big Flame adopted a position that Eastern European societies were class societies of a new type at its Conference in 1976. In two further, though contrasting pamphlets, this new mode of production has been described as 'state collectivism,' to indicate that property was collectively owned, but by a new class, based on a fused, party-class apparatus, rather than the working class. Other descriptions differed in the variety of work within the third position, but what mattered was the underlying content of ideas.

The minimum basis of this position accepted the conceptual and empirical description of Soviet-type societies as new modes of production, breaking with the impasse of the de-generated workers' state and state capitalist positions. Of necessity, the theories also accepted the implications of recognising that a new mode of production was possible. Such "bifurcations" constituting a major alternative method of economic/social and political development, rather than accidents or de-generations of a two-type model (capitalist or socialist). This is a break in the orthodox Marxist position (including that of Marx) which sees a linear development of modes of production.

However, this is where the agreement sometimes stops. For it still has to be worked out why new modes of production come into being. This is something Big Flame is still debating and the aim of this article is to look at the alternative conceptions of the origins and basis of the third mode, that we call state collectivism.

Two alternatives appear to be available. The first sees state collectivism (SC) as a theory of under development. (2) This is the position put forward in the Big Flame pamphlet "Century of the Unexpected." It is worth quoting at some length:

"A series of societies in the underdeveloped world have branched-off into a non-capitalist path, a path which runs not between capitalism and socialism, but parallel to capitalism, a path along which those societies can industrialise and to some extent catch up with the more advanced part of the world. This path of state collectivism is neither more nor less a transition to socialism than capitalism itself is." (p.4)

It is therefore only a theory of revolution in the sense that revolutions are normally required to break the grip of imperialism. Russia is presented as a "peculiar case" in that SC was preceded by a genuine proletarian revolution (ie one led by the working class). Other societies are described as having "populist or peasant revolutions, which merely masqueraded as socialist," (p.5).

The second alternative (to which I hold and was outlined in the BF pamphlet "The Unfinished revolution-A Critique of Trotskyism), sees SC as a product of 'failed' revolution. This is not in the sense of the Trotskyist conception of de-generations of workers states, but of limits, both self

and externally imposed to the revolutionary process. Therefore SC is seen as a possible road of development in advanced capitalist countries as well as those in the third world.

#### WHY UNDERDEVELOPMENT IS NOT THE DETERMINING FORCE OF SC

The idea that SC could exist in advanced capitalist countries is explicitly denied in the first conception of SC. It is held that SC has "nothing to offer" advanced capitalism. In this it runs parallel to the general idea dominant in Marxism that "de-generated revolutions" like Russia are almost impossible in countries like Britain, because the level of development of the productive forces (ensuring abundance) and the cultural level of the working class (ensuring avoidance of bureaucracy). Hence the non-existence of socialism whether in de-generated workers state, or some varieties of state capitalist and state collectivist theories is linked to basically external, economic factors, where scarcity and isolation are held responsible. The theories of state capitalism and SC that rest on the notion of underdevelopment, argue that nationalised property relations give emergent bureaucratic elites the means of breaking the grip of imperialism and industrialising in more favourable conditions. Though their isolation in relation to the capitalist world market then constrains what they can do. A transition to socialism being 'very difficult if not impossible' (3).

However, a new, exploitative mode of production does have something to "offer" in advanced capitalism. To see this, we have to break with the idea that "offer" only refers to dependent bourgeoisies, or other non working class forces. SC is, in fact, a general alternative way of managing an industrial or industrialising economy. It embodies forms of political control and economic management that are present in both capitalist development and working class movements. We will return to this in more detail later.

SC as a theory of underdevelopment suffers from economism. It is within the tradition of seeing the level of productive forces as the overwhelmingly dominant factor in enabling a transition to socialism. As stated previously, this shares with some interpretations of state capitalism the view that lack of productive forces leads to de-generation and new class forces:

"In an isolated and backward society, social relations are imposed and sustained by material scarcity, the ruthless division of labour demanded by the task of survival in conditions of backwardness. Scarcity impels the creation of a ruling class capable of maintaining the division of labour." (4)

Here economism and fatalism go hand in hand. The mechanical notion of base and superstructure gives too much weight to the problem of scarcity. Such economic conditions do not necessarily impel countries like China, Cuba or Angola to develop a new exploitative mode of production. There is the possibility that they force revolutionaries in those circumstances to develop alternative models of economic and social development. These concentrate on transforming the social

relations of production (relations between town and country, men and women, large and medium scale industry, the labour process etc). Scarcity does make these problems of a transition to socialism very much more difficult. But the uneven development of capitalism on a world scale will continue to ensure that revolutionary movements in the third world have the opportunities to challenge and defeat imperialism, in conditions of degrees of underdevelopment and isolation. It should be our task to try and indicate what are the conditions for a transition to socialism. Dependancy on productive forces, not only leads to a fatalistic belief in almost automatic de-generation, it also fails to pinpoint other factors which are motive forces for the introduction of new class societies (forms of political power and social relations).

Of course, the question of the development of productive forces is linked to the "pre-condition" for socialism of a large working class. SC theories of underdevelopment are also Eurocentric in their rejection of any other force but the working class in conditions of advanced capitalism, as the sole force capable of providing a base for a transition to socialism. The Big Flame pamphlet "Century of the Unexpected" simply writes the peasantry out of the picture (p17). Yet imperialism has drawn the peasantry of the third world into the centre of struggle. It is absurd to carry on saying (as also do the Trotskyist movement) that the peasantry have no political weight (5). It just isn't as simple as asserting (6) that while peasants want to divide things up, workers can and do think and act collectively. Peasants have shown "collective tendencies" in China, Latin America and Southern Portugal to name a few examples. Like the working class, the peasantry is internally differentiated. There is an increasingly large sector that is not a landowning peasantry to any significant degree, but more of an agricultural proletariat. It is also the case that there is more movement from rural to urban centres, a more fluid social structure, in which the definition of a worker is not always clearcut. To say nothing about such situations or to mechanically call for revolutionary workers parties to be created, is once again to try and by-pass genuine problems.

Many of the problems, briefly mentioned centre round the conditions and process of a transition to socialism in a situation of "under-development." It seems to me that it is wrong and dangerous to jettison the concept of a transitional society or a transition to socialism in such conditions.

There are three roads open to any society whose revolutionary forces have overthrown capitalism. They can:

1. Return to capitalism. Capitalist forms of property and relations of production are likely to exist, albeit controlled by the state (ie. state capitalism in Lenin's sense). Though this gets less likely the more these elements are eliminated from the economy, as there is not the class basis for a return.

2. Emergence of a new class society. Transformation stops at nationalised property relations. Control and effective, non-judicial ownership is appropriated by an emergent new ruling class based on a fused party-state apparatus.

3. A transition to socialism. This would build on the basic transformed property relations, revolutionary processes in two

spheres. That of social relations of production and society (eg relations between mental and manual labour, men and women etc) and relations of power. The latter needs to take up the necessity for proletarian direct democracy in the economy and state (7). Unless all three elements are transformed (property, social relations, power), their inter-relations will ensure that the conditions for the emergence of a new class system will emerge. However, we have to recognise that there may be disjunctures between the levels, depending on the particular circumstances. Proletarian democracy is the ultimate key element, because without such power relations, the door is left open for the emergence of elites in party, state and economy, which can co-alesce in a new ruling class.

While this applies to any post-revolutionary situation, such transformations have obviously added difficulties and specific problems in 3rd world countries, arising from degrees of under-development and isolation. Specific emphasis needs to be given to relations between town and country, size of productive unit and to alliances of workers with sections of the peasantry and other potentially progressive social forces. What therefore is likely, is that in the early stages of a transitional society, there may be contending modes of production. For instance remnants of capitalism (usually controlled by the state), emergent socialism and possibly state collectivism. The struggle between class forces and political tendencies, combined with the nature of the material circumstances will condition the possibility of such a situation resolving itself towards a transition to socialism. (8)

The concept of transitional society needs to be handled carefully. Its use by orthodox Trotskyism is often absurd. Societies can no longer be transitional (particularly when conceived of as between capitalism and socialism) when their social economic and political structures have hardened to the degree that a society like Russia has. But given that a transition to socialism is possible even in 3rd World countries, to describe a new mode of production (state collectivism) as 'progressive' is extremely dangerous. (9) It is only progressive if one refuses the possibility of a genuinely progressive alternative (ie a transition to socialism). If such an alternative is possible, then the emergence of a new class mode of production is regressive. It does not matter that such a regime could accumulate capital and develop productive forces in a way that capitalism could not. To use 'progressive' in this sense is to abuse the term in any Marxist way. (10) It can also lead to being 'soft' on the political regimes of such countries and fatalistic about bureaucracy, including Stalinism in some cases (11). What holds this notion of progressive together is however its economic fatalism. The position of various 'new mode of production as a response to under-development' theories is not too different from the more right-wing versions of Trotskyism which hold that because a transition to socialism is impossible in third world countries then a form of "proletarian Bonapartism" is inevitable and therefore progressive in such circumstances (12).

### ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS

In criticising the version of state collectivism as a theory of underdevelopment, the implication has been that an exception should not be made of the third or second world. So Binns and Haynes (of the SWP) are right to say that "exceptionalism" mistakenly "hives off" parts of the world to explain them. (13) In fact the SWP's own version of state capitalism has traditionally used such arguments (14). Their own use of a state capitalist model extends the analysis to a world level, where state capitalism is seen as the emergent form of an "aging" and crisis-ridden capitalism, East and West. The differences in nature and rhythm of development are covered over by utilising the over-used and vague notion of 'combined and uneven development.'

Yet such differences are crucial. The trends correctly identified in Western capitalism - ruling classes resorting to the state to aid the accumulation of capital - is distinct from second and third world situations. In the third world imperialism has determined that there is seldom any other agency except the state which can 'modernise' the economies (15). In the second world (of Eastern Europe etc) the direct power of capitalism has been eliminated, the state's role therefore is conditioned by the radically changed property/production relations. The SWP's view of course, is related to their definition of capitalism, an issue which has been dealt with elsewhere (16). The point being made here is simply that it makes no sense to collapse very different relations between the state and capital accumulation into one process. This "general theory" does not identify the specific dynamics of either 'private' capitalism, Soviet-type societies or any relation between the two in a useful way.

It remains the case however that no fully developed general theory that would explain the impetus for and dynamics of a new mode of production, yet exists. Even those that only attempt partial or "exceptionalist" explanations of particular circumstances like Russia often refer more to workers' general condition (eg alienation, exploitation etc) than to an adequate political economy. Those that try to look at the 'laws' of motion and crisis of new modes of production (Fantham and Machover, Ticktin) refer to "production for production's sake" and/or 'waste' as characteristic features. Yet this appears to be too descriptive to grasp any laws of motion.

But one of the problems may be that it is wrong to conceive of origins/laws of motion in terms parallel to the more strictly economic functioning of a mode of production like capitalism. It is a further example of economism to deny any relationship between movements to overthrow capitalism and the character of post-revolutionary societies. One does not have to go along with theories that Stalinism = Leninism = Marxism to identify important tendencies which have helped shape those societies. State collectivism is characterised by centralised economic and political power arising from the collective but non-proletarian ownership and control of the means of production. I would argue that such new modes of production emerge from specific combinations of tendencies in capitalism and oppositional, anti-capitalist movements.

There is a tendency for capitalist societies to attempt to survive and grow through the centralisation of capital and state (17). This centralisation helps to produce a division of labour which is increasingly hierarchical and specialised, creating new types of class composition (18).

While such measures cannot stop the emergence of capitalist crises, they do change the system that socialists are confronting. This is important, for part of the socialist movement (particularly the Second International and its descendants) have always perceived socialism as built on and an extension of capitalism: socialism itself being achieved through the guidance of the working class by enlightened experts (19). The result is a thrust towards a state managed capitalism (given their non-revolutionary project), where "socialism" is identified with state planning and control (20). But what of revolutionary marxism? It must be said that there are important ambiguities in key areas. There is well-documented evidence that sections of the Third International tradition have seen productive forces as neutral and re-produced different examples of the socialism=state planning and ownership equation (21). This has become accentuated by the experience of Stalinism and the de-generation of the Russian revolution. It should also be added that the Third International Tradition also has a theory of political representation - working class interests embodied in one vanguard party - which can have dangerous implications in the sphere of political centralisation.

There is a real tension between this tendency and the emphasis in Marx, Lenin and other communist thinkers on direct proletarian democracy in state and economy. The consolidation of political and economic power in a fused party-state apparatus, characteristic of societies like Russia, is therefore a distortion of Marxism. But also a way of going beyond capitalism-but failing to break with relations of production and power which partially confirm the statist and bureaucratic trends in the socialist movement. This is why state collectivism is an alternative form of management of industrial societies, not merely a response to under-development or another type of capitalism. None of these factors make such post-revolutionary developments inevitable. As in the third world there is a choice of road, without some of the material problems of scarcity. (22)

But to take that road, certain tasks are incumbent on the revolutionary movement in Europe now. Briefly stated these include:

1. Theoretically and practically distinguishing the socialist tradition of proletarian democracy from the ~~economist~~ statistism of sections of the working class movement.
2. Giving more publicity and support to the dissident movement in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Particularly giving emphasis to the left-wing alternatives ignored by the Western media.
3. Giving more critical support to liberation movements in the third world. Within a full anti-imperialist solidarity, we should recognise trends towards new, exploitative modes of production and support in what ways we can alternative conceptions (and forces) which can lay the basis for a transition to socialism. (23)

- (1) This 'third position' is associated with Carlo, Rakovski, Bahro and in Britain, writers around 'Critique,' and Big Flame.
- (2) This association of new mode of production with a reaction to underdevelopment is shared by writers like Carlo, Bahro and the Big Flame pamphlet written by Fantham and Machover "Century of the Unexpected."
- (3) Whether such theories completely rule out the possibility of a transition towards socialism is not altogether clear. 'Difficult if not impossible' seems a reasonable summary of the Fantham/Machover position.
- (4) Nigel Harris in IS Journal 89, page 19. This notion of scarcity impelling hierarchical economic and political forms is a common one among such theories whether they be state capitalist or new mode of production. Bahro for instance refers to backwardness in Russia 'levying an institutional tribute on the Bolsheviks.' See the commentary on Bahro by Militand in Socialist Register 1979.
- (5) One example of such a position is the British IMG. They say, "The peasantry may supply a major part of, or even the main physical force in the revolutionary process, nevertheless as a political force its influence is relatively zero." (p54 'Imperialism, Stalinism and Permanent Revolution' John Robens).
- (6) This refers explicitly to a statement from Ian Birchall in IS 89. He also says.. "The peasantry... by its nature, does not pose collective solutions to the problems of society," (P.12 "The Vietnamese Road to State Collectivism").
- (7) Hence proletarian democracy is part of those social relations.
- (8) We explicitly refer to a transition towards socialism. There is no possibility that in a backward country (or even an advanced one) socialism could actually be achieved in isolation. How far it can go will be determined by a combination of external and internal factors.
- (9) See for example page 15 of "Century of the Unexpected" for their explanation of why the term progressive can be applied in particular stages. These arguments are repeated in even worse form in the first Big Flame submission to the Bulletin (eg page 7). The only progressive content in movements which end up producing state collectivist regimes, is their anti-imperialism.
- (10) A parallel cannot be made with Marx's use of the word progressive to describe the impact of early capitalism. Centring progressiveness on development of the productive forces would make fascist regimes like Mussolini progressive, as Binns and Haynes point out in IS 7 (p32 "New Theories of Eastern European Class Societies.").
- (11) This is particularly the case with Bahro. See Binns and Haynes p30 etc.
- (12) This is the position of the British "Militant Group", the largest Trotskyist entrists into the Labour Party. They describe countries like Syria and Burma as workers states!
- (13) All theories which see underdevelopment as cause of state capitalism or collectivism have not got to grips with some of the Eastern European countries like East Germany. Clearly a state collectivist model is viable and 'offers' something to a developed industrial country. To say that it can be explained because such a model was forced on them by the Red Army is inadequate in relation to its actual functioning.

- (14) We have already referred to the articles in IS 89. For further examples of the SWP's own 'exceptionalism' see IS 84 and the debate with Avanguardia Operaia.
- (15) The fact that various social forces use the state as an agency of 'modernisation' does not mean that they necessarily move towards breaking from imperialism. Egypt is a prime example of where a strong state sector and political control is used to maintain the domination of capital.
- (16) See the BF submission to the first Bulletin "The Class Nature of the Soviet Union and its Implications for Marxist Theory," (Campbell).
- (17) The recent retreat from state intervention by the Tory government shows however that the process can at least temporarily be modified.
- (18) Some theorists refer to this class composition as a basis, East and West for political/economic hierarchy. See for instance the essay on 'The Professional-Managerial Class' by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in 'Between Capital and Labour' ed Walker (Harvester 1979). This theory makes the double mistake of reducing the processes to particular social groupings and therefore failing to grasp the specific dynamic of the modes of production in the two different type of societies producing different class relations.
- (19) This is in addition to the traditional point of reformism's refusal see the necessity for smashing the capitalist state.
- (20) The left-reformism of people like Benn in Britain is an example of this statist reformism, though it has less radical guises with a common historical link in Fabianism.
- (21) This ground has been particularly covered in the work of Bettelheim. See also the Big Flame pamphlet "The Unfinished Revolution - A Critique of Trotskyism" (Thompson/Lewis).
- (22) The account given of the impetus for state collectivism still lacks an adequate political economy. This is inevitable in a form of analysis still in its infancy.
- (23) Most of the liberation movements have theoretical models of socialism based on the Russian model. A recent report in the Guardian of a speech made by President Machel of Mozambique shows some of the results. Echoing the traditional complaints about "petty-bourgeois concepts of equality", he called for (amongst other things) 'lower ranks' to address those higher respectfully and to stand up when they came in the room and went on to justify separate wards for hospital treatment of administrators and manual workers. Uncritical support or resignation to the inevitability of de-generation (described as heroic liberation fighters, then the day after they take power as Stalinist bureaucrats and betrayers) merely strengthens that trend.

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February 1980