THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOVIET UNION BY PHIL SHARPE

INTRODUCTION

It would seem that the significance of the Soviet Union has become irrelevant because of its ultimately brief existence and the rapidity of its demise. However, because of the apparent failure of the attempt to construct socialism the popular view is that there is no alternative to capitalism. In this article we do not intend to answer the question as to why socialism is still practically feasible and credible, or to provide a study of the events that led to the collapse of the USSR. Instead we attempt to provide support for the view that the USSR was bureaucratic collectivist and so could not express a democratic form of socialism. Instead the Stalinist bureaucracy was a new ruling class because of its domination of the state and the economy. We know that the theory of state capitalism has provided a more detailed political economy of the USSR, but this conception has been unable to explain the ideology of the CPSU and the international conflict which became known as the cold war. Furthermore, the theory of the degenerated workers state cannot explain how the bureaucracy became a ruling class and any vestige of socialism was eradicated by the domination of the party elite.

The reason for this development and failure to create socialism was because of the isolation of the Soviet regime after 1917, the civil war which created the apparatus of the party-military dictatorship, and the defeat of the Left Opposition, who were the most principled forces of internationalism and the political basis of the regeneration of the regime. Between 1918-1928 the state was effectively a deformed workers state, and so was still receptive to the aspirations of the workers and peasants. But in 1929 Stalin carried out his counterrevolution of forced collectivisation which led to massive repression against the peasants, and the situation of the working class also became worse because of rapid industrialisation. This development enabled the party bureaucracy to control the economy, via domination of the state, and so they became a new ruling class. The bureaucracy had carried out a type of civil war against the workers and peasants, which was actually called an offensive for socialism, which ended the vestiges of accountability of the state to these classes. This meant the nationalised property was not an expression of the potential for socialism and was instead under the control and domination of the Stalinist ruling class. All the organisations of the workers state which had expressed the influence of the working class such as Soviets and trade unions had been destroyed.

To define the USSR as a degenerated workers state is to project an autonomous progressive character onto the nationalised economy and to ignore the actual importance of the complete control of the state and economy by an unaccountable party elite, or the Stalinist bureaucracy. Thus in order to transform this situation required a social revolution that alters the economic, political and social relationships: “But from our whole analysis, it follows that the Stalinist counter-revolution, in seizing the power of the state, thereby changed the property relations in the Soviet Union. In overturning the rule of the bureaucracy, the Soviet proletariat will again raise itself to the position of ruling class, organize its own state, and once more change its relations to property.”(1)

The ideology of Stalinism (as we have explained in previous issues of Socialist Standpoint) was based on crude propaganda that socialism was being built. The bureaucracy recognised that it was historically illegitimate and could not justify its rule by an open acknowledgement of its supremacy. Instead the myth was created that the post 1929 regime was the continuation of the legacy of Lenin, and was trying to implement his wishes. Critics of the regime like Trotsky and Bukharin became to be portrayed as historical opponents of Lenin, and so rejected the very construction of socialism. In this repressive manner the reactionary regime was unable to develop an independent ideology and instead it had to uphold the myth that it was promoting the construction of socialism. However, the view that the CPSU was the leadership of this process of developing socialism was admirably suited to the interests of the bureaucratic system. The political action of the CPSU combined with nationalisation led to the generation of a statist conception of socialism. This standpoint was ideally suited to the rule of a regime that originated within a genuine proletarian revolution and yet had developed in terms of bureaucratic regression. If it was to be openly admitted that the regime no longer had any relationship to its revolutionary origins this admission could have led to mass opposition and even the prospect of a new revolution. Instead Stalin could only maintain his credibility in terms of the mythology as being the heir of Lenin. However, it was the effective exploitation of the working class within the nationalised economy that indicated the falsity of the ideology of the bureaucracy. In other words the contradiction between the ideology of the bureaucracy, with its false promise of communism and the classless society, and the reality of the economic domination of the party elite, was an expression of the class character of society. If society was state capitalist it would not have been tenable to have an ideology with the aim of socialism and communism.

In other words the methodology utilised in order to define the criteria for understanding the class character of the USSR is based on which social force controls the state. This is because the development of a workers state is based on the generation of state institutions like the Soviets. It is this state which carried out acts of nationalisation and the development of an economy based on social ownership. However, if this state undergoes political degeneration so that a party elite replaces the functioning of Soviet democracy, the result is that the state is no longer defined by its working class character and instead it has to be defined differently, and the relationship to the nationalised economy has also changed. In connection to the history of the USSR there was a transitional period in which the struggle for control of the state occurred between 1923-28. In this period tensions arose between the working class and the forces of the emerging new class. The end of the role of Bukharin in the leadership of the party and state led to the completed establishment of the domination of a party elite that was determined to exploit the working class within the organisation of nationalised property. Consequently, the class character of the state had changed, it was no longer a deformed workers state and instead a new exploiting class presided over the political apparatus.

The other aspect that confirmed the USSR was not a degenerated workers state or state capitalist was the events in Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War. What occurred in Eastern Europe was the creation of a social replica that was identical in class character to the Soviet Union. This meant the capitalist class was expropriated and the working class was denied any economic or political power: “In these countries, Stalinism triumphed over a bourgeois state and over a subject, not ruling proletariat.”(2) The only justification for the theory of the degenerated workers state is to argue that it is able to establish similar social forms by counterrevolutionary means of conquest and bureaucratic nationalisation. This viewpoint is absurd because it implies that a progressive social formation can be established by reactionary means. The only approach that is logical and coherent is that which accepts capitalism has been overthrown in a bureaucratic manner by a new class that is not capitalist or socialist. Hence the party elite represents a class that is the antagonist of both capitalism and socialism, and this means it is possible to understand how the economy is nationalised without it representing either type of society. Furthermore this development represents the expansion of the Soviet empire, or the promotion of a type of imperialism that is not capitalist.

The development of the cold war is most convincingly explained by the standpoint of bureaucratic collectivism. Hence the impetus of Stalinist expansion, epitomised by the aspiration to control Poland, means that the agreement of the Allied capitalist powers to this situation is only temporary. Sooner or later geo-political tension will develop because of the irreconcilable relationship of Western capitalism to the bureaucratic regime of the USSR and its expansionist dynamics. In 1944, Shachtman predicted the following: “And second, the seeds of the Third World War are being sown already. World War II is not yet over, decidedly not yet, and the conditions for speeding World War III are being laid. This idea is not peculiar to revolutionary Marxists. Many bourgeois understand it. Many even fear it, for the bourgeoisie does not want war, and especially does not want the revolutions that come with it. But it is helpless to prevent it, as utterly and completely helpless as it proved to be in 1939. The military struggle between the two big camps is accompanied by a feverish political struggle within the Allied camp. The attempts made in it to come to an agreement on the division of the spoils are condemned in advance to the failure which the temporary character of any imperialist agreement bears from the moment it is adopted. They agreed before, once, twice and ten times. Their very agreements contain the seeds of conflict. The agreement over Poland simply injects one of the many germs of tomorrow’s conflict.”(3)

Thus the diplomatic unity in relation to the task of defeating the aggression of the Axis powers cannot disguise the increasing contradictions within the Allied camp. The USSR wants to expand as far as possible in order to increase the power, prestige and revenues of its empire. In contrast, the Western Allies desire political independence for Eastern Europe, including Poland, in order to promote their economic influence. There is a basic conflict of interest between the differing regimes of the USSR and the USA and UK. Hence any diplomatic agreements will be temporary and instead the situation will become polarised and create the possibility of a third world war. The basic issues of contention is expressed by the actuality of rival forms of imperialism which cannot be reconciled by political agreement, and this situation means the Allies are composed of incompatible social regimes. This contradiction suggests that the political conditions for Third World war can only be overcome by the development of the struggle for world revolution, including the formation of a United Socialist states of Europe.

However, the period after Stalin seemed to pose important challenges to the theory of bureaucratic collectivism. The USSR became able to provide reforms for the working class and no longer primarily based its legitimacy on the role of state repression. But the suppression of the Hungarian revolution did indicate that the party elite was still motivated by the aims of Soviet imperialism. Nevertheless, the Khruschev regime was interested in providing more consumer goods for the population, and introducing methods that enhanced the efficiency of the economy for the benefit of society. It was the inability of the theorists of bureaucratic collectivism to appraise the importance of these changes that undermined its credibility and turned it into a dogma. Furthermore, the theory was ultimately challenged by its lack of a political economy and the failure to carry out serious study of the ideology of the CPSU. Instead it was a theory which was able to explain the origins of the process of degeneration within the USSR, but which became ossified and was replaced by apparently more dynamic theories of the USSR. We hope to begin a defence of the credibility of the theory of bureaucratic collectivism in this article. This study will be based on a limited evaluation of rival theories.

A CRITIQUE OF THE DEGENERATED WORKERS STATE APPROACH

One of the works which has carried out in the most comprehensive manner an attempt to elaborate Trotsky’s understanding of the USSR was the Workers Power Group. They collectively developed a work which was entitled: ‘The Degenerated Revolution.’(4) This work begins with a description of the conception of a workers state and the process of transition to communism which is based on the highest levels of political democracy, as expressed by the Paris Commune and the early period of the October revolution, and the conscious realisation of planning on the basis of social ownership. They argue that if the working class no longer has political power, the state will change its character and the promotion of socialism will be undermined: “The result will be that “the state” will continue in precisely the form Marxists seek to abolish – set above and against the toilers. Far from a tendency to ever greater equality, inequalities will continue and solidify.”(5) This situation could easily result in the conclusion that the state, which is no longer accountable to the working class, is an expression of different social interests. However this conclusion is not made because it is argued that the expropriation of the capitalist class and the introduction of planning means that the state represents a degenerated workers state. So the very process of Stalinist counterrevolution, which led to the formation of a new class dominating nationalised property, via the expropriation of the peasantry and the introduction of planning for industry, is portrayed with progressive credentials. The fact that this is not capitalism means that the state and society is defined in the contradictory terms of being a workers state without democracy. Only in this illogical manner is it possible to reject the view that the domination of the state by the Stalinist bureaucracy represents the development of the rule of a new class. In the description of the development of the Soviet state the difficulties caused by the lack of Soviet democracy, the failure of workers control, and the alienation of the peasantry caused by war communism, are glossed over and instead the character of the workers state is defined in strictly economistic terms in terms of the nationalisation of the economy, the role of planning, and the state monopoly of foreign trade. The authors are aware of the increasing bureaucratisation of the workers state and Lenin’s vain but valiant attempts to overcome this development. But they tend to locate the major reasons for this situation with the role of the New Economic Policy and the conciliation of the peasantry and the importance of private trade. This meant they could not recognise that the effective end of NEP in the period 1928-29 was the expression of the formation of a new ruling class. Instead the situation was defined as the rise of Stalinist Bonapartism, and so the development of a bureaucratic caste was not recognised as the effective expression of the ascendency of a new ruling class. Instead the situation was described in the following terms: “The events of 1927 to 1930 saw the establishment of a Bonapartist regime on the ruins of Lenin’s party, the Soviet structures of the workers state and the ruins of the Thermidorian party and state of the mid 1920’s.”(6)

What was an important qualitative change was not identified because dogmatically only quantitative changes could be accepted by the methodology of Workers Power. This meant the formation of the Stalinist ruling class, via its completed control of the state, expropriation of the peasantry, and the introduction of five year plans, could only be understood in political terms as the demise of Lenin’s party. But this development was effectively an aspect of the creation of a ruling class that had obtained control of the state and economy. The actual unaccountable domination of the bureaucracy is described by Workers Power but they refuse to make the logical conclusions which was that an effective counterrevolution had occurred with the demise of the workers state and the generation of a new type of society. Indeed it would be difficult to understand the catastrophic implications of the evens of 1928-30 without these being related to the creation of the bureaucracy as a ruling class. The break with Bukharin and his comrades was because they would not accept the end of the worker-peasant alliance, and the related demise of the deformed workers state, in the name of economic progress. The Right Opposition and Left Opposition were united in their defence of the October revolution against the measures being taken to end the remnants of the workers state.

Indeed the approach of Workers Power means that it critically supported the extension of economic planning as a measure against capitalism. Stalinism was described in the following terms: “It differed from the right in that, in certain exceptional circumstances, should its political grip on the Soviet state be threatened, it was capable of bureaucratically moving against private property and of developing and extending a form of economic planning in conflict with the operation of the law of value. Its interest in developing forms of planning flowed from its need to hold onto the political power it had usurped, not from a commitment to socialism.”(7) This standpoint rigidly and dogmatically denied that the development of planning could express the interests of a new ruling class and therefore was not because of concern about the restoration of capitalism. Or rather, it could be argued that the ideology of opposition to the kulak was a convenient political measure to gloss over the objective effect of the so-called socialist offensive which was to promote the formation of a new ruling class. Workers Power admit that the motive of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not to defend socialism, but their standpoint means that they ambiguously define what occurred in terms of the extension of bureaucratic privileges. This vague standpoint could be overcome if it was explicitly admitted that what was occurring was the utilisation of economic measures in order to generate the creation of a ruling class that was able to systematically extract a surplus from the producers. The process of collectivisation is described as repressive and lacking any genuine popular support within the peasantry, and the failure to organise this measure in terms of economic preparation is outlined. However, this description is unable to explain the cause of this development which is only intelligible in terms of the undermining of the social influence of the peasants and the generation of the economic power of the state. The forces of petty-bourgeois commodity production has been replaced by the omnipotent economic domination of the state bureaucracy which has reduced the peasants to being a new type of serf within the collective farms, and therefore their productive activity becomes based on the requirements of the state and the dictates of the five year plan.

However the ambiguous standpoint of the degenerated workers state theory means that the eradication of private capitalism and the introduction of planning within agriculture and industry can be presented as a semi-progressive measure in terms of the advance of so-called collectivisation and the five year plan: “The defining feature of Stalinist state power, the attempt to create a bureaucratically planned economy on the basis both of the destruction of capitalist property relations and the political expropriation of the proletariat, took shape in the period of the first two five year plans.”(8) However the very fact that the end of capitalism was based on the repression of the peasants and the consolidation of the bureaucratic state meant that collectivisation and the five year plan could only express the generation of the ability of the elite to create the economic basis to extract a surplus from the workers and peasants. There was nothing historically progressive about the end of capitalism which was based on the coercion of the peasants and the end of any gains of the workers within the organisation of the factories. Indeed it could be argued that the inefficiencies introduced into the Soviet economy meant that the actuality of planning was a semi-fiction, and what was actually dominant was the attempt of the bureaucracy to extract a surplus via the atrocious conditions on the collective farms and the low wages of the workers within the process of industrialisation. Instead of this clarity, the defenders of the degenerated workers state approach suggest: “While opposed to the Marxist programme for the planned construction of socialism in the aftermath of destroying the bourgeoisie, Stalinism can expropriate bourgeois property and create planning mechanisms for its own non-socialist purposes.”(9) What does this comment mean? Without reference to the actual development of exploitation in relation to the process of forced collectivisation and introduction of the five year plans, the so-called Stalinist expropriation of bourgeois property can only be envisaged as being a semi-progressive measure that overcomes the importance of non-socialist forms of production. At its most precise we have the formulation that bureaucratic planning is opposed to socialism and yet represents an advance from capitalism. This standpoint is based on the vague dialectical view that the bureaucracy is both reactionary and progressive, reactionary in that genuine socialism has not been advanced, but progressive because the influence of capitalism has been ended. Instead of this ambiguity we should argue explicitly that the bureaucratic repression of capitalism was reactionary because it was based on coercion against the peasants and the worsening of conditions within the factories. There is nothing progressive about the extension of nationalisation and the role of the five year plans.

It is admitted by the defenders of the degenerated workers state theory that the very character of bureaucratic planning means that it is implemented in an anti-democratic manner and against the interests of the workers, and that low productivity and inefficiency is the result. But what cannot be admitted is that the relations of production are an expression of the attempt to impose forms of exploitation onto the working class. The work, ‘The Degenerated Revolution’ outlines in useful empirical detail the poor conditions of the workers, but it fails to connect them to the significance of exploitation because this admission would refute the conception of the degenerated workers state. Instead the authors support Trotsky’s view that the bureaucracy does not have an indispensable role within the relations of production and so is not an economically dominant and ruling class: “For these reasons it remains the case that, even in Stalin’ Russia, the working class remained the ruling class because the property relations in existence were those that the working class requires in order to build socialism. The working class, had, however, been expropriated by a caste of bureaucrats analogous to the caste of bureaucrats in the trade union moment under capitalism.”(10) This comment is unfortunately nonsensical. What is denied is the undoubted empirical fact that the nationalised property relations are dominated by the state bureaucracy and its aims to extract a surplus in order to enhance its privileges. Thus the character of nationalised property cannot be independent of this economic domination imposed by the bureaucratic elite. Hence the bureaucracy is more than parasitical on the relations of production and is instead indispensable to its character. The ability to develop the productive forces is based on the exploitation of the workers by the bureaucracy within the relations of production of nationalised property and the role of planning. Consequently, nationalised property cannot have a character independent of the significance of the bureaucracy, and to therefore define the working class as a ruling class despite its exploitation and subordination within the relations of production, is absurd. In other words the conception that the working class has been deprived of political power, and yet in the last analysis has still got dominant economic influence is not logical. The working class cannot be a ruling class and yet be exploited. This is why the actuality of exploitation within the relations of production has to be denied by the degenerated workers state theory.

The contradictions of the degenerated workers state theory are explained by the authors in terms of the importance of Stalinist Bonapartism, or the political independence of the regime from its nationalised economic base and importance of the working class. This explains a regime of terror. But a vague reference to contradictions does not explain the political tensions of the system. Instead the inefficiency of the exploitative economic system, and its inability to create high quality consumer goods, and the prevalence of low wages, means the system had to be upheld by means of repression and the denial of effective political democracy. This is justified ideologically by the conception of the party leading the struggle to create socialism ad make advances to communism. This ideology attempts to gloss over the exploitative character of the relations of production and instead claims to continue the political legacy of Lenin. Consequently, the contradictions of the USSR are not between its potential socialist character expressed by the nationalised economy, and the related role of the working class, which contrasts with its political reactionary forms of state repression and the independence of Stalinist Bonapartism. Instead the Stalinist elite has definite domination of the nationalised economy, but ideologically it cannot promise that this situation will result in genuine socialism. There is a political tension between the adherence of the bureaucracy to the continuation of exploitation within the relations of production and the promise of the classless society of communism. Stalin can only suggest that the party is needed in order to conduct the class struggle successfully against the vestiges of the counterrevolutionary offensive. Thus the terror of 1936-38 is required in order to crush this reactionary resistance to the completed realisation of socialism. Thus in order to reinforce the control of the economy by the party elite there is no possibility that genuine democracy can develop. Instead repression is needed in order to ensure that discontent with the economic domination of the bureaucracy does not become a new revolution. It would not be possible to explain the political repression of the 1930’s except in terms of the tenacious attempts of the party elite to maintain the exploitative character of the relations of production. Hence to describe this situation in terms of contradictions between the character of nationalised property and the political rule of the bureaucracy are absurd. There is no contradiction of this type because the economy is utilised by the bureaucracy in order to extract a surplus. The repressive political regime reinforces this situation.

The Degenerated Revolution describes quite accurately the tensions in the Allied camp in the Second World War, and how the Soviet bureaucracy was concerned to expand and control Eastern Europe whilst curbing the various mass movements against capitalism. In the period 1944-47, the Stalinists promoted bourgeois governments that were favourable towards the interests of the USSR. The various popular Fronts between Stalinists and the national bourgeoisie were effectively of a transitional character because of the irreconcilable social interests. The Western Imperialist camp was never reconciled to Soviet control of Eastern Europe, and ultimately this antagonism led to the Truman doctrine and the introduction of Marshal Aid which undermined the integrity of the Soviet economy. This analysis concludes with the understanding that bureaucratic workers governments were formed because of these international tensions that led to the overthrow of capitalism without involving the working class. The political expropriation of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by increasing nationalisation and the completion of the control of the state by the Stalinists. With the introduction of five year plans the creation of bureaucratic workers states was completed: “The qualitative transformation of those bureaucratised states into a bureaucratically degenerate form of the dictatorship of the proletariat took place at the point when the regimes expropriated the bourgeoisie economically and set out to subordinate and curtail the operation of the essential law of the capitalist economy, the law of value, and to organise their nationalised economies on the basis of the planning principle, albeit in a bureaucratically deformed manner.”(11)

We can agree with most of this analysis and accept the understanding of the process of change and some of the aspects of the character of the counterrevolutionary transformation. It is necessary to emphasise that the cause of the process of developments was the very Red Army control of Eastern Europe, this meant that at some point in the near future the situation of dual power of popular front governments would be altered by the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. In this context, the increasing Western hostility towards the fact of Soviet control of Eastern Europe was only the aspect that generated the immediate process of change and the carrying out of measures to overthrow capitalism. The point is that the economic and political control of Eastern Europe by the USSR was essential to the strengthening of the social power of Soviet imperialism and so the period of popular fronts could only be transitional. Furthermore, the view that a degenerated workers state was formed because of the introduction of an economic plan implies that the system was progressive when compared to the anarchic character of capitalist relations of production. Furthermore, the determinist viewpoint is being justified, namely that the introduction of the plan was the ultimate aim of the bureaucracy motivated by the creation of the workers state. In actuality, the introduction of an economic plan can only be in the interests of the bureaucratic elite that was intent on exploiting the working class within nationalised property. To argue, as Workers Power do, that military-bureaucratic measures were carried out that led to the political expropriation of the working class, and the formation of a degenerated workers state, is absurd. It is not possible to create any type of workers state by reactionary methods. Instead the result of this particular reactionary political process was the generation of the economic and social power of the bureaucracy which is motivated by the aim of exploiting the working class within nationalised property.

The dilemmas of the credibility of Workers Power’s position were articulated by them in an appendix when they asked the question: “To put it bluntly, how could the property relations of a workers state be introduced without there being a proletarian revolution, by which we mean the overthrow of the bourgeois state by working class organisations such as workers councils and a workers militia?”(12) It is not possible to answer this question within the limitations of this theory. Without genuine proletarian revolution, and on the basis of counterrevolutionary methods, it is possible to overthrow capitalism but the result is not the formation of any type of workers state. Instead what is created is the domination of the economy and society by a bureaucratic elite. The confusion is not overcome in the position of Workers Power when they argue that the dynamics of the process of the overthrow of capitalism was based on the formation of bureaucratic workers governments: “The bureaucratic workers government has to be understood as a reactionary variation of this category, a government of workers parties that was prepared to expropriate capital, but totally opposed to the very existence, never mind power, of such workers organisations as workers councils and workers militias. The programme of such a “bureaucratic workers government” was not workers revolution and the building of a “semi-state” destined to wither away when its functions had been fulfilled, but bureaucratic expropriation to create a copy of the Soviet Union’s “degenerate workers state.”(13) Thus the bureaucratic workers government creates a type of workers state and yet is opposed to the programme of popular democracy that is necessary for the creation of a genuine workers state. Hence this type of government acts on behalf of the working class and yet is opposed to the revolutionary aspirations of this social force.

Consequently, even though Workers Power try to deny that the role of the bureaucratic workers government is to create promote the ‘road to socialism’, they also portray this process of change as progressive because they concede that a ‘model of socialism’ has been created by the actions of the bureaucratic elite.(14) This is the only logical conclusion, because if it is accepted that the reactionary methods of the bureaucracy do not culminate in the creation of a new type of exploitative society, it has to be reluctantly conceded that that the role of the national communist parties in Eastern Europe is to promote the development of a society that is in some form more progressive than capitalism or other types of societies dominated by an exploitative class.

These confusions and tensions are extended and deepened when it is also admitted that the process of the creation of the degenerated workers state is carried out by a form of the bourgeois state. Workers Power maintain that only a genuine proletarian revolution based on the role of Soviets can begin the task of smashing the bourgeois state. In contrast, the Stalinist parties established influence and domination over the bourgeois state in Eastern Europe which enabled them to create bureaucratic workers states. Indeed it has to be admitted that the Stalinist parties reconstructed and consolidated the bourgeois state in the period of popular frontism, and this situation was then utilised in order to supervise the expropriation of the capitalists: “Instead the apparatus of the bourgeois state, whose personnel had been purged of those suspected of continued loyalty to the former ruling class and were now organised politically by a party modelled on that of the Soviet Union, oversaw an economy and society that corresponded in all essentials to that of the Soviet Union itself.”(15) Thus it is being argued that a type of bourgeois state creates a degenerated workers state! This standpoint is absurd. It is more tenable and logical to suggest that the purging of the state created a new type of state, but this would be the generation of a bureaucratic state that was dedicated to the reactionary overthrow of capitalism and the introduction of the exploitation of the working class via the role of planning. The actions of the Communist party could generate a new class character to the state and society, but this could not be the creation of a type of workers state, which required authentic proletarian revolution for its development, and instead what occurred was the formation of a bureaucratic state subordinated to the USSR and based upon exploitative relations of production. The verbal gymnastics of Workers Power cannot gloss over the fact that a form of repressive bourgeois state cannot create a higher social form, or workers state, even of a degenerated type.

Workers Power outline convincingly that there are independent aspects to the process of the overthrow of capitalism in Yugoslavia. This development resulted in tensions with Stalin and the split of 1948. However the importance of limited industrial democracy for modifying the bureaucratic character of Yugoslavia is not explained, and so the hybrid aspects of its social formation are not outlined. The process of bureaucratic transformation in China is outlined in impressive detail by Workers Power. They outline how the perspective of national reconciliation with the bourgeoisie led to an extended period of dual power between1949-1952. However, the Korean War and the increasing antagonism of American imperialism resulted in the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. Systematic and comprehensive planning was introduced in 1953, and so the importance of private capital was replaced by the role of the state. In Vietnam the war with foreign imperialism is outlined by Workers Power as having an important influence on social developments. The effective assimilation of the South of Vietnam by the Northern state after the victory over USA imperialism enabled the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism to be completed with the introduction of planning in 1976.

It is developments in Cuba that really ‘test’ the degenerated workers states theory in relation to the fact that the question of the overthrow of capitalism was carried out by a movement that was not of a Stalinist origin. It had been possible to relate developments in Yugoslavia, China and South-East Asia to the Soviet model because the major role in the process of change was based on Stalinist parties. However, could it be possible for a petty-bourgeois political organisation to carry out the process of the creation of a workers state? The Trotskyist movement was split between those that argued a healthy workers state based on forms of political democracy had been established, and the supporters of the view that a deformed workers state similar to that of the USSR had been created. There was also the view that the petty bourgeoisie could not overthrow capitalism and so the situation was characterised by the emergence of state capitalism. Workers Power outline how the original intention of the successful July 26th movement led by Fidel Castro was not to overthrow capitalism, but increasingly the dynamics of land reform and criticism from the USA led to a left-wing turn. This situation led to reconciliation with the estranged Stalinists and the petty-bourgeois government increasingly carried out measures of nationalisation in 1960. This meant a bureaucratic workers government had been formed: “From the summer of 1960, the Castro government had become a bureaucratic anti-capitalist workers government, a government forced to attack and break the economic power of the bourgeoisie, but through carefully controlled bureaucratic measures and mobilisations.”(16) However it was the economic and political support of the USSR after the trade embargo imposed by the US that enabled Cuba to be supported and survive. Workers Power argue that the importance of nationalisations and the introduction of five year planning in 1962 led to the creation of a degenerated workers state.

There is a vague analysis of the character of the Cuban government before 1960 in the Workers Power book. It is sometimes described as a bourgeois workers and peasant government that was not decisively committed to the overthrow of capitalism, and was based on the influence of petty-bourgeois parties. What would be more precise would be to define the social form as a Bonapartist bourgeois government that in the last analysis was not yet committed to breaking with capitalism. The early nationalisations of 1960 did not yet mean an end to this situation, but the increasing connections within the USSR meant the formation of a bureaucratic government based on the aim of the overthrow of capitalism. By the latter part of 1960 it was possible to suggest that a bureaucratic state had been established. We can argue that the forces of the petty-bourgeoisie with the mass support of the workers and peasants were able to overthrow capitalism because of the crucial support of the USSR which provided the material basis for a Cuba that had become economically isolated from the USA. However the result is not the generation of a degenerated workers state because the influence of the USSR meant the only outcome of the process of change could be the creation of a bureaucratic state. Furthermore, the only manner in which a genuine workers state can be formed is by authentic proletarian revolution. What had occurred was a process of effective structural assimilation of Cuba into the social system of the USSR. The ability of Cuba to survive was because of its material connections to the USSR.

The authors of ‘Degenerated Revolution’ reject the approach of structural assimilation which considers that the creation of the various deformed workers states in Eastern Europe was because of the primary role of the Soviet Union, or the extension of the nationalised property relations created by the degeneration of the October revolution.(17) They argue that this approach denies the importance of independent political development in Vietnam, China, Yugoslavia and Cuba. However, the ‘Degenerated Revolution’ constantly refers to the importance of the Soviet Union in the process of the overthrow of capitalism, and the work is aware that the USSR is central to understanding the developments that occurred in the post-war period. But in order to establish consistency to this approach it is necessary to apply the theory of the formation of a bureaucratic state. Eastern Europe was likely to undergo the process of assimilation with the USSR because of the establishment of its post-war dominance over this area. In other words Soviet domination meant the situation was favourable to the creation of similar bureaucratic states and the overthrow of capitalism in a counterrevolutionary manner once the tensions with the imperialist forces became intensified. The situation in Yugoslavia was contradictory in that the tempo of developments was decided by internal factors, but the actual change itself of the overthrow of capitalism would have been inconceivable without the influence of the USSR. This point could also be applied to China. The internal tempo of developments was connected to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the civil war, but the ability to overthrow capitalism and create a bureaucratic state was related to the role of the USSR. The agreement between Stalin and Mao in 1950 meant China became part of the ‘socialist camp’, and so financial and economic support was provided for its development. In relation to Cuba the assistance of the USSR was crucial to the possibility of its ability to overthrow capitalism without being isolated and subject to the pressure of the USA. The Cuban regime would not have been able to survive without its relationship to the USSR.

In other words what characterised the process of change and creation of bureaucratic states was the importance of structural assimilation. The ability to oppose the pressures of imperialism was because the countries of Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam and Cuba were incorporated into the Soviet empire in terms of economic agreements and tactic political control. In contrast, the dispute between China and the USSR meant the beginning of the fragmentation of the Soviet empire, and the isolation of China, despite its initial radicalism, meant the beginning of the process that led to the dynamics of the restoration of capitalism. Furthermore, the effective gaining of national independence from the USSR by the various regimes in Eastern Europe between 1989-91 undermined the prestige of the USSR and hastened the process of the restoration of capitalism. The demise of the Soviet empire meant the end of the ideological legitimacy of the bureaucratic system and the result was the overthrow of the domination of the CPSU.

However despite these various criticisms of the ‘Degenerated Revolution’ work it describes in comprehensive detail the various limitations of the bureaucratically planned economy, and the contradictions that led to the tendencies for the restoration of capitalism. It describes vividly how Gorbachev was unable to reform the system and instead the result was the formation of a new system system that was based on the restoration of capitalism. In this context, the ability to explain developments in impressive empirical detail indicates the importance of the role of the degenerated workers states despite its flawed conception of the social system in the USSR. The authors of this work also carried out important criticisms of the theory of state capitalism in terms of its political economy and description of the demise of the USSR and the disintegration of its empire. Hence without supporting the various premises and conclusions of ‘Degenerated Revolution’ we can consider it an important work that can contribute to the development of an even more impressive theory of the history of the USSR since 1953.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Max Shachtman: The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Donald Press, New York, 1962 p57

(2)ibid p82

(3)ibid p147

(4)Workers Power: The Degenerated Revolution (second edition) Prinkipo, London, 2012

(5)ibid p8

(6)ibid p45

(7)ibid p47

(8)ibid p51

(9)ibid p51

(10)ibid p89

(11)ibid p129

(12)Appendix- Marxist State Theory p461

(13)ibid p464-465

(14)ibid p465

(15)ibid p467

(16)ibid p192

(17)ibid p267-270