IS ORTHODOX TROTKSKYISM AN EXPLANATORY THEORY?

Given the apparent failure of the parties of orthodox Trotskyism to be able to develop effective and popular revolutionary parties we need to examine whether this development is because of some important limitations in its approach. In this context the theory of permanent revolution will be evaluated in terms of the work of one of its most important defenders. The other issue will be that of the situation of the Gorbachev era, and whether some orthodox Trotskyists became over-optimistic about the possibilities for the reform of the system and the connected development of a genuine type of socialist society. In other words, the point being made is whether the approach of orthodox Trotskyism developed illusions in the possibility for Stalinism to become progressive, whether in terms of the promotion of genuine revolutionary change in the undeveloped capitalist countries, and also that the Gorbachev regime was resulting in authentic socialism rather than generating the conditions for the restoration of capitalism. Some Trotskyist groups were resolutely critical of the role of Stalinism, but the problem was that their standpoint seemed to be the expression of dogmatism as the basis of the promotion of what was considered to be principled politics. Therefore, the organisations that seemed to be superior were those that were able to define Stalinism as the expression of new forms of exploitative societies, whether bureaucratic collectivist or state capitalist. However, the problem of the approach of these organisations was that they seemed to dogmatically deny the aspect of the popular character of Stalinism as an organisation of change in some countries. The alternative limitation was a perspective of opportunist adaptation to the role of Stalinism because of its apparent ability to be able to create types of workers states. What also created controversy was the period of the era of Gorbachev. Did he advocate progressive reforms, or was he supporting a process of the restoration of capitalism, or indeed did he combine both objectives? The ultimate failure of the Gorbachev project seemed to resolve these issues in terms of the understanding that it was not possible to reform Stalinism without the development of the increased influence of the role of the people in the process of political decision making. But did this ultimate result mean that it was an illusion to support the attempt to develop the progressive modification of the Stalinist system? What we can suggest is that the failures to develop systematic changes within the USSR led to the restoration of capitalism, which has not in any manner increased the importance of the role of democracy in the political system. Was this development inevitable or could it have been avoided by the successful reform of Stalinism in a progressive manner? These issues are analysed in an important book by Tariq Ali. But initially we need to analyse the character of the revolutionary process in the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, China, Vietnam and Cuba, in order to try and establish whether it was possible to establish genuinely popular regimes that could in an important manner advance the realisation of the objectives of socialism. In this context it will be possible to establish whether the ultimate restoration of capitalism was an inevitability because of the failures of these societies or was it instead the result of a process of deliberate change arising from the increasingly opportunist character of the role of the communist party. In other words, one of the major issues that has to be addressed is that the failure to establish genuinely popular revolutions based on the involvement of the people meant that various elitist regimes were formed. This development did not necessarily express rejection of revolutionary aims and could be considered too be in a certain manner based on the objectives of socialism, even if this was expressed in terms of the dominant role of the party. Therefore, could it be suggested that a genuinely democratic type of organisation of society in order to realise socialism was an impractical possibility, and that instead all that was practically feasible was the hegemonic role of the party? This conclusion seemed to be suggested by the very empirical history of Stalinism. But the problem with this conclusion is that the initial history of Bolshevism could suggest different and more democratic possibilities. Consequently, the potential for the realisation of democratic socialism was ultimately undermined by the increasing elitist trajectory of Bolshevism. These issues have to be studied.

The character of the revolutionary process in Russia and other societies is systematically analysed by Michael Lowy in: “The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution” (Verso, London 1981) Lowy introduces his book with the intention to establish the compatibility of the approach of Marx and Engels with the development of revolutionary change in Russia. But we can suggest that it was not necessarily feasible for Marx and Engels to be able to anticipate the development of the process of international revolutionary change. Instead in order to overcome the very problem of dogmatism it was necessary to develop a continually changing perspective that would be able to explain the character of the class struggle in its contemporary aspects. Thus, the major issue was not to be faithful to the very perspectives outlined in a different era by Marx and Engels, but instead to understand that the continual development of the world economy and the role of nation states would mean the necessity to establish new perspectives. Indeed, this type of understanding was recognised by Bukharin and Lenin in their work on imperialism and so was a contrast with the more dogmatic approach of Kautsky. But Lowy is right to suggest that in theoretical terms it was Marx and Engels who outlined the perspective of a possible permanent revolution in which the development of a process of bourgeois democratic revolution would also create the possibility of transition to the role of a proletarian revolution. This becomes precise during the 1848 revolutions in terms of the elaboration of the perspective that the workers could become the major agency of democratic revolution, which would then suggest the possibility of making advances to a new socialist type of transformation. But of course, the problem with this radical perspective was that the development of capitalism in economic terms was still in its infancy and so it could also be suggested that change under the leadership of the workers could result in premature possibilities that did not correspond to the character of the objective economic situation. Therefore, in realistic terms it seemed that the workers had no option than to wait for the development of more favourable economic conditions for the realisation of the feasibility of a socialist alternative. What would resolve these dilemmas in a principled and effective manner would be the elaboration of a perspective of democratic political change and increasing workers influence over the character of the economy. This approach would become the basis to develop the influence of the workers within capitalist society, but without advocating a process of short-term revolutionary change. But the problem was that this type of perspective was not adopted, and instead the importance of changes within capitalism became associated with an explicitly reformist approach. In contrast the revolutionary perspective became associated with the maximalist rejection of the role of capitalism in the name of socialism. The problem was that the orthodox Marxist conception of permanent revolution in which bourgeois revolution would become the immediate prelude to the proletarian revolution had been shown to be unrealistic, but not credible alternative was developed until the reformist justification of an emphasis on reforms as the basis to change the balance of class forces in favour of the workers. Kautsky essentially accepted this perspective, but with an emphasis on the importance of the ultimate aim of socialism. Lowy seems to ignore these issues of the importance of the economic and political role of the workers under what would inevitably be a capitalist type of economy and society, and instead emphasises their apparent perception in anticipating the theory of permanent revolution as it applied to Russia of 1917. He comments that Marx’s address to the central committee of the Communist League indicates: “This striking passage contains three of the fundamental themes that Trotsky would later develop in the theory of permanent revolution: (1) the uninterrupted development of the revolution in a semi-feudal country leading to the conquest of power by the working class; (2)the application by the proletariat in power of explicitly anti-capitalist and socialist measures; (3)the necessarily international character of the revolutionary process and of the new socialist society, without classes or private property.”(p15) This view seems reasonable, but what is not established is the relation of this perspective to the possibility of change in societies that develop a effective type of capitalist economy and bourgeois democratic political system. This apparent omission by Marx led to the elaboration of various opportunist approaches that emphasised the importance of reform rather than revolutionary change. Indeed, it could be argued that Engels was the initial elaborator of this approach. However, despite these potential problems it could be suggested, as Lowy does, that Marx had outlined a principled perspective of revolutionary change based on the relationship of bourgeois democratic revolution to the proletarian revolution. But the problem was that this perspective seemed to have become outmoded with the stabilisation of capitalism and the apparent end of the era of bourgeois democratic revolution. What had become important was the development of a principled revolutionary perspective in the situation of the consolidation of capitalism. The result of controversy about this aspect was to lead to the justification of a reformist approach of the necessity to modify capitalism rather than advocate revolutionary change. However, Lowy does not seem to consider the importance of these challenges to a Marxist revolutionary perspective and instead emphasises the significance of developments in the class struggle which indicated the possibility to connect the bourgeois democratic and proletarian revolutions. But the apparent limitations in the Marxist approach meant that the issue of the political role of the working-class movement in the emerging capitalist countries was not resolved in a principled manner. Instead, we had the openly reformist approach of Bernstein who adopted an openly reformist approach of the necessity to make gradual changes within capitalism in order to achieve transition to socialism, or the slightly different view of Kautsky that suggested an elected socialist government should introduce a radical programme of change that would result in socialist change. Only Rosa Luxemburg argued that the dynamism of the struggles of the workers was necessity to achieve genuine revolutionary change. Hence Lowy is right to suggest that it was in Russia that the expression of a revolutionary perspective achieved genuine ascendency. But this was based on the rejection in the 1905 revolution of Plekhanov’s perspective that bourgeois democratic revolution led by the bourgeoisie was the initial stage of the revolutionary process. Lenin had an intermediate position that suggested the workers and peasants would carry out a bourgeois democratic revolution and establish a popular revolutionary government. Lowy outlines how Trotsky, basing his ideas on the views of Parvus, develops a strategic alternative to these stageist approaches and suggests the necessity of the formation of an openly proletarian regime supported by the peasantry which would have anti-capitalist objectives. The point is that it would not be realistic to conceive of a genuine proletarian revolutionary government if it limited its objectives to what was possible within capitalism. However, Lowy also suggests that Trotsky was pessimistic about the possibility to maintain the proletariat-peasant alliance because of the expression of increasing different objectives by these classes and so the only manner in which the process of revolutionary change could be maintained was by the development of international revolution. Lowy contends that Lenin effectively supported Trotsky’s approach during the revolutionary events of 1917, but it could be suggested that what was of primary importance was that the role of the Soviets indicated the possibility and necessity to establish a worker’s government. Thus, the issue was how to relate the role of the party to the role of the soviets. The problem was resolved by the development of a perspective of supporting the attempt to establish a majority for the Bolsheviks within the major soviets. In this manner the Soviets could become transformed into being an expression of the aim of the achievement of revolutionary change. Hence it was the development of popular class struggle that essentially indicated to the Bolsheviks the problems of their stageist conception of revolution that had been adopted in 1905. Trotsky did not have to carry out an ideological struggle in order to establish the credibility of his revolutionary approach. Instead, it was logically adopted by the Bolsheviks as the expression of the basis to realise the political possibilities of the character of the class struggle. But the ultimate political problem that would emerge would concern the relation of the party and class in the revolutionary process. To what extent could the party speak in terms of being an authentic expression of the aims of the workers. In other words, the issue that became of increasing importance was the relationship of the Soviets to the role of the party. Would the party substitute itself the role of the Soviets? It could be suggested that this is what occurred, and the soviets essentially became a formal institution, and it was the role of the party that was the effective expression of government. Hence it was not possible to establish a genuine worker’s state based on the genuine participation of the workers in the soviets as the basis of the organisation of society. In other words, the failure to create a principled and participatory democracy of the Soviet state expressed the situation of the inability to create a genuine socialist system.

However, Lowy explains this aspect of the degeneration of society in the different terms of the ideological adoption of the theory of socialism in one country which seemed to imply the secondary importance of the aim of world revolution. But in actuality this aspect was the logical culmination of the creation of a privileged relationship between the party state and the working class, which suggested that the ultimate aim of the emerging elite was the necessity to consolidate the role of the state in order to establish their increasing privileges because of this aspect of supremacy over the social formation. Lowy emphasises the opportunist logic of the approach of socialism in one country which was to consider the aim of international revolution as being of secondary importance. This view seems to be correct, but it has to be accepted that this approach took the form of a theory and practice contradiction. In theory and in political perspectives the Stalinist elite was still committed to the aim of world revolution. Hence the understanding of the stabilisation of world capitalism was not meant to deny the continued importance of world revolution. Therefore, it was argued that there was no contradiction between the emphasis on the necessity of creating socialism in one country and the importance of international revolutionary change. But obviously the view of Trotsky was that there had developed an opportunist emphasis on the aim of socialism in one country at the expense of the interests of international revolution. This opportunist degeneration was expressed by a process of adaptation to the leadership of the British trade unions and the Chinese bourgeoisie rather than support for a more principled revolutionary perspective. Lowy outlines how in relation to China this opportunist approach was expressed in terms of support for the perspective of national bourgeois revolution, which meant acceptance of the leading political role of the Kuomintang. This approach led to the repression of the left wing workers of Shanghai by the KMT. It was shown in practice the opportunist errors of the Stalin approach of acceptance of the leadership of the Chinese bourgeoisie. The response of Trotsky during the period 1928-35 was to extend the importance of his theory of permanent revolution so that it applied to the countries dominated by imperialism and not merely a perspective that was utilised to explain the character of the Russian revolution. This meant that he generalised the view that the role of the bourgeois democratic revolution would be connected to socialist tasks in relation to the objective of ending imperialist domination of the oppressed colonial nations. But Lowy suggests that this perspective was advocated by Trotsky in dogmatic terms which meant a consistent underestimation of the importance of the role of the peasantry in the process of anti-imperialist struggle: “Integral, of course, to this whole discussion of the workers and peasants alliance was the question of the precise socio-political nature of the peasant movement. Trotsky’s attitudes to the Chinese peasantry were somewhat ambivalent: on the one hand, he clearly perceived the manifest anti-bourgeois dimension of the peasant insurgency, but on the other hand, he still considered it a fundamentally petty-bourgeois democratic movement – even when it was led by the Communist party in the form of the red army. Even more importantly, he did not envisage the possibility of large sections of the peasantry assuming a socialist consciousness before the victory of the proletarian revolution. These questionable assumptions of Trotsky’s explain why he almost totally neglected the significance of the Red army in his articles on China during the late 1930’s and why he did not appreciate the originality of the historical process taking place in the rural areas controlled by the Communist party.” (p95) This criticism only seems to be justified by the fact that Trotsky does not seem to have commentated on the situation in China in any detail in the 1930’s. But his overall perspective seems to have been correct that it was necessary to develop the political struggle of the workers in the urban areas if the possibility of socialist revolution was to be realised. The actual experience of the Chinese revolution seems to have expressed this perspective because the victory of the peasants struggle under the autocratic leadership of the Communist party did not result in the organisation of a system of participatory economic and political democracy which could have become the basis to realise genuine socialism. The major point is that the peasants did not have a collective type of economic activity which could promote forms of united political action that would advance the possibility to establish the cooperative character of socialism. Instead, they were based on a situation of economic self-sufficiency and so the aspect of united political action was connected to the role of the communist party in facilitating the possibility of this development. Hence the conception of socialism that emerged in this situation was based on the hegemonic role of the Stalinist communist party in the development of the economic and political organisation of the peasants in a collective manner. On this basis it was possible to create a red army that could engage in popular struggle against the bourgeois nationalist government. Trotsky was right to insist that only the mass action of the workers could create the potential for a democratic and socialist type of revolutionary process. In contrast the Red army based on the role of the peasants implied a conception of political change that would have an authoritarian character. Lowy is right to suggest that Trotsky could not anticipate this development, but his approach could explain that what was happening in China was a process of bureaucratic change based on the role of the Red army that could result in the demise of the domination of capitalism in an authoritarian manner. The ideology and practices of Soviet Stalinism were becoming influential to explaining the actions and theory of Mao’s red army, and so the result was not likely to be a progressive expression of the revolutionary process. But Mao in an empirical manner was critical of Stalin’s acceptance of the domination of the national bourgeois government of Chiang Kai Shek, and was prepared to conduct a policy of military opposition to the administration based on the role of his red army. Lowy explains the contradictions of this approach in the following manner: “The dissonance between practice and ‘line’ worked itself out in the following way: Mao continued to formally uphold the Stalinist doctrine of revolution by stages and alliance with the bourgeoisie, whilst he increasingly disregarded Stalin’s instructions on the practical course to be followed in China.”(p121) This situation of increasing independence of the Chinese communist party in terms of consistently rejecting the instructions of the Soviet leadership meant: “The great turning point of the CCP’s history, however, was in 1945-46 when Mao and the party leadership decisively affirmed their independence from Moscow and charted a course of bold revolutionary struggle.”(p121-122) But this is an ambiguous view that equates militant opposition to the role of the national bourgeois government with being the expression of an authentic revolutionary aspect to the actions of the CCP. It is said to have led a genuine process of popular and democratic change that resulted in the formation of a worker’s state. Thus, Lowy concludes that: “Despite its long detour through the countryside, the CCP retained its original nature as the organic party of the Chinese proletariat. As a matter of fact, only such an urban, proletarian and ‘modern’ force could lead and centralise the dispersed and politically limited peasant rebellions, transforming them into organized revolutionary warfare on a national scale…. To a certain extent the peasantry was the instrument which the CCP used to achieve proletarian ends…. the peasantry substituted for the proletariat as the revolution’s mass base; while politically, the Communist party substituted itself for the working class. Nonetheless, the political leadership of the revolutionary process must be characterised as ‘proletarian’ to the extent that the CCP was – historically, politically and ideologically – a working class party (albeit with bureaucratic tendencies.” (p129) But this view suggests that despite the bureaucratic and Stalinist tendencies of the Chinese Communist party it was still an expression of the interests of the workers. Such a standpoint is questionable because by the 1930’s the workers had minimal involvement in the Communist party. But most importantly the perspective of bureaucratic socialism meant that the party had developed independent interests which would mean that it was aiming to create a non-capitalist society, but without the participatory role of the workers. This standpoint did result in the promotion of militant struggle against the bourgeois government, but this did not mean that in some manner the role of a genuine proletarian revolution was being advanced. Instead, the aim was to establish the political supremacy of the communist party in terms of the importance of the aspect of the popular support of the peasants. The workers were not effectively organised by the communist party, and instead their lack of influence was because of the continuing effects of the defeats of their struggles in the 1920’s. Consequently, what developed was a conception that the peasants under communist party leadership would realise the process of socialist revolution. In this manner the role of the workers would be re-activated and become an aspect of this process of change. However, this aspect would be entirely secondary when compared to the hegemonic role of the communist party in this process of the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. In other words, the democratic expression of the role of the peasants and sections of the workers in the mass movement against the bourgeois government never developed in an effective and consistent manner. Instead, the dynamic aspect in this process of change was the communist party acting on the basis of the ideology of Mao. This is not to deny the popular character of these developments, but they still had an elite aspect based on the importance of the party.

In relation to the developments in Yugoslavia, Lowy assumes that the communist party had a socialist character, and so it acted in that manner to connect the success of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with the socialist transformation of the economy: “Can there be any question, then, that the Yugoslav revolution was a process of permanent revolution defined by the combination of democratic and national tasks with specifically socialist transformation in an uninterrupted process of struggle under the leadership of a proletarian party?”(p114) But this perspective is a generalised view that has some problems. It could be suggested that until about 1947 the leadership of the Yugoslav communist party was content to try and reconcile its regime with the domination of Stalinism of the USSR and in Eastern Europe. Only the increased differences with the leadership of the USSR led to increased support for the development of a genuinely cooperative type of economy based on the principles of participatory democracy. But the continuing aspects of elitism in the political and ideological character of the Yugoslav communist party meant that it could not be suggested that a genuine workers state had been created. Instead, what had been created was a degenerated workers state because of the continuing importance of the aspects of the elitism of the communist party. This contradictory aspect was indicated by the attempt to reconcile aspects of the market economy to the role of the cooperative character of the economic structure. Ultimately the tendencies facilitating the restoration of capitalism became more important than the expression of the principles of the cooperative character of the economy. But the historical validity of the Yugoslav revolution was indicated by the expression of these important aspects of socialism in terms of workers management of the economy. But Lowy does not seem to be concerned with this aspect and instead his emphasis is on the process of revolutionary change. But what ensured that this revolution was a genuine process of transformation was the development of genuine forms of economic democracy which meant that it was possible to create a type of socialist organisation of the economy. However, there was a contradictory aspect to this development because it was not possible to question the domination of the Yugoslav communist party over society. In other words, there was no political system of multi-party democracy. Therefore, an aspect of authoritarianism was contained in the role of politics and so when the Yugoslav communist party degenerated it was not possible to question this increasingly opportunist role. Ultimately the restoration of capitalism occurred.

Lowy outlines how a popular revolution in Cuba based on the support of the workers and peasants ultimately led to the regime nationalising the economy because of the necessity to undermine the importance of the capitalist class and the role of American imperialism. Lowy outlines how the revolution led to the seriously undermining of the ability of the capitalist class to maintain the system of capitalism because the popular new state was no longer committed to the defence of the capitalist economy. The process of nationalisation of the major companies in 1960 meant: “The significance of these measures was undeniable: the democratic revolution in Cuba had grown over, through an uninterrupted and permanentist deepening, into a socialist one. Although Fidel and the revolutionary leadership only publicly acknowledged the socialist character of the revolution in April 1961…. the revolution had already abolished capitalism in October 1960” (p149) Lowy defines this as a process of permanent revolution in which a bourgeois democratic revolution becomes the expression of a process of proletarian revolution. But it is questionable whether this was a genuine type of workers revolution because the initiative for the process of change was with the role of the revolutionary government. It acted on behalf of the people, and so the result of these changes could only be the development of a type of degenerated worker’s state. Lowy is correct to suggest that a popular movement had created the conditions for these developments, but the initiative for the process of the nationalisation of the economy was with the government. Furthermore, there was no genuine development of the role of workers participation in the organisation of this nationalised economy. Instead, it was based on the importance of the role of a new type of management. However, this view is disputed by Lowy who contends that a popular and democratic character defines the revolutionary process: “Meanwhile the urban working class in the 1959-60 period moved more to the centre stage of political life through a sustained mobilization in support of the revolutionary leadership. New mass organizations…..increasingly integrated the proletariat with the revolutionary state. At the same time, working class initiatives ‘from below’ were a principled factor in the growing number of interventions and expropriations of capitalist firms, that is for the growing over of the democratic into the explicitly socialist revolution.” (p157) But this aspect of mass mobilisation did not undermine the development of a new form of organisation of the economy on the basis of the role of the government. Hence the aspect of popular democracy within the economy was limited to what was acceptable to the government in relation to the organisation of a nationalised type of production. But these developments do indicate that what was being created was another expression of the role of a degenerated workers state. The economic and political system was different to that which prevailed in the Soviet Union, eastern Europe and China. Obviously, the continuation of the Cuban regime could not occur without the support of the Soviet Union, but this did not mean that the system in Cuba was identical to that in the USSR. The Cuban regime accepted being part of the world socialist system, but it was often characterised by having a more principled internationalist standpoint. This led to support for various national liberation struggles in Africa. But ultimately the demise of the Soviet bloc undermined the credibility of the Cuban regime. It can be suggested that in order to ensure continual economic success the result has been the effective acceptance of the process of the restoration of capitalism. This does not mean that all aspects of the workers state have been ended and Cuba is still able to provide aspects of the role of the welfare state. But the Cuban regime is increasingly integrated into the world economy. This development is an indication that a worker’s state requires more than the role of the party elite in order to ensure its continuation. Instead, the workers have to mobilised in an effective manner in order to defend the gains of a nationalised type of economy. The failure to develop this aspect was an indication that the party elite in Cuba was increasingly committed to the objective of achieving the process of the restoration of capitalism. This development was made increasingly feasible by the influence of the pressures of being effectively the only degenerated workers state in the world. This isolation meant that the tendency to accept the reintroduction of capitalism became effectively an inevitability.

Ultimately the economic and political limitations of the various Stalinist states meant that the development of the prospect of the restoration of capitalism became realised. But there were many illusions within the forces of Marxism that suggested that the Gorbachev era would express the possibility for the progressive reform of the system, and the connected development of a genuine socialism. One of the supporters of this approach was Tariq Ali who wrote in his book: “Revolution from Above” (Hutchinson, London 1988) that: “Gorbachev represents a progressive, reformist current within the Soviet elite, whose programme, if successful, would represent an enormous gain for socialists and democrats on a world scale” (pxiii) This view could not be more wrong. The bureaucratic socialist system had entered into a period of serious crisis in the 1980’s caused by the increasing economic limitations of the system. The only approach that could resolve these problems was to introduce a system of participatory economic democracy of the producers which would provide the workers with an incentive to develop production in a more effective manner. However, the ideology of Stalinist elitism could not accept this possibility and instead considered that the issue was to increase the level of influence of the managers of the various enterprises in order to become more effective in the organisation of the workers so that they would produce goods in a more efficient manner. Thus, Gorbachev had to promote the possibility of reform in these terms. He had to obtain the consent of the people for the development of a form of market socialism that would attempt to make the system more productive in terms of minimal change in economic and political terms. The communist party would become more receptive to the aspirations of the people, but its monopoly of power would be consolidated rather than undermined. But this new perspective could only become influential in terms of accepting that there was an effective economic crisis of the system which could be characterised as stagnation. But there was an ideological problem because the party had been accustomed to the perspective that the system was based on the realisation of the objective of increasing success. Now it was being admitted that there was a crisis caused by the stagnation of production. It was not clear how the increased political openness of the leadership of the party, known as Glasnost, would be able to resolve these serious economic problems. But Ali suggests that the party leadership at least formally accepted the necessity to make progress towards workers management of the economy: “Unless and until the bulk of the workers, whose social weight in Soviet society is substantial, are drawn into the movement, it will not be easy to destroy the stranglehold of the bureaucracy. Here the reformers confronted a dilemma. The only way they could democratise the factories is by appealing to the workers above the heads of the bureaucrats, since the latter are reluctant to surrender any privileges voluntarily.” (p12-13) Ali suggests that the political and cultural conditions for this type of progressive change is being promoted by the development of a new era of intellectual freedom. But it could be suggested that this aspect becomes the justification to differentiate between the increasing situation of cultural expression and the increased inability of the ruling elite to be able to introduce measures to provide for more economic efficiency. In other words, the problem is that the very development of the opinions of the people will call the system into question. There will be the increased influence of the workers if people are able to organise more freely and if the domination of the party elite becomes called into question. In this context the influence of the view that the role of the market is necessary in order to ensure the continuation of the aspect of discipline within the economy becomes increasing important. In other words, there is a problem between the acceptance of the principles of democracy and the apparently contrasting objective to maintain the domination of the party in economic and political terms. Gorbachev tries to suggest that these various objectives are not contradictory. He implies that the party needs to obtain popular consent for its rule. Ultimately the divisions within the party means that this perspective of Gorbachev becomes a failure. It is the development of differences within the elite about how to maintain its supremacy that results in the demise of the system.

One of the important limitations of the approach of Ali is that he considers that Gorbachev is leading a process of progressive change: “Gorbachev in the past three years has challenged bureaucratic certainties and there are many inside the centres of power who are unhappy, not for the reasons of real principle, but because their political monopoly and material privileges are under threat.”(p30) This view is false because it implies that Gorbachev is leading a process of the development of progressive economic and political change. However, it would also be wrong to suggest that Gorbachev is also trying to realise the restoration of capitalism. Instead, he wants to maintain the stability of the Stalinist system by making it more credible. He does want to introduce measures that result in increased economic efficiency and this objective involves changes to the political system that would make it more democratic. Ultimately this aim means accepting the necessity to end the one- party system. Therefore, Gorbachev is what could be defined as a conservative reformer. He wants to introduce economic and political reforms in order to maintain the present system in a more credible manner. In this context the alternative of Yeltsin represents the justification of a popular form of demagogy which is based on the attempt to increase his influence within the party and society. But Ali naively suggests that Yeltsin is leading a principled attempt to reform society in terms of opposing the various aspects of the absolutist domination of the party. The point is that Yeltsin becomes a popular hero because he is removed from the party leadership because of his criticisms of the role of the elite. But this does not mean that he can be supported, contrary to the illusions of Ali. All sections of the party leadership are still reactionary because they do not support in a consistent manner the development of the role of economic and political democracy. They are still committed to maintaining the supremacy of the communist party. The only manner in which the situation could have been transformed in a progressive manner would be for the development of a genuine and popular mass movement for change. It was necessary that the workers organise in terms of the principles of democratic socialism. This would mean a revolutionary challenge to the present system, and Yeltsin for all his demagogy does not represent this type of alternative. Hence the approach of Ali is effectively to support a perspective of reform from above, and so he is effectively dismissive of the importance of the necessity to develop a popular mass movement for change. Formally, he is not opposed to this development but in effective terms he can only contemplate a type of change that is carried out by members of the elite. Essentially, he is for an alliance of Gorbachev and Yeltsin as the most credible and effective manner in which this process of change could be realised. Therefore, he ignores the issue of the necessity to develop a progressive popular movement in favour of change. Instead, his whole analysis is based on indicating the importance of the attempts of members of the ruling elite to attempt to develop the potential for the progressive development of the present form of society so that it becomes a genuinely popular form of socialism. But ultimately this perspective is emphatically rejected because the elite either supports the restoration of capitalism, or else wants to maintain the status quo. Only Gorbachev remains some expression of being a genuine reformer. The major problem is the failure to develop an alternative revolutionary party that could have established a principled relationship to the workers and in this manner attempted to establish a democratic socialist society. Ultimately these problems of the crisis of the system are resolved by the overthrow of the Gorbachev regime by a coup and this in turn leads to the success of Yeltsin. In this manner of major crisis of the system the result is the restoration of capitalism by the Yeltsin regime. But the alternative of the continuation of the bureaucratic system was increasing not tenable under this situation of increasing political crisis. However, the apparent association of Marxism with Stalinism meant that in ideological terms it was difficult to establish the credibility of a genuine socialist party. Indeed, such a party has not been created in the new Russia. The ultimate legacy of Stalinism was to thoroughly discredit the aim of socialism and as a result the prospect of the restoration of capitalism became an effective inevitability.

In other words, the problems with the approach of Tariq Ali are that he makes the assumption that the leadership of the Soviet communist party has the potential to become an expression of the development of a form of socialist democracy that would replace the situation of the role of a bureaucratic regime. But the important objection to this perspective is that the present leadership of the party is able to benefit from the situation of the importance of an authoritarian and elitist type of society. Therefore, the political changes being proposed by Gorbachev can only express the aim of trying to increase the economic efficiency of the present system. In other words, the hegemonic importance of the communist party as the basis to provide the guidance deemed necessary to consolidate and strengthen the socialist economy is not being questioned. Thus, the conception of democracy is essentially being defined in terms of the promotion of discussion within the party in order to create a more effective perspective for tackling the serious economic problems of society. Ali considers that an important task is to create genuine dialogue between the party leadership and the workers about how to tackle the economic situation. But the point is that the only effective approach would be to increase the influence of the workers within the relations of production about what should be the major objective of the process of economic activity. However, the party leadership cannot seriously entertain this possibility because it would result in a possible questioning of the validity of the economic system. The party elite considers that a process of the introduction of the aspect of the importance of the market could provide the basis for the creation of economic efficiency, but the workers would reject this development because it would imply that they had to work harder but without any possible material benefits. Thus, Ali is indirectly establishing that the problem is the antagonistic relationship of the workers and party elite in relation to the aspect of developing perspectives for the increased economic efficiency of the system. The party is in favour of increasing the importance of the managers, whilst the workers would generally support the development of the democratic participation of the producers in the organisation of the process of production. In other words, the aspects of the polarised and different interests of the party leadership and the workers means that it is not possible to establish popular and agreed objectives about how to generate increased economic efficiency. Ali is aware of these dilemmas, but he rejects the logical conclusion that what is necessary is to generate the possibility of the workers achieving a successful process of the transformation of the character of the economy. Instead, he seems to suggest that despite the adverse circumstances there is no alternative to the necessity for the party leadership of the progressively minded Gorbachev to try and introduce measures to make the economy more efficient. But Ali is not explicit about this development because he seems to accept the pessimistic view that the workers are not able to take the initiative in terms of being able to establish a more efficient and democratic type of economy. He implies that the workers know what they are against, in terms of opposing the intensification of the role of the managers within the economy, but this opposition is not being translated into support for a constructive expression of the aspiration of the organisation of production by the producers. Instead, it is assumed that the issue of economic efficiency depends on a process of dialogue between the party leadership and the workers.

The point being made is that Ali is more convincing when he considers the reasons for the economic problems of Stalinism as opposed to his reluctance to outline in detailed terms what should be the alternative development. He outlines the limitations of the bureaucratic economy in impressive detail: “In the USSR, part of the cause of the crisis does undoubtedly lie with commandist planning, by which I mean that if the measure of enterprise performance is the achievement of material output targets within a narrow time span, then clearly there is no space to encourage technological innovation and thereby increase productivity. Simultaneously a failure to assess the relationship between material inputs and outputs results in a total lack of incentives to economise on inputs. This in turn results in a massive waste of raw materials, energy and primarily, labour. Furthermore, since output is assessed from enterprises rather than on the basis of sales to voluntary buyers, performance is not judged on the quality of output. The consequences are a great deal of substandard and unusable products.” (p71) This situation would suggest that the only feasible and principled alternative would be the realisation of the development of the increased ability of the producers to be able to establish their initiative to be able to define the objectives of economic activity. The point is that it has been the situation of the control and domination of the economy by the party and managerial elite that has resulted in the alienation of the workers concerning the objectives of production. Hence the issue of economic efficiency would be connected to the expression of the ability of the workers to be able to define the aims of the process of production. However, Ali seems reluctant to make this logical conclusion. Instead in what seems to be dogmatic terms he considers that the development of a situation of alliance between the party leaders and the workers will be able to establish united objectives concerning economic development. But why would the workers be cooperative in this manner given that the major objective of the party elite is to try and realise a process of the extraction of a surplus in the sphere of production? The point is that Ali can only establish the apparent credibility of this perspective by ultimately assuming that in the last analysis it is possible to reconcile the objectives of the workers and the party elite concerning the aims of the process of production. This approach means that he denies the importance of the aspect of the exploitation of the workers in the aspect of the role of the economy, and instead he implicitly suggests the workers and party can agree objectives about the necessity to develop the material situation of the people in terms of the realisation of economic growth. Hence Ali denies the aspect of the exploitation of the workers within the relations of production. This is because he extends Trotsky’s view that the nationalised property relations of the supposedly bureaucratic workers state have an essentially progressive character that could potentially result in the generation of increased material benefits for the producers. But in actuality the nationalised economy does not have this character and instead its objectives are based on the extraction of a surplus by the party elite from the workers because of their domination of the relations of production. The primary aspect of the system is the role of the exploitative domination of the workers by the party in the process of production. Only in ideological terms is socialism justified as being the character of the system. But this ideological content is completely subordinated to the expression of the domination of the producers within the relations of production. In other words, there is a theory and practice contradiction. The ideological justification of socialism by the party elite is in contrast to the necessity to consolidate the subordination of the workers within the relations of production. In this context the economic reforms being proposed by the party elite are about the consolidation of this situation of the exploitation of the workers within the relations of production. Hence in order to make these measures popular, the party elite has to suggest that these aspects are connected to the development of the democratisation of society. In other words, the contradiction between theory and practice in the character of society is not being ended by the new economic measures of market socialism being advocated by Gorbachev. Instead, the ultimate aim of these policies will be to increase the importance of market disciplines in order to consolidate the domination of the economy by the party elite. There is nothing in these proposals thar could be said to be in the interests of the workers. Therefore, a principled and genuinely revolutionary perspective would suggest that the workers should develop a stance based on the rejection of the economic policies of Gorbachev and instead develop an alternative based on the management of the economy by the producers. But Tariq Ali cannot advocate this type of perspective because of the illusions that he has in Gorbachev. He considers that Gorbachev has the perspective to essentially promote progressive change within Soviet society. Thus, the aim should be to support the attempt to realise this genuine attempt to reform society. Hence the connection of the approach of Gorbachev with the attempt to consolidate bureaucratic socialism is not recognised by the illusions that Ali has concerning the progressive character of the so-called process of economic and political reforms.

However, this criticism of the reformist approach of Ali is not meant to deny the possibility or validity of reforms under the regime of Gorbachev. On the contrary the achievement of genuine reforms such as allowing the role of a multi-party democracy and the right of workers to organise in genuine trade unions would be an important progressive development. But it should not be assumed that the realisation of these reforms would result in a radical modification of the character of the system so that it becomes based on the importance of realising the aspirations of the workers. Instead, any change in the balance of social forces in favour of the working class will be a temporary aspect of the situation unless the very character of the system is changed by a radical process of transformation of the character of economic and political power. But Ali seems to ignore these issues because he has a perspective that the most important aspect of social change is represented by the initiative and dynamism of the Gorbachev leadership. In this context it is assumed that the most progressive task is to critically support the attempt of Gorbachev to reform society. The fact that Gorbachev is a representative of the ruling group within society is not considered to be a reason to be sceptical about the prospects for the realisation of what is understood to be a genuine attempt to reform society in a progressive manner. Instead, it is assumed that the principal task of Marxists is to provide solidarity in relation to this presumed credible perspective of change by the actions of the ruling group. However, the major problem with this approach is that what is underestimated is the extent of the problems of the economy which means that the transformation of the economy in terms of a modification of the system is difficult to achieve. The problem is that the bureaucratic elite cannot obtain the consent of the workers for supporting the aim of increased production if they are not able to obtain to express important gains such as increased wages and the realisation of the genuine influence of the trade unions in relation to the decision-making process of management of the enterprises. Gorbachev was prepared to make concessions in this context, but he wanted to maintain the domination of the state over the process of economic activity and so these changes had a limited and formal character. This meant the issue of the stagnation of the economy created by the bureaucratic system of management could not be resolved in this manner. Indeed, the only sense in which the increasing economic problems could be solved was by the realisation of the genuine workers management of the economy. But the problem was that there was no articulate expression of this perspective in terms of the development of the role of a genuine socialist party. Instead, there was a situation of economic and political crisis which increasing led to the influence of the view that the only credible perspective was to support the restoration of capitalism. Yeltsin became the expression of this standpoint. The major problem was that the approach of Marxism seemed to have become discredited because of its association with the role of Stalinism. In this context it seemed that a radical approach was expressed by the objective of the restoration of capitalism. Indeed, it was implied that the workers would be able to increase their wages within what was assumed would be a prosperous capitalist type of society that would be superior to the limitations of bureaucratic socialism. The fact that this understanding was very problematical was not challenged because it was popularly assumed that capitalism would be a superior economic system when compared to the limitations of bureaucratic socialism. Instead, the association of Stalinism with socialism made it seem that the restoring of capitalism would express a progressive resolution of the economic problems of the present bureaucratic economic system. In this context nobody outlined what a genuine perspective of a socialist economy could be like in terms of the effective development of workers management of the economic system. In this context the only prospect to resolve the situation of economic stagnation seemed to be the development of a capitalist system in which the profit motive would provide the basis of the realisation of economic efficiency. The fact that nobody had experience of what a capitalist system was like could only encourage the development of support for this objective of the restoration of this type of economy.

But Ali seemed to be oblivious to the possibility of the development of the role of capitalism in order to solve the important economic problems. Instead, he suggests that a programme of the realisation of popular democracy is feasible: “This means that what is on the agenda today in the USSR is not the radical freedom of communism as envisaged by Marx, but a renewal of socialist dynamism amongst the Soviet people. This means democratisation and the re-founding of the socialist project among the Soviet people.” (p126) However this perspective is problematical because the leadership of the communist party of Gorbachev is not interested in the development of a type of socialist democratic regime because this would suggest the increased influence of the workers within the economy and society. Ali supported the restoration of soviet democracy, but what would this have meant under the circumstances of the Gorbachev era? The problem is that Gorbachev could not accept the possibility of the role of a popular form of democracy because it would have contradicted the intention to establish the process for the development of the increased importance of private enterprise within the economy. In other words, the generation of a viable system of socialist democracy could only contradict the realisation of the economic imperatives of the party elite and so cannot be allowed to develop. Instead, there has to be the limited expansion of the aspect of democracy which would not undermine the ability of the party to introduce increasingly elitist principles in relation to the aim of introducing the disciplines associated with a capitalist economic system. Indeed, Ali has to accept that his political perspective is not being realised: “We are still some distance from a world of popular sovereignty, of democratic soviet power in the Soviet Union. There is still plenty of evidence that powerful currents within the bureaucracy reject socialist pluralism.” (p154) But he does not seem to conclude from this understanding that the only effective manner in which genuine popular democracy can be realised is to end the domination of the one party state. Only in this manner will it become possible to establish the role of different parties and so be able to develop genuine elections that enable a process of political rivalry between the various parties to occur. Thus, the creation of democracy requires the end of the domination of the Stalinist party. But instead of this logical conclusion Ali contends that it is the very actions of the communist party which could result in the creation of a credible democratic system. Instead, only the increasing effective struggle of the workers can establish the basis for the development of a genuine popular regime. However, Ali cannot directly advocate this perspective because he considers that progressive political change requires the actions of the communist party leadership of Gorbachev. Indeed, ultimately Gorbachev did introduce limited measures that led to a more credible political system based on the principles of universal suffrage, but this development was still combined with the hegemonic political power of the communist party. The bureaucratic socialist system was still maintained in these terms. Hence what was required was the development of popular action of the workers to create a democratic system connected to socialist principles. But instead of this development, Yeltsin increasingly connected the role of democracy to the aim of the restoration of capitalism, and it was this perspective that became practically realised.

In other words, the overall problems with the approach of Ali are that Trotsky’s perspective of the necessity of popular struggle by the workers in order to establish the basis of genuine progressive change is transformed into a political perspective of change from above by the role of the Stalinist party under the apparently progressive leadership of Gorbachev. But ultimately the very reform programme of Gorbachev was opposed by important sections of the party who attempted to realise a military coup in order to realise a more authoritarian regime. The most effective opposition to this development was Yeltsin who increasingly supported the aim of the restoration of capitalism. These problematical issues indicated that the Stalinist party could not be the agency of progressive change contrary to the perspective of Ali. Instead, there was no alternative than to develop the role of a genuine revolutionary party. The failure to realise this perspective meant that the crisis of Stalinism ultimately had a reactionary development in terms of the restoration of capitalism. Thus, the approach of Ali was ultimately discredited by events. His hope for change within the Stalinist system was honourable but it could not be realised. But the problem was that a genuine socialist party never emerged that could promote the perspective of the realisation of a revolutionary alternative to Stalinism.