

# Recent Works on the Character of Soviet Society

Charles Bettelheim. Class Struggles in the USSR: 1917-1923. Monthly Review Press, 1976.

"On the Relations of Production in the USSR," by Bernard Chavance, and a reply by Paul Sweezy, in Monthly Review. May 1977.

Grahame Lock. "Introduction," in Essays in Self-Criticism. Louis Althusser. NLB, 1976.

In recent years a number of books and articles have appeared attempting to come to grips with the theoretical and political problems raised by the Chinese Communist Party in its position that capitalism was restored in the USSR as a result of the political and economic changes introduced first by Krushchev and continued by Kosygin and Brezhnev. The majority of the writings which appeared on this question in the new communist movement were of the type made famous by Martin Nicolaus' The Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR. In other words they displayed not only a shallow understanding of Soviet history and economics, but also a limited reserve of theoretical concepts and analyses with which to even approach the subject.

In the last few years however, several important texts have been published in English which make a significant contribution to the theoretical and ideological struggles around the thesis of capitalist restoration and its implications for a communist strategy in the last quarter of the 20th century. Inasmuch as this is not an academic discussion, but one which has direct implications for practice (strategy), we would like to briefly examine several of these texts, not in terms of weighing their arguments for or

against the thesis, but in terms of a discussion of some of the conceptual and methodological assumptions which figure in the debate.

Perhaps the most important recent work on the character of Soviet society is one which attempts to approach the problem indirectly. We refer to Bettelheim's Class Struggles in the USSR. This is the first of a multi-volume work which presents an historical analysis of the development of Soviet society from the revolution until 1923. Given this limitation of time, Bettelheim only touches on the present Soviet reality in his introduction. In so doing, however, he also makes explicit his theoretical premises, premises which he first put forward in his book, Economic Calculation and Forms of Property. It is these premises which concern us here.

The corner stone of Bettelheim's argument is his opposition to what he terms 'the economist' problematic. This deviation, he stresses, has historically dominated the world Marxist movement since the birth of the Second International and has reduced Marxism to a vulgar economic determinism. In the USSR and elsewhere this economism manifested itself in a theory of building socialism which can be called the theory of the primacy of the productive forces. This theory is economist (a deviation from Marxism because on the one hand it fails to recognize the existence of productive forces in the structure of relations of production which gives the forces their character (exploitative, non-exploitative), and on the other hand because it fails to recognize the active role of other levels of the social formation (politics, ideology).

Bettelheim argues that while Lenin always struggled against economism, Stalin and the other Soviet leaders\* did not follow him in this regard with the result that the

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\*Trotsky included. For an excellent critique of Trotsky's economism see pp. 27-29.

economic development of the USSR was accompanied by grave deformations of social and productive relations, deformations which would be exploited after Stalin's death by the capitalist agents who were the beneficiaries of them, to promote the all around restoration of capitalism.

The economist problematic also functions, Bettelheim argues to blind communists outside the USSR to the reality of Soviet life, because it leads them to ignore the character of productive relations, which in the USSR, says Bettelheim, are in essence no different from those in other capitalist countries. Economism prevents them from grasping the key concept that the heart of the class struggle under socialism is the struggle to develop communist relations of production, rather than the simple development of the productive forces.

Bettelheim also points to another notion which supports this economist view. It is the one which mechanically identifies property relations with actual class relations and argues that since, by law, private property and exploitation are illegal in the USSR so too must be the practice of these relations. For Bettelheim not only do legal relations not guarantee social practice, but in fact they can (and do in the USSR) serve to mask that practice.

Let us examine Bettelheim's views more closely. Clearly he is on target with his critique of the economist problematic. Economism and its theory of the productive forces have indeed dominated Marxist thought abroad and in the USA, and their negative effects on Soviet economic development should be apparent just from Bettelheim's work on the early years of the Soviet Union. Economism in theory has blocked the development of a Marxist political economy of the transition from capitalism to communism and it has vulgarized Marxism by eliminating the important roles played by political and ideological practices in social change.

But if Bettelheim is correct in characterizing the economist problematic, he is unable to entirely break with it himself, at the level of his own theoretical practice. He

has not broken entirely with that element of economism which characterizes the economic moment of society as the real (active), and the other levels, politics, ideology as phenomenal reflections (passive) of it. Bettelheim reproduces this error in his own thinking with his use of the distinction between 'property' and 'possession.'

He uses these terms in such a way that actual relations of production ('possession') in the USSR have been transformed from non-capitalist to capitalist, while the politico-legal relations ('property') have not only not undergone qualitative changes, but have not even acted to significantly block this transformation. In this use of the term 'property' Bettelheim presents the legal superstructure as a mere mask concealing behind it a capitalist reality.

Since Bettelheim holds to this view he can believe that a soviet bourgeoisie has assumed state power through its possession of the productive forces and the former state apparatus without being required to lead a political counter-revolution which smashes that old state apparatus. In place of the mechanical identification of productive relations with legal relations, Bettelheim posits the almost complete independence of the two, rather than a theoretical conception of the dialectical relationship between them, the relationship specific to the transition period between capitalism and communism.

An additional problem associated with the Bettelheim school can be observed in a reading of the debate which recently appeared in Monthly Review between Paul Sweezy and one of Bettelheim's supporters, Bernard Chavance. In his article, "On the Relations of Production in the USSR," Chavance proposes to show the capitalist character of the Soviet Union and to identify the specific forms which capitalism takes there.

The Soviet Union is capitalist says Chavance because it is characterized by the "radical separation of the direct producers from the means of production," a relation which is appropriate to the capitalist mode of production. He

then goes on to indicate the specific forms of this Soviet capitalism:

- 1) the domination of the drive for maximum profit;
- 2) the existence of a momopolist state capitalism;
- 3) the ownership of the means of production by a state bourgeoisie;
- 4) the growth of anarchy of production and crisis.

Even though he is limited by a short article, Chavance does no more than propose these characteristics, offering no theoretical or practical evidence of their actual existence in Soviet society. In Paul Sweezy's reply, in which he takes up Chavance's points, it is demonstrated that they do not either prove that the USSR is in fact capitalist, or have been shown to actually function in the Soviet social formation in the way Chavance argues. Sweezy correctly indicates that Chavance is speculating rather than demonstrating the position he espouses.

Inasmuch as Sweezy adequately addresses Chavance's specific points, we are more concerned in this review to investigate the latter's method. An examination of the nature of the Marxist method of theoretical production will help us locate the source of Chavance's methodological errors.

Marxism holds that the production of theory is comparable with other kinds of production in that it has three elements: raw materials, tools, and a finished product. In theoretical production the raw materials are yet to be proven ideas, raw data, information etc. The tools are the scientific method and its conceptual system. And the finished product of theoretical production is scientific knowledge.

When the first level is dominant in theoretical production, empiricism is the result. Various ideas and data are accepted uncritically and not subject to the rigorous test required to consider them knowledge. On the other hand when the third level is dominant the result is speculative reasoning. Here previously produced knowledge takes on a life of its own and is pressed into service directly without the

necessary mediations of theory and the requirements of the reality which it is used to explain.

Only when the second level is dominant, when ideological raw materials are transformed into scientific knowledge in the process of application of the Marxist-Leninist method, when the practice of the method and conceptual system of Marxism-Leninism is uniting raw ideas and scientific knowledge in a process of production, only then does Marxism function as the revolutionary science it is.

Chavance's error is that of speculative reasoning. By this we mean that he presents a series of theoretical truths, proven in the process of production of knowledge of the capitalist mode of production, and then he super-imposes this knowledge on Soviet society, by-passing the stage of applying these concepts, to prove their necessity and scientific value for an analysis, not just of capitalism, but of the USSR as well.

Nowhere in Chavance, and as of yet, nowhere in Bettelheim do we find the rigorous application of Marxism to the Soviet social formation, but only the presentation of a theory which we are told adequately explains the USSR as a capitalist country. To this degree the Bettelheim school is guilty of speculative reasoning, of the tendency to state theory rather than to practice it.

This deviation is not accidental, however. In fact it has its roots in the relationship between theory and politics, between theoretical practice and political practice. We are convinced that this theoretical deviation relates to the attempt by Bettelheim and his followers to remain faithful\* to the political (and theoretical) line of the Chinese Communist Party on the character of Soviet society.

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\*This may be changing, however. See Bettelheim's letter of resignation as Chairman of the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association, excerpts of which were published in the Guardian, September 14, 1977.

It is one thing for theory to serve the political practice and struggles of the communist movement and quite another when this practice or struggle sets the limits beyond which theory cannot go, or predetermines the answers it is allowed to give. Recognition of this difference helps us to put in perspective the positive and negative significance of the Bettelheim school.

To the extent that it has advanced and deepened Marxist political economy, to the extent to which it has posed questions in a new and more rigorous manner, to the extent that it has clarified the nature of the transition period between capitalism and communism, and lastly to the extent to which it has used this knowledge to shed new light on the early years of the USSR, we all owe a great debt to the Bettelheim school.

But to the degree to which they have retained elements of economism, to the degree to which they have foreclosed debate on the thesis of capitalist restoration for political reasons which require a pre-determined answer, we must clearly and unequivocally separate ourselves from them and make sure that, as we get more involved with the development of a strategy for American communism, we ourselves do not fall victim to these same errors.

Already in our discussion of Bettelheim's book we have touched on the question of the nature of Stalin's role and the Stalin period in Soviet history. Perhaps one of the most important things which separates the most recent works on the USSR from those of the early 1970s is their differing treatment of this period. While the vulgar Marxism of many of those who followed the Chinese critique of revisionism was typified by the worship of Stalin and the Soviet Union of the 1930s, recent studies, including Bettelheim's, have begun to explore the theoretical and practical failings and errors which emerged in that period.

Since Class Struggles in the USSR, volume 1, ends in 1923 it does not even begin a serious treatment of this question. A shorter, if much more explicit presentation of a

new orientation on the Stalin period is provided in Graham Lock's introduction to Louis Althusser's Essays in Self-Criticism. By way of an introduction Lock has presented the value of Althusser's philosophical work for the solution to an important historical and political problem: the character of Soviet socialism in the 1930s.

Lock begins with several important theoretical assumptions. First the existence of the economist problematic discussed above in connection with Bettelheim. Second, he begins with a definition of socialism, also derived from Bettelheim, which characterizes socialism not as its own mode of production, but as a social formation combining elements of two distinct modes of production, capitalism and communism.

The implications of these assumptions should be clear. The first requires a break with the theory of productive forces as the key to socialist construction and on the contrary recognises the transformation of capitalist productive and social relations as the main battle ground in the proletarian struggle under socialism.

The second assumption insists, inasmuch as socialism is a combination of capitalism and communism, that capitalist elements and relations continue to exist in socialist society, and that only the correct leadership of the proletarian class struggle can prevent the consolidation of these capitalist elements into a "new" capitalist class and the threat of capitalist restoration.

Lock's argument is that Stalin took incorrect positions on both these questions. First he held to the theory of productive forces and disregarded, in the main, the important struggle against the capitalist relations of production in which the soviet productive forces were contained. Secondly Stalin saw socialism as its own mode of production, distinct from capitalism, concluding that capitalist threats to the USSR could only come from one of two places: either from the remnants of the former exploiting classes,

or from foreign capitalist powers. Consequently Stalin was blind to the most important source of capitalist revival and continuation: the very elements of capitalism inherent in socialism itself.

Since Stalin did not see the presence of capitalism within socialism, he had no clear theory of the class struggle under socialism and the requirements of proletarian power. Lock argues that Stalin was unable to lead the working-class in its struggle to curb capitalist elements and to nurture the communist relations of production in Soviet society. Instead a blind party and state lashed out at party and state leaders which it perceived to be a threat to workingclass power, as often missing the target as it was accurate.

The results of this situation manifested themselves at all levels: in the lack of Marxist investigations on the contradictions in socialist society; in the decline of the leading role of the party as proletarian vanguard, in the decline of democratic centralism within the party; and the increasing application of administrative methods; in the failure to correctly handle contradictions among the people.

In his all too brief conclusion Lock discusses the implications of these developments and the theoretical assumptions behind them both for the world communist movement and for the more recent attempts to criticise and rectify them. Unlike Bettelheim, he is not convinced that the Chinese Communist Party has drawn entirely correct lessons from the Soviet experience. He finds evidence in the Chinese writings on this question of a contradiction between what they continue to up-hold of the Stalin experience and what they reject. Lock also takes Bettelheim to task for his uncritical acceptance of the Chinese position on the present situation in the USSR.

While Lock's treatment can in no way be considered exhaustive, it is nonetheless a stimulating and sophisticated treatment which poses in a sharp manner the problems of the Stalin period while at the same time breaking with Trotskyist and Maoist conceptions of that era.