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Bolshevism and the USSR

The nature and deficiencies of Soviet society have been hotly debated by Marxists more or less continuously since 1917.* Marxist polemics over Bolshevism go back even further. It is therefore wise to begin by indicating where we think we have anything new to say. It is not at the level of facts. Our concern is rather with the theories which give such well rehearsed facts as Russia's pre-1917 'backwardness' or the decimation of the urban working class in the civil war their salience in Marxist accounts. Our specific focus is on what we call the Bolshevik problematic. We use the term 'problematic' to describe the usually unarticulated premises shared by a variety of otherwise opposed positions, which allow us to speak of them as identifiably 'Marxist', 'Bolshevik', or whatever, notwithstanding their differences. In talking of a specifically Bolshevik problematic we therefore intend both to point to the common ground on which we believe *all* major Bolshevik positions stand and to distinguish this common ground from that of Marxism as such. Two further clarifications are necessary given the overly formal way in which this

concept is often used. First, we do not see the Bolshevik problematic as being simply a theoretical framework. The premises of which we speak are *material* practices, forms and agencies as much as ideas. These include for instance a particular kind of party before 1917—illegal, urban, its leaders mostly in exile, and particular kinds of state formation after. Such social forms are as much a part of the equipment Bolsheviks brought to bear on the problems that confronted them as their understanding and application of Marx or their analyses of Tsarism or imperialism.

Second, we do not see this problematic as being static and unchanging, and still less as tidy and consistent. It is the historical product of a century of struggle, and there are struggles and tensions, and silences and absences within it. Indeed, we will argue that Bolshevism is structured around a raging contradiction which lies at its very heart. We cannot do justice to Bolshevism's complexity in an article of this length. But we must avoid reifying. The Bolshevik problematic is not some mysterious hidden structure that somehow realises itself in the Bolsheviks' actions, but an analytic device *we* employ to impose coherence upon them. Unless both of these points are borne in mind throughout, our argument is open to a seriously idealist misreading.

Our interest in the Boshevik problematic in this article is twofold. We are primarily concerned with its influence within the USSR. But we also contend that the Bolshevik problematic has dominated most (though not all) Marxist analyses of the Soviet experience, including critical ones. This has had several unfortunate effects. Critical Marxist analyses have all too often tended to replicate Bolsheviks' own assessments of the contexts in which they were acting, the problems they faced and the range of available remedies. Disputes within Bolshevism have attracted far more notice than the assumptions which competing positions shared. Most seriously of all, Bolshevism itself has rarely been taken as an explicit object of study within the mainstream of critical Marxist accounts of the USSR. In sum, the common ground we have called the Bolshevik problematic has remained something of a Marxist blindspot.

The USSR: Three Familiar Views

Critical Marxist analyses of the Soviet Union can be divided into three broad groups. (1) *Classical Trotskyist views*, of which Mandel is probably the best contemporary example, hold the USSR to be a deformed or degenerated workers' state. They argue that the production relations of Soviet society remain 'basically' socialist, but a parasitic bureaucracy rather than the working class exercises political power and enjoys economic privilege. This ruling 'caste' does not constitute a ruling

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* This is based upon a paper given by Corrigan and Sayer to the URPE/New School Conference on 'The USSR in the World Today,' New York, March 1979. Sources for our argument can be found in our following supporting texts: Corrigan and Sayer, *Socialist Construction and Marxist Theory*, London and New York 1980, and *For Mao*, London and New York 1980; Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer, 'The State as a Relation of Production,' in P. Corrigan (ed.), *Capitalism, State Formation and Marxist Theory*, London 1980; Sayer, *Marx's Method*, London and New York 1979.

class. (2) *State capitalist theories* consider the USSR a capitalist society, albeit of a peculiar type. Control of the state, which itself controls the economy, is seen as the basis for exploitation of wage labour and accumulation of capital. Party and state bosses are regarded as forming a specifically capitalist ruling class, a 'state-bourgeoisie' in Bettelheim's term. Variants of this view are held by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, the Communist Party of China (at least until recently), and others including Martin Nicolaus and Charles Bettelheim. They frequently differ over when and how 'state capitalism' came into being. For Tony Cliff (SWP) it was in the twenties, for the CPC sometime after 1953. (3) '*New class*' *theories* agree that there is a Soviet ruling class but deny that this class is a bourgeoisie or the USSR is in any way capitalist. For them the Soviet Union is neither capitalist nor socialist, but a social formation of a new and historically specific type. Some see it as progressive with regard to capitalism. Older new class theories include those of Rizzi and Schachtman, recent ones those of Djilas, Melotti and (in his latest writings on the topic) Sweezy. These theories differ as to exactly what kind of social formation the USSR is and who makes up its ruling class.

Beneath the surface heat and thunder of debates between these positions, two motifs predominate. The first—in fact an extraordinary focus for *Marxist* historical accounts in both its personalism and its stress on motive and intention—is the notion of 'betrayal'. A self-interested clique or stratum, strategically located in the state and party bureaucracy, is held at some point to have 'seized power' and perverted the machinery of state to its own ends. This is the structure both of official communist critiques of Stalin and of Maoist critiques of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Accusations of betrayal also occur in Trotskyist accounts, though these at least attempt to explain how such 'betrayals' became possible. And this is, of course, the issue. For put at its simplest, what kind of a *socialist* revolution is it that can be so readily betrayed by one 'clique' or—in the ludicrous extreme of this view—by one man? If this *has* occurred, then what requires explanation is surely the antecedent centralisation of power that permitted such an outcome. And for that, not a personal and motivational, but a structural and historical explanation is necessary.

The second motif is that of 'backwardness', often coupled with isolation. This has an ancestry going back at least to Kautsky and the Mensheviks. The crudest version of this argument assumes an inexorable path of historic development that all societies must undergo and argues that in the absence of revolution in the 'advanced countries', the Soviet State had no alternative but to act as a surrogate capitalist accumulator while its upper echelons developed into a 'state-bourgeoisie'. This is in essence the SWP position. Elsewhere things are stated less nakedly. Trotsky, for instance, did not explicitly endorse the inexorability argument but, nonetheless invoked Russian backwardness and isolation to account for the rise of those strata who supported Stalin. Similarly, decisive importance has sometimes been attached to the civil war decimation of the urban proletariat, although much of the force of this argument derives from the hidden assumption that the 'backward' peasant masses who survived could not build socialism.

'Backwardness' arguments are less easily dismissed than 'betrayal' theses, for communism does require a high level of development of the productive forces. But while economic development, broadly conceived, may well be a necessary condition for communism, it does not follow that all societies have to go through a capitalist or quasi-capitalist stage. This would follow only if capitalism were the unique set of social relations capable of stimulating such development. It is difficult to see how such an argument might be constructed in a historical materialist framework (though bourgeois economists working from their universal 'homo economicus' might have less trouble). We would also suggest that capitalist 'development' has in fact meant *under*development for many—in the metropolitan countries as well as in the 'third world'—while socialism has provided ample evidence of the productive viability of alternative and more egalitarian forms of development.

The Peasantry: Mere 'Sacks of Potatoes?'

More specifically, it is (to quote Trotsky) 'the peasant . . . thrust back by capitalism away from the mainstream of development' whose 'political barbarism, social formlessness, primitiveness and lack of character' are held to cause the trouble. For Lenin, the same peasants were a 'sea of enemies'. It is not low levels of technique as such, but the attitudes they are claimed to support that makes peasant backwardness such a threat to socialism. But here again there is room for doubt. This view certainly has provenance from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and ample backing in Kautsky's *Agrarian Question*; though Marx also drew attention to the socialist potential in social arrangements among Russian peasants. More to the point, the twentieth-century examples of successful peasant revolutions and wars of national liberation should surely by now have dented these cosy assumptions about peasant consciousness. How could the revolutions in China and Vietnam have been made by a class whose collective identity is comparable to that of a 'sack of potatoes?' Experience of agricultural co-operation in China and elsewhere suggests the 'petty-bourgeois individualism' Marxists have traditionally ascribed to peasants everywhere is a trifle exaggerated. The point is not to set up some new, romantic image of an invariably revolutionary peasantry to replace the old stereotype of the 'dull-witted muzhik'. It is that we can no longer accept these astonishingly vulgar equations of economic 'backwardness' with social and political primitivism, any more than we can sensibly sustain the converse correlation of extensive proletarianization with necessary political 'maturity'! What is required are specific, historical, materialist investigations of *particular* circumstances and classes. In their absence the significance of 'backwardness' is *not* clear. This is not to say it is unimportant. No materialist could deny that a low level of development of human productive capacities, especially in conditions of post-war devastation, must severely constrain the kinds of socialist construction that can be undertaken. But just what the constraints are and how much they constrain—and, indeed, the extent to which, as with 'surplus' labour in China, they may conceal resources—cannot simply be inferred from a set of dubious generalisations about history or peasants. Such a procedure is as unmaterialist as it is ahistorical. We need instead to

look at the contexts in which Russian backwardness and isolation were significant. Not the least of these must be the problematic through which the Bolsheviks apprehended, acted upon and altered the world in which they found themselves.

Origins of the Bolshevik Problematic

Bolshevism has a complex history, not least because it was formed in an attempt to come to grips with a complex and, at the time, novel type of social formation. As Teodor Shanin has grasped, Tsarist Russia was in many ways the prototype of what we would now call a 'developing society'. It was, in one way, extensively developed: Russian industry was fifth in world output in 1914 and boasted some of the world's largest plants. At the same time agrarian production, which occupied the vast majority of the people, was semi-feudal, and the industrial development was of a very particular (and nowadays very familiar) form: semi-colonial, and mainly confined to social, economic and geographical enclaves. In 1914 47% of Russia's industrial capital was held outside the country, and most of the finance for state-led 'internal' development was raised by foreign loans. The highly concentrated and militant proletariat numbered 4 million at most: the peasantry over 100 million. Dominant, if competing, views saw Russia as disadvantageously located in the world market and in need of urgent 'modernisation'. But, as Stolypin in particular realised, this could not happen naturally. There was wide recognition of a need to transform relations in and between agrarian and industrial production from above. This assumed the possibility of direction and management by means located externally to the point of production—specifically, the Tsarist state. Within this autocratic formation there were various forms of opposition—liberal, populist and social-democratic.

What conceptual tools did the Marxism of the period offer to make sense of this singularity? First, the range of texts and analyses available was extremely limited by comparison with today: much that was central to Marx's work was unknown and available texts were interpreted through the grid of Engels's later writings, notably *Anti-Dühring.* Second, they were understood in a particularly late-19th-century way. The theorists of the Second International, in part in competition with contemporary bourgeois ideologies like Social Darwinism, sought to make Marxism a comprehensive system of thought embracing nature, history and society. They stressed the scientificity of their doctrine, seeing it as expressing necessary and universal social and historical laws, as distinct from the pious hopes and moral injunctions of utopian socialism. Amongst such laws was a two-fold serialization of development. First, there were necessary, consecutive stages through which all societies had to pass, impelled by the forward march of the productive forces. And second, of discrete areas of social relations within each stage, 'the economy' was basic and determining, albeit 'in the last instance', while political and cultural relations were superstructural and determined. As Colletti has argued, this meant that production was itself understood in an extremely impoverished way, as technical processes plus invariant laws of econ-

omics. This two-fold serialization dictated the possibilities of socialism. No social revolution could overcome (even if it could 'anticipate') the technical and economic prerequisites—a particular proportion of the population in towns, a certain percentage of the workforce in factories, and so on—that alone could culturally mature a proletariat competent to build socialism. In this view what were seen as 'pre-capitalist' forms were unambiguously retrogressive.

The Fetish of the Productive Forces

Lenin's earliest analyses were formed squarely within the terms of the dominant—Tsarist *and* Marxist—analyses of Russia-as-a-developing-country, and against the political strategies of other opposition groups. Two crucial early constitutive debates within Bolshevik thought were those against the populists and Socialist Revolutionaries on the one hand, and various 'modernizing' Social Democrats (the 'Economists', the 'Legal Marxists,' and later the Mensheviks) on the other. The former envisaged a distinctive route to socialism, through specifically agrarian productive forms already foreshadowed in the Russian peasant commune. The latter insisted on the need to expand capitalism first, as a necessary base for socialist revolution, and therefore saw surviving communal agrarian forms as objectively reactionary. This led them to support the 'bourgeois' opposition in a manner analogous to those who sought to identify a 'national bourgeoisie' and back them as inherently progressive in imperialized and colonialized social formations in the 1960s and after. Against the populists, Lenin, like Plekhanov and Kautsky, argued the necessity and progressiveness of some form of capitalist industrialization. But against the orthodox Marxist 'modernisers', he (along, initially, with Plekhanov, Zasulich and other subsequent Mensheviks in the *Iskra* collective) rejected any general support except for tactical alliances for proto-bourgeois and bourgeois political forces. Though, as was suggested at the time, Lenin's overall position might have lacked consistency, his evolving politics were increasingly rooted in an analysis of class forces in Russia which proved both sharp and realistic. The tension is typically Bolshevik.

It was out of the specific and novel circumstances of Tsarism analysed in terms of the available, but ill-adapted Marxism that the Bolshevik acceptance of the necessity of promoting and extending certain capitalist productive forms was first formed. Lenin's support for the Stolypin reforms—which he saw as inducing a progressive peasant differentiation on the American small farmer rather than the Prussian junker model—fits easily within such a perspective. So does his later espousal (backed by the majority of the Bolsheviks, including both Stalin and Trotsky) of the 'necessity' to learn from Taylorism, or to control the economy through fiscal. manipulation, or to employ highly paid and privileged specialists. To argue here that such measures were adopted with reluctance and under dire material conditions is partially true, but misses the point. It is still the underlying assumption that capitalist paradigms provide the natural, necessary or, indeed, only remedies which permit the link between the problems and *these* solutions. Other

non-capitalist remedies for equally appalling material hardships appear to have worked elsewhere—for example, the co-operative development strategies pioneered in the barren and besieged Border Regions in China during the 1930s and 1940s. It may be that conditions did not exist for the pursuit of analogous strategies in the USSR, though the point is eminently debateable. That issue is beyond the scope of this article. What *can* be asserted with certainty is that Bolshevik theories generally dismissed such possibilities out of hand; and Bolshevik policies, in so far as they did foster typically capitalist productive forms, actively helped suppress these possibilities, in industry as well as agriculture. Judgements both of long-term policy and short-term expediency were made from *within* a set of overarching images of modernity and its prerequisites.

The Break with 'Orthodox' Marxism

But the foregoing is not the complete story of the making of the Bolshevik problematic. It is indeed in some measure less than half the truth. Before the open split in the international socialist movement over the Great War in 1914, Bolshevism was already progressively breaking with 'orthodox Marxism'. The 1905 revolution was crucial, forcing Russian Marxists to abandon old habits of 'formalist deduction' (as Trotsky put it in 1908) and confront 'the class dynamics of the Russian revolution . . . the one that is going on in Russia at the present time'. The impotence of the 'liberal' bourgeoisie and combativity of the working class were made graphically clear. But more than this, 1905, with its massive peasant risings, taught Lenin that *peasants could be revolutionary.* Part of what this meant was explicitly theorised in what we might call the subordinate strand that runs throughout Lenin's work. Part of it awaited another revolution—that of China—to show its full significance. Centrally it meant acknowledging the practical achievements and theoretical implications of ordinary workers and peasants on the move. These practical breaks were finally crystallized in Lenin's 1917 writings (the *Letters on Tactics*, and above all the *April Theses*) whose unorthodoxy so repelled the 'Old Bolsheviks'. In contrast to learning from experience, the latter sought what Lenin in his 'Letters from Afar' derided as 'cut and dried theory'. In his famous 'Lecture on the 1905 Revolution', Lenin denounced the sterility of theoretical dogmatism while stressing the revolutionary courage and creative capacities of both workers *and* 'illiterate peasants'. These points are repeated unambiguously in the texts of the moment of revolution itself, 'Peasants and Workers', and 'To the People'. It was these practical breaks rather than continuities of strategic theory which helped make the Russian Revolution possible and guaranteed that some of its gains were sustained and revolution aided elsewhere. But the breaks occur on the level of what we might call the possibility of a revolutionary politics. They were *not* for the most part carried through to challenge the dominant Bolshevik notions of social development. These continued to turn upon features and criteria drawn from capitalist experience. Because of that contradiction Bolshevism was marked by a constant struggle to maintain the gains which the breaks make possible against the pains that the continuities guaranteed.

The Contradiction within Bolshevism

The crippling contradiction at the heart of Bolshevism lies between its central defining images of modernity and its socialist politics and culture. The former entail a theory of productive forces and of the economic superiority of capitalist methods; the latter calls for increasingly conscious, collective, and egalitarian self-assertion from below. The contradiction is an antagonistic one: to choose either horn of the dilemma is to undercut the basis of the other. Bolshevism certainly broke the automatic link between level of productive forces and socialist revolution. But it did so only to argue that the revolution 'in advance' could speed the development of the productive forces—a proposition in itself that we do not, incidentally, object to—within a framework that was still thought in terms of the categories of capitalist modernization. At the most general level what is at stake here is the Marxist understanding of production. Bolshevism sees production as necessarily involving at each 'stage' of social development a definite and socially neutral set of techniques which can be understood and controlled through the 'laws of economics'. Relations of production are considered more variable. But the central features of capitalist exploitation are held primarily to relate to ownership of the means of production—or at best, their de facto control—by the capitalist class, rather than extending to the ways in which things are actually made. Ownership, in turn, gives capitalists control of the state, ensuring that laws conform to their interests. Conversely to take and retain control of that state, and through it the means of production, is seen as sufficient to ensure that development can proceed in a socialist direction. For instance, Taylorism or one-man management can be considered 'neutral' techniques, useful for advancing production and thus 'objectively' progressive, because production relations are seen only as comprising relations of ownership. The central distinction between capitalism and socialism becomes one of who controls such techniques, and more broadly, to what social and moral purposes the results are applied. Control, moreover, not in the sense of those who make things controlling their own lives, in and out of the workplace; but control through national agencies such as party and state. The latter—machine, bludgeon, hammer—to use the Bolsheviks' own favourite images, were seen as unproblematically socialist ('ours') and well able to control the regrettable, but necessary production forms.

None of this, we should stress, is to deny that real and important differences in the quality of people's lives have flowed from such a change of control in the case of the USSR and other socialist states. Rather it is to point to the fetters that the Bolshevik understanding of production imposes upon the development of certain liberatory potentials. We would argue that this understanding is so impoverished that it ignores—and as practice, suppresses—the most fundamental of socialism's productive forces: the knowledge of better ways of making things locked up in communities of direct producers. Without unleashing this knowledge, centralised planning makes its advances at the cost of reinforcing a set of relations to production lived by direct producers which range from a sense of distance (the production is not really theirs) to varieties of sabotage (central forms of which are 'holding back

and 'exact obedience'). In more formal Marxist terms the Bolshevik contradiction can be understood as a systematic combination of an economistic and technicist strategy towards production with a voluntaristic approach to politics crystallized in an inflated set of state apparatuses. The cultural arena becomes one of sharp and contrasting struggles; quite different notions of education, for example, flow from the economistic or the political emphases. The economism follows from understanding production as a set of necessary techniques governed by neutral laws. The voluntarism follows from the parallel reduction of politics to matters of state policy rather than seeing it located *in* production collectivities and *about* the ways lives are lived there. It is at its sharpest in the assumption that a socialist state *can* control capitalist relations and forms. Recent accounts, especially those of Charles Bettelheim and Carmen Claudin-Urundo, have also drawn attention to Bolshevik economism. Bolshevik *voluntarism*, on the other hand, has been much less identified, although Bettelheim unconsciously replicates it, in his haste to avoid economism, in his own highly idealist notion of 'politics in command'. In Bettelheim this often amounts simply to counterposing political to economic objectives (which was not in our view Mao's intention in his original slogan). This oversight is unfortunate. For we would argue that Bolshevik economism and voluntarism are two sides of the same coin and need equal stress. They represent poles between which Bolshevik policies have lurched, in a consistent oscillation, ever since 1917, and have the same root. There is no paradox here. Productive forms are not only objectives, but also means and resources for socialist transformation. To subordinate production to the imperatives of capitalist modernization (economism) is literally to rob socialist politics of their material base, while simultaneously idealising them (voluntarism).

We would, therefore, suggest that some variant of this contradiction, in which capitalist forms of development dilute, disrupt or deny socialist advance, is the likely outcome of any social revolution from below in a social formation which is dependent rather than dominant in the world market. Without thoroughgoing and conscious challenge the material relations of that market will also provide the core of the categorial and moral framework through which people think the 'obvious' features of what it is to be human. The legacy of dependency—including, above all, a relationship to the world market mediated by an enclaved and gigantist industrial structure and a swollen and overbearing state—will continue to structure perceptions of the direction and means of possible advance. If so, the issues raised here become of far more than just historical importance.

An Alternative Theory of Soviet Society

The Dangers of Theoretical Simplification

Let us now return to the question of the nature of the USSR. By this stage it should be clear how ritual evocations of backwardness

and/or betrayal reproduce the Bolsheviks' own economism and voluntarism. 'Backwardness' gains its explanatory powers only when the 'modernity' with which it is contrasted is conceived and evaluated in Bolshevik or similar terms. 'Betrayal' is persuasive only within a conception of politics whose attenuation is likewise familiarly Bolshevik. Rather than replicate this combination of economism and voluntarism ourselves, we would suggest that the distinctive features of Soviet socialism can be better understood as the historical product of six decades of specifically Bolshevik political practices upon the 'raw material' of the Russian Empire they inherited in 1917. Of course the nature of this raw material limited what could be made out of it. But so too did the tools, skills, techniques and knowledge of its makers.

We do not believe the Soviet Union can be meaningfully described as capitalist—'state' or otherwise—for reasons Mandel, Hindess and others have developed at length. Following Paul Sweezy, we would identify three distinguishing features of capitalist production: (1) Production units operate independently, with the consequence that goods are produced as commodities and resources allocated through a market. (2) Capital accumulation through valorisation of surplus labour is, in Marx's words, 'the direct aim and determining motive' of production, and (3) The foundation of this exploitation is the wage-relation. In our view (1) and (2) are demonstrably inapplicable to the USSR. There has been some decentralization of economic decision-making to enterprises and there is a black market. But overall, most resources are manifestly allocated through the plan, often *un*economically by the standards of market 'rationality'. Absence of rule by market laws in turn means there is no *compulsion* to accumulate comparable to that in capitalist economies. The rapid accumulation which historically has taken place has rather resulted from *political* decisions about economic necessities and priorities—again of a characteristically Bolshevik kind. Further, (3) is difficult to satisfy except purely formally. Even if we allow that because workers do not exercise political power (an oversimplification), they are effectively separated from the state-owned means of production, the content and implications of this 'separation' are very different than in capitalist states. The real guarantees of employment in the USSR mean that, for instance, wage-levels are not subject to the same determinants of supply and demand. Where they are more than purely rhetorical charges (as in much Maoist anti-Soviet propaganda) state-capitalist theories usually prove to be operating with imprecise or inadequate criteria for demarcating specifically capitalist relationships. Thus the SWP case for seeing Soviet accumulation as capitalist rests on an analogy between military competition between the Soviet Union and the West, and economic competition within capitalist economies. Bettelheim, on the other hand, inflates merely necessary into sufficient conditions for capitalist production, confusing surviving capitalist elements in the USSR with a fully-fledged capitalist system.

What about the thesis that the Soviet Union is not capitalist but is nevertheless governed by a new ruling class? In part this argument is semantic, reflecting dissension among Marxists about what is meant by 'class' in the first place. Thus if (like orthodox Trotskyists) we consider ownership of the means of production to be a necessary

feature of any ruling class, we are bound to conclude that no matter how powerful or non-proletarian the rulers of the USSR may be, they are not a ruling class in the Marxist sense of the word. We do not take that view. Nor do we exclude in advance the possibility of a ruling class arising on the basis of control of formally social property. We distinguish class relations as social relationships which confer control over other people's labour and its products, and regard the question of the basis of such control as an empirical one. But we would add the forceful rider that classes are not just analytical fictions. To paraphrase Edward Thompson, classes also *construct* their identities, out of historical experiences which are always specific. The resources for and constraints on that construction are therefore important in making empirical judgements about classes. The argument that the distribution of labour and its products in Soviet society has long been determined, non-democratically, by a relatively small group of party and state bosses is persuasive—though in our view oversimplified—and this usually forms the basis for serious 'new class' theories. Against it we would put a number of points.

The boundaries of this 'class' are both notoriously difficult to specify (just how lowly a party member or *apparatchik* qualifies?) and unusually open. Moreover, notwithstanding some slowing of mobility in recent years, this relative openness appears to be a structural rather than a conjunctural feature of Soviet society. The mechanisms for consolidating, and in particular for passing on 'class power', are much less reliable than those which flow from the transferability and inheritability of property in capitalist states. Additionally, for a supposedly cohesive ruling class, the upper reaches of the Soviet party and state have proven peculiarly vulnerable to what in these terms would have to be analysed as 'intra-class' strife, carried under Stalin to suicidal extremes. Most importantly of all, there are severe constraints on the Soviet rulers' freedom of action from below. Expectations of material *guarantees* for the broad masses of the people—not just of a 'safety net', but of improving provision of work, food, housing, clothing, medical and cultural facilities *as of right*—are built into the Soviet system in a way they are not in any capitalist society. Recent experience of the Thatcher government's rapid dismantling of much of Britain's 'welfare state' (which was supposedly protected by a social-democratic 'consensus'), indicates how facile it is to compare the Soviet situation with capitalist welfare provision—where it exists. The difference is again structural rather than conjunctural. The *entire* legitimacy of the Soviet ruling stratum derives from its ability to administer a system which meets these expectations. No capitalist ruling class rules under that constraint or faces that accountability. The ideologies of individual 'freedom' and so forth which sanction their activities make no such promises and recognise no such obligations. Indeed in many cases they actively deny social responsibility for individual welfare.

A 'Deformed' Socialism?

The implications of this difference are immense. Because of it workers in the socialist states *do* exercise a form of political power over their rulers which is extensive if usually passive. Indeed in this sense they

arguably wield greater substantial power, notwithstanding the lack of formal democratic mechanisms, than their counterparts in the most politically democratic of capitalist states. And, conversely, the opportunities for governing groups to develop a distinctive class identity and consciousness are correspondingly reduced. When the Polish shipyard workers rioted in 1970 over food price rises—itself an instructive comparison with the West—not only were the rises rescinded, but Gomulka fell. Compare this to what happened in France two years earlier. More broadly we would agree with Mandel that those who see in the USSR the prototype of a new class system based on a new mode of production, 'bureaucratic collectivist' or whatever, have failed to demonstrate laws of motion, tendencies, contradictions and so on sufficiently specific to the system and distinct from what we would expect of capitalism or socialism to justify their claim. This failure undercuts 'new class' assertions whatever their initial plausibility. Instead we go along with the Trotskyist tradition to the extent of accepting that the Soviet Union can still be analysed as a form of socialist society, whose particular 'deformations' are explicable historically.

To be clear, by a *socialist* society we mean one transitional between capitalism and communism, the latter being characterised by a high level of material productivity and the absence of classes and the state. As Mao suggests, this transition may take several centuries, as did that from feudalism to capitalism. With Bettelheim we would add that to speak of transition by no means implies a one-way corridor or an automatic progression. The entire transitional era is one of struggle between elements of capitalist and communist modes of production at all levels of the social structure. There is, therefore, always a possibility of retrogression or stasis, and we see no reason to rule out in advance the possibility of evolution into a third option either. Where we part company with the Trotskyists is over the nature and explanation of Soviet 'deformations'. We do not think it accurate to characterize the Soviet problem as being predominantly an issue of the deformation of the Soviet *state* or to draw the conclusion that a merely political rather than a social revolution is all that is required to set things right. Nor, as we have argued earlier, do we believe 'degeneration' to be explicable in terms of the backwardness/betrayal couplet. Instead we see the struggle between capitalist and communist roads extending into the sphere of material production itself, and argue that the specific weight of Bolshevism needs to be taken into account if we are to grasp the distinctive forms this struggle has assumed in the USSR as well as the particular deformations it has generated. In particular, these correctives to the Trotskyist analysis must be made if we are to understand the roots of the statism endemic to Soviet socialism.

The Achievements of Soviet Society

Interviewed recently on the significance of the October revolution, its greatest historian, E. H. Carr, took pains to emphasise that 'the danger is that we shall be tempted to forget altogether, and to pass over in silence, its immense achievements . . . I am thinking of the transformation since 1917 in *the lives of ordinary people*'. Raymond Williams

agrees: 'it was one of the two or three great moments of human history. It is as simple as that'. We believe this is the proper place for any socialist assessment to begin.

In 1896 life expectancy in Russia was 32 years. In the USSR today it is 70. This compares with 71 in the USA, 72 in the UK, and 35 in India. Housing, transport, medicine, and insurance consume 15 per cent of an average Soviet family's income as against 50 per cent of their American counterpart's. A recent British estimate puts expenditure on rent and utilities (telephones, laundry, etc.) in the USSR at no more than 8 per cent of average household income. Essentials of life are deliberately priced low and kept low: inflation during the 1960s and 1970s has averaged between 0.8 and 1.2 per cent per annum, but rents, for instance, have not risen since 1928. At the same time real wages of office and factory workers are claimed to be 3.7 times the 1940 level. Equally important is the 'social wage', and the guarantees of work, housing, etc. unknown in the West. There is no significant unemployment, but there is a statutory minimum wage and pension. There are proportionally more than twice as many full-time students as in Britain or West Germany, and much more extensive provision of public cultural, educational and recreational, facilities. Books and records, for instance, are deliberately cheap, and all indices show a more actively literate population than in the West. Similarly, medical care is state-provided, and there are proportionately more—and far more equitably distributed—doctors than in most capitalist countries (32.7 per 10,000 of population as against 21 in the USA and 15.7 in Britain). The list could be continued.

None of this denies particular blackspots in provision or the lower overall standards of consumption compared with UK or US averages—though the large numbers *below* the breadline in the latter (let alone in 'third world' capitalist states) need emphasis. Nor do we dispute the (exaggerated) material inconveniences of the much-trumpeted waste, shortages and corruption consequent on the shortcomings of the Soviet form of planning. It is the priorities we wish to draw attention to. Notwithstanding a consistent squeeze on consumption in the supposed interests of accumulation, there has always been a recognized commitment to securing the basics of life for all the people. Taken with the crucial absence of a capitalist labour market this underpins a working-class experience of *not* being subject to Marx's 'violence of things'.

We would equally stress the vitality of what can only be called a socialist culture—however compromised—in Soviet society. This is less easily measured: it lies in the differences in the statues in public squares or how mining disasters are commemorated. To take a recent illustration, when the swimming pool for the 1980 Moscow Olympics was completed, the first people to swim in the inauguration ceremony were representatives of the workers who built it. This event was televised across the USSR. A small thing no doubt, and easily sneered at. So let us for a moment suppose that such events and images are mere tricks to lull the workers into believing they live in a workers' state. We must still ask: which *capitalist* government thinks the workers important enough to merit such flattery? And in any case, what is the

likely effect on workers' self-esteem and assertion of being surrounded by *these* images of themselves and their importance as distinct from the kind pumped out daily by the capitalist media?

In sum we would argue that the Soviet working class inhabits an environment of expectations and evaluations which is both very different from that of its capitalist counterparts and, in the respects we have pointed to so far, specifically socialist. In their way, the much-cited 'surliness' of Soviet shop assistants or 'bloodymindedness' of Soviet workers are a kind of backhanded testimony to this. The empty and ritualistic character of much 'official' Soviet political life—single candidate elections, a rubber-stamp 'parliament' (the Supreme Soviet)—is similarly double-edged in its significance. Too often it is taken as simply another index of Soviet workers' powerlessness. What this ignores, in the simplemindedness of the search for equivalents of 'our' institutions, is that the formality of Soviet politics *also* testifies to a diffusion of politics *throughout* the society and a partial overcoming of capitalism's separation of the political sphere. Soviet 'politics' is largely ritual because most areas of Soviet life are subject to direct, though not necessarily democratic, political discussion and control. There is less place for a separate polity. As a consequence far less of Soviet social life appears mysterious or subject to quasi-natural 'laws'.

Survivals of Capitalism

To turn now to the survival of elements of capitalism in the USSR and the deformations which mar and restrict the socialist features we have outlined. To begin with, we fully accept that to eliminate *all* vestiges of the capitalist mode of production demands: (1) the development of social productiveness beyond levels attained in the so-called 'advanced' capitalist states, and (2) defeat of the capitalist class internationally. Without the first, the 'real separation' of production units, which Bettelheim rightly sees as the enduring foundation-stone for capitalist production, will persist. Without the second, some form of state must remain necessary, and class struggles will be prone to take nationalistic forms. Communism cannot be built in a single country. But in our view Bolshevism bears an additional responsibility both for the persistence of many capitalist features in Soviet society and for many of the deformations of its socialist elements.

All major Bolshevik strategies for socialist construction, from Lenin to Brezhnev and including the main oppositions both right and left, have demonstrably shared the problematic we outlined earlier. Their disagreements have been articulated within its boundaries. Much of the evident 'convergence' between certain social relations in Soviet and capitalist society, we submit, needs no further explanation than this. It does not stem from the 'imperatives' of 'industrial society', so much as from the Bolsheviks' *belief* in such imperatives and active pursuit of *policies* designed to implement them. This is especially true of relations between town and country (dominated by capitalist models of primitive accumulation) and within the labour process (dominated by capitalist models of efficiency and productivity). A book like Harazti's *A Worker in a Workers' State* (actually about factory life in Hungary) documents

one sort of direct consequence of Bolshevik obeisance to bourgeois images of modernization: just how little the experience of work differs in crucial respects—monotony, boredom, lack of control, coercion by piece-rate and bonus systems—in sum, alienation. But Trotsky, for example, was very well aware of this. The replication of capitalism's divisions of labour 'in the work shop' has broad repercussions. Consider the implications for, say, the education system, which in the USSR is highly elitist and perceived as first and foremost a competitive vehicle of individual social mobility. This cannot but represent an immense fetter on the socialist culture we spoke of above, tending to marginalize and render it rhetorical.

A final set of consequences deserves particular emphasis. So far as we are aware ours is the only Marxist position to stress the intimacy of the connection between this replication of core features of capitalist social relationships through Bolshevik economism, and the prevalent forms of Soviet politics. In particular we believe the *statism* which is the most manifest deformation of Soviet socialism owes much to Bolshevism's approach to production. Economism and statism connect directly via the huge fiscal and planning apparatuses needed to administer programmes of socialist construction which can only rely on the kind of passive, controlled (and typically Bolshevik) mobilization from below typified by Stakhanovism, because any fuller emancipation of direct producers would require (or threaten) a challenge to relations held indispensible to 'modernization'. The problem here is a general one. If socialist control is denied to producers at the point of production, it can only be re-established through external—national and state—agencies of regulation and coercion. The parallel with the bloated state forms that social-democratic governments develop when they try to use the state to establish a measure of social control over untransformed capitalist enterprises is not fortuitous. Moreover, because such programmes both defer immediate expectations and give the promised eventual socialist transformation the external and imposed quality of a paternalistic donation, we are thinking here particularly of what 'socialism' must have come cumulatively to mean in the experience of Soviet peasants—a formidable machinery of repression also becomes necessary if Soviet power is to be maintained. The net result is a vicious circle which has repeated itself throughout Soviet history. An increasingly expensive and burdensome state blocks productive advance in a multitude of ways. The inefficiency, waste and corruption is real enough, even if some of what is analysed in these terms in fact represents socialist priorities (these vocabularies are not neutral). The remedy for the blockage *economically* is seen to be judicious application of the latest in proven capitalist 'technique'. *Politically* this is seen as demanding further tightening of the screw of state . . . And so ad nauseam, in a depressing dialectic whose ultimate paradox is that failing any all-round revolution from below, defence of what *is* socialist in the USSR depends upon the brutal state machinery of Bolshevism remaining intact and vigilant.

The Challenge: Defining a Socialism from Below

In our view what the experience of Bolshevism shows above all is that the relations of capitalist development cannot simply be abstracted and

applied for socialist ends under socialist management as if they were neutral techniques. The political costs, in terms both of the inflation of the State and the impoverishment of socialist politics by their separation from production and the producers should by now be clear enough. But we would also argue that the costs will in the end be non-productive as well; for any short-term gains of 'using' capitalism to build the material 'base' for socialism are attained through the direct erosion of the conscious, co-operative and egalitarian relations whose extension is the fundamental condition of any *sustained* socialist productive advance. Capitalist relations between people stifle socialism's greatest productive force—the creativity, the experience, the skills, knowledge and enthusiasms embodied in the community of producers. Socialism is centrally about creating the social conditions in which that force is unleashed for the common wealth.

To achieve this entails *recognising differences*. One way of depicting what we mean by this (others are possible: it is a metaphor, not a model) involves a shift in the dominant imagery of socialism, away from the Plan as its supreme and defining feature. Instead we should envisage the hegemony of a general line: a body of guidelines and objectives, rather than of detailed instructions, which foster (rather than compel *or* guarantee) socialist advance, not by a calculus of a fiscal and quantitative character—that 'rigid, national, centralised system of accounting' Lenin so often called for—but by the encouragement they give to the attainment of local collective power and material security. Such a general line would attempt to synthesize experience and highlight exemplary transformations, but its detailed application would be a matter for local collectivities themselves to decide. Party and State would be correspondingly less evident in the lives of the people, except through their necessary safeguarding of the national conditions of existence of socialist construction, and their provision of such large-scale means as no single collective could hope to generate internally. Their apparatuses would be correspondingly minimal. For this form of *human* emancipation we need a different conception of what politics might be. The priority must be a continuing cultural revolution which recognizes and establishes rational forms for the ubiquity of class and other struggles. The latter, including struggles against forms of gender, racial and ethnic oppression, are also crucial to the abolition of human exploitation. Only through this expanded concept of revolutionary politics can we ensure that differences are not perpetuated as disadvantages, but, rather, are celebrated and encouraged. As Raymond Williams notes of Bahro, socialist 'human emancipation is intrinsically and as a matter of principle, more diverse than *any* philosophical definition'. Socialist construction must recognize, with Marx, that a mode of production is a 'mode of life' and its transformation must be correspondingly total. Most importantly, we must not allow politics to become sundered from either 'production' or the 'personal', nor become localized to a restricted set of institutions, issues and occasions and, therefore, in the end a privileged body of people.