UNDERSTANDING STALINISM - PART TWO

TED GRANT'S UNDERSTANDING OF STALINISM

Ted Grant has an important historical role as being one of the foremost theorists within the Fourth International who developed the perspective of the formation of deformed workers states. However, this standpoint was most outlined in resolutions and obscure pamphlets. Near the end of his long life he decided to write a book about the history of the Soviet Union.(1) This outlined in comprehensive detail his understanding of the revolution and Stalinism. What is most interesting is his interpretation of Trotsky's conception of the degenerated workers state. He developed his distinctive conception of proletarian Bonapartism, and utilised it in order to study the history of Stalinism and in order to also comprehend the Yeltsin period of the restoration of capitalism. Ted Grant argues that despite the mismanagement of Stalinism the economy made major advances in productivity and in its ability to realise the material welfare of the people. But increasing the contradictions between the requirements of the planned economy and the limitations of the role of the bureaucracy led to an impasse by the late 1970's. The achievements of the USSR meant that it was historically justified despite the retrogression represented by Stalinism. Ultimately the bureaucracy was undermining the possibility for further social improvement, and it began to consider the option of capitalism as the means to overcome the impasse.

Grant's starting point is that the October revolution was a genuine proletarian revolution based on the role of organs of popular democracy, the Soviets, and the high level of class struggle. The Bolsheviks attempted to provide leadership to what had emerged as a mass movement. The result was a popular revolution and the installation of a revolutionary regime. However, Grant is uncritical of some of the controversial measures such as the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the role of War Communism, and he only defends the New Economic Policy in the most limited manner as a necessary retreat. He does not recognise its possibility to advance socialism. Grant considers the foremost task of the transitional workers state is to develop the productive forces in order to create the material conditions for socialism.(2) This standpoint is correct, but what this process also involves is the development of democratic consent for this task. The working class and the peasantry have to become supporters of this aim because they are involved in the attempt to generate the material conditions for socialism. Such a situation implies that the state is not bureaucratic, and so does not impose its will onto society. Instead the state is an expression of the popular will of the workers and peasants, and this situation is also expressed within the economy. However, the major problem is that the transitional state in Russia was unable to promote socialism in the most principled manner. Instead as Grant outlines: “Thus the new state assumes a dual character: socialist in so far as it defends nationalised property relations, and bourgeois in so far as he distribution of goods and services is carried out by capitalist methods of wage labour. However, by using bourgeois norms of distribution, the productive force will be propelled forward and will serve socialist objectives in the last analysis. Nevertheless, as Lenin points out, the exploitation of man by man will have become impossible because the means of production will remain social property. This fact alone cannot remove the defects of distribution and the inequality of bourgeois law. The immediate abolition of capitalism does not provide the material classless society. It is a means to an end. The state itself – although a semi-state – sees it role as to safeguard this bourgeois law, which sanctifies a certain inequality in society. With the further development of the productive forces and the attainment of communism, the state and also the other vestiges of capitalism disappear.”(3)

The problem with this generalised conception of the relation of the state to society is that it does not correspond to the developing situation in Russia. The state has become more independent of the popular forces within society and is starting to impose its own imperatives in the economy, and the organs of democracy have been reduced to a formality. Hence the state has an extreme independence from the working class and peasantry, and this means it is only able to promote socialism in the most limited and inadequate manner. The elite character of the state is in competition with the objective of advancing socialism. Grant outlines the administrative measures that Lenin advocated in order to tackle the issue of bureaucracy, but he does not seem to recognise that they were insufficient because what had to be tackled was the alienating power of the state over society. This domination had to be limited, and the workers and peasants had to become involved in both the decisions of the state and the economy. Lenin did not accept that the elite character of the state meant it could, and indeed was, undermining the socialist objectives of society. Unfortunately he conceived the problem of the state in terms of its bureaucratic practices, and so did not recognise that the central issue was its increasing independent power over society. In addition, he did not recognise that part of the answer was ending the party state. Instead he considered the hegemonic role of the party central to the functioning of the state. Grant accepts uncritically the understanding of the state provided by Lenin. Hence Grant is reluctant to conclude that the state is acquiring a type of power that means it is opposed to socialism. Instead he is adopting the conclusion that he never rejects, namely the state is a bureaucratic limitation which ultimately does not undermine the promotion of socialism.

Grant argues that is was optimistic to believe that Trotsky could have taken power in a situation representing the influence of reaction. He is correct if this issue is limited to the role of the party, but what was a mistake was the reluctance of Trotsky and other opportunists to refuse to struggle outside the party. They could have developed a mass and popular campaign of opposition to the bureaucratic party regime. This development could not have ensured success, but it could have led to genuine mobilisation against the regime. The problem was that Trotsky was reluctant to develop a movement against the centrism of Stalin. Instead criticism was limited to the upper echelons of the party. In contrast to this ambitious perspective, Grant considers that Trotsky's defeat was inevitable. Reaction could not be overcome. This pessimism is fatalistic. Lenin would have carried out an intransigent struggle in order to defeat the party leadership. Trotsky could have equalled that audacity with an appeal to the workers outside of the party.

Grant is critical of the adventurist methods of forced collectivisation, but he is unable to define the character of this development. Instead the repressive measures and the intensification of one man management and greater labour discipline are understood in the following manner: “The bureaucracy with Stalin at its head was consolidating its hold over power. By the mid 1930's, the bureaucracy had secured for itself a privileged and powerful position far greater than any bureaucracy in history.”(4) This is true, but what did the process of increasing social differentiation within the economy and society represent? Grant accepts that this situation meant the bureaucracy was extracting a surplus from the workforce, but he also denies the significance of this point when he suggests that the bureaucracy was a parasitic stratum: “The bureaucracy was eager to share in the growing surplus produced by the labour of the Russian working class. It devoured, wasted and embezzled a considerable proportion of the nation's income.”(5) This comment is illogical in that he is describing the importance of two different functions. The point is that the extraction of a surplus had an inefficient form, and so often seemed to have a parasitic quality. However exploitation became systematic with the introduction of planning. The economic significance of collectivisation and rapid industrialisation cannot be separated from the logical conclusion of the role of an alienated state that was no longer receptive to the interests of the workers and peasants.

Grant supports Trotsky's characterisation of the process of modernisation as an expression of both bureaucratic centrism and Bonapartism. This does not make sense, because centrism would imply some expression of a progressive policy, whilst Bonapartism suggests the further development of a dictatorship. In other words what was being proposed was confusing. The mistake that Trotsky made was to imply that Stalin was bureaucratically defending socialism using Bonapartist methods, and this was why he was still a centrist. In actuality, Stalin was completing the process of the separation of the state from the exploited masses in the form of the introduction of the process of the extraction of a surplus in the process of production. Grant supports Trotsky because he is beginning to utilise the concept of proletarian Bonapartism in order to justify the view that the state can act in an independent, elitist and distinctive manner, and yet in the last analysis still uphold the interests of the working class. This was how the process of the introduction of planning is considered. So despite being critical of forced collectivisation, Grant still implies some level of limited support: “To safeguard and entrench itself as a privileged caste, the Stalinist bureaucracy was forced to lean on the workers in order to smash the incipient bourgeois counter-revolution.”(6) But the point is that the peasants were not in rebellion against the state, instead they had become dissatisfied by a deliberate lowering of grain procurement prices. Collectivisation was a deliberate policy, and Grant does criticise its terrible consequences. But he does not deny its supposed progressive aspects, whilst industrialisation is linked by Grant with economic growth despite measures being taken to undermine the standard of living of the workers.

Instead of relating the process of modernisation, the reactionary foreign policy and the purges with the creation of a new exploitative regime, Grant utilises the concept of proletarian Bonapartism in order to suggest that the nationalised economy established by the revolution was defended by the bureaucracy. The increasingly independent state is still based on the conquests of the revolution: “The peculiar nature of the bureaucracy as a usurping ruling caste gave rise to all sorts of contradictions. The bureaucracy, which had politically expropriated the working class, nevertheless based itself on the nationalised property forms established by the revolution.”(7) Grant failed to recognise that the very process of political expropriation of the working class by an increasingly bureaucratic state prepared the basis for its economic subordination and the end of the possibility of the advance of transition to socialism. The Bonapartist character of the state had counter-revolutionary consequences which Grant was not prepared to contemplate. Instead he argued that a proletarian Bonapartist state still defended socialism in a bureaucratic manner. In other words Grant is effectively defending the concept of bureaucratic socialism. He is implying that Stalinism, despite being reactionary and repressing the working class, still defends the aims of socialism in terms of the promotion of the interests of the nationalised economy. In terms of genuine socialism, proletarian Bonapartism is a retrogressive political superstructure, but it still upholds the interests of a limited and flawed socialism because it acts as the guardian of the nationalised economy. This understanding is based on a denial of the actual character of the relations of production, because the Stalinist domination of the nationalised economy has become an expression of the subordination of the working class to the requirements of accumulation. Hence Soviet Bonapartism is not the defence of socialism in the last instance, and is instead the regime of a new form of society.

The point is that it is not possible to reconcile a situation of intense repression and personal dictatorship with the view that a potentially progressive nationalised economy is functioning in a limited and distorted manner. Instead the reactionary political superstructure must reflect corresponding changes within the economy which have led to the imposition of the exploitation of the producers. Instead, Grant utilises the understanding that the state can acquire independence from the class that it claims to represent in order to define Stalinism. But the point is that this situation does not express Stalinism, and is instead the character of the transitional state under Lenin. The adverse conditions for building socialism in the early years of the Russian revolution led to the creation of an elite state that acted on behalf of the working class instead of expressing an apparatus that was the direct agency of class interests. Grant cannot recognise that under Stalinism this contradiction between state and society was resolved in a reactionary manner because he considers that in the last analysis the fact of the nationalised economy means that the proletarian character of society is maintained: “Although it does not exhaust the question of the class nature of the state, which at different times is defined in different ways, economy and property relations are decisive in the long run. Because of this, as all the Marxist teachers were at pains to explain, in the last analysis the superstructure must come into correspondence with it.”(8) This apparent truth is abstract if the extent of the social changes are ignored. The point is in the specific instance of the USSR the decline of the workers state into becoming a bureaucratic state meant that this process of political degeneration transformed the nationalised economy and it became the expression of a new form of exploitation. This meant to continue to define the situation in terms of the contradictions of the original Soviet state amounted to denying the reactionary and truly counter-revolutionary importance of Stalinism. It defended nationalised property not as an expression of a workers state, but instead as the basis to extract a surplus from the working class.

Grant defends his position by suggesting that under capitalism many forms of political regime are possible, and the state assumes different forms. This point is true of capitalism, but it is not valid in relation to the workers state. Only the most democratic type of state is valid for the revolutionary regime of the working class. This means a bureaucratic distorted workers state can only exist for a limited period of time. It must undergo regeneration as a revived form of democratic state or alternatively degenerate further until it promotes a new type of exploitative society. This latter situation occurred with the Stalinist counter-revolution. Grant denies the logic of this perspective because he considers that the nationalised economy is sufficient for establishing a distorted or degenerated workers state which despite its Bonapartist political regime still promotes socialism in the form of the development of the productive forces: “A transitional state inevitably has a contradictory character. The Soviet regime was based on the new property relations that issued from the October revolution, but still had many elements taken over from the old bourgeois society. The nationalisation of the means of production is the prior condition for moving in the direction of socialism, but the possibility of really carrying society onto the a higher stage of human development depends on the level of the productive forces.”(9) In the last analysis, this standpoint implies that the question of the character of the political regime is secondary because the economic importance of the nationalised economy means that socialism is being advanced. Such an analysis is flawed because the issue of the type of political regime developing within the transitional state was vital. The continuation of the process of degeneration of the workers state meant that at some point the very economic basis of socialism would be seriously undermined. This was why Stalinism meant the end of the workers state, and the creation of a new type of reactionary society. The prospect of socialism was not compatible with many different political forms, and Bonapartism did not represent the distorted defence of a progressive nationalised economy but instead led to economic transformation and the defeat of the aims of the revolution.

Grant argued that the process of reaction after the era of Lenin led to the working class being deprived of its political power, but in an elite and Bonapartist manner the bureaucracy came to defend the nationalised economy established by the revolution: “The political counter-revolution carried out by the bureaucracy completely liquidated the regime of workers Soviet democracy, but did not destroy the new property relations established by the October revolution. Raising itself above the workers, the bureaucracy sought to regulate these internal contradictions in its own interests. It based itself on the nationalised planned economy and played a relatively progressive role in developing the productive forces and, although...at three times the cost of capitalism...In the end it raised itself above the proletariat and established a regime of bureaucratic absolutism, where the working class was politically expropriated, without rights or any say in the running of society.”(10) This comment indicates the contradictory logic of the conception of proletarian Bonapartism. If this is a reactionary regime that is based on the defence of the nationalised economy it would seem logical to also assert that the bureaucracy has a relatively progressive role in developing the productive forces. The very mismanagement of the economy also implies that the bureaucracy is able to have role in generating the material conditions for socialism. The logical result of this standpoint is that bureaucratic socialism is both feasible and historically progressive. But this would also imply that the working class should limit and restrict its opposition to the political system. The point is that at least for a limited time the bureaucracy has a progressive function in enabling the productive forces to expand. The very prospect of socialism appears to take the form of the role of the bureaucracy. This means that despite being reactionary the political regime of Bonapartism is also progressive and capable of promoting the interests of the productive forces. The logical conclusion is that Stalinism is historically advanced despite its opportunist political role.

This understanding would have some validity if the analogy between the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte and that of Stalin was credible. Despite being a bureaucratic reaction against the Jacobin regime, the military campaigns of Napoleon overthrew feudalism in many different countries, and he introduced land reform for the peasants in France. Primarily the various forms of bourgeois Bonapartism politically expropriate the bourgeoisie, but continue to rule in their name. This is because this type of political rule is in correspondence with the system of private property and the ability to develop a capitalist economy. But such political substitutionism does not correspond to the logic of a workers state. This state thrives when it is based on the direct and democratic rule of the working class. Hence the rule of a bureaucracy can only be a temporary phenomenon. Bonapartist dictatorship would mean that the workers state had been ended and replaced by a new form of regime. But this possibility is denied by Grant because he claims that the workers state can also have a variety of political forms, including Bonapartism. This standpoint actually represents a rigid form of economic determinism because it implies that regardless of the character of the political superstructure, the nationalised basis of the economy implies that the role of the workers state continues. Hence it is possible to admit that Stalinism is similar to fascism, and yet the workers state is not overthrown. This view is absurd. The workers state can only exist without genuine workers control of production and functioning Soviets for a limited period of time. Hence the transformation of the workers state into an elite state poses the question as to what this state will become. The development of Bonapartism in this context means that counter-revolution has occurred.

In contrast to this view, Grant suggests that the development of Stalinism as proletarian Bonapartism means the following: “But as a special type of proletarian Bonapartism, in the last analysis it represented the working class in so far as it defended the nationalisation of the means of production, planning, and the monopoly of foreign trade.”(11) The major problem with this view is that the political superstructure can be understood as viciously repressive, and yet its defence of nationalised property means that a workers state is being defended. Hence it would appear that the character of the state is a matter of indifference because in the last analysis it still maintains the economy established by the October revolution. Grant denies the illogical aspects of this standpoint, and instead contends that it is illogical to suggest that the bureaucratic elite comes to own the state and so control the economy? Why is this illogical? Surely it is more illogical to claim that a workers state is in existence despite its horrendous political regime and repression. Furthermore, the nationalised economy can truly thrive it is connected to the functioning of a genuine and democratic workers state. Only in this manner can workers control become the principle of the nationalised economy. Bureaucratic control of the economy can only undermine these possibilities. Genuine development of the productive forces cannot occur in this context. In contrast, Grant implies that the nationalised economy can grow despite the horrific political regime. This is the terrible pro-Stalinist logic of the theory of proletarian Bonapartism.

Consequently whilst the bureaucracy is considered by Grant to be a parasitic stratum, it also has a role in developing the productive forces on the basis of its relationship to the nationalised economy: “The Stalinist bureaucracy rested on the property forms established by the revolution, which for a whole period demonstrated a colossal vitality. Until recently, the Russian bureaucracy was compelled to defend state property as the source of its power and income. This fact alone enabled it to play a relatively progressive role in developing the productive forces. However, even in the best period it remained a parasitic growth on the workers state, the source of endless waste, corruption and mismanagement. It had all the vices, and none of the virtues of ruling class.”(12) This understanding is contradictory. If the bureaucracy was primarily a parasitic growth it would have no beneficial aspect in relation to the development of the productive forces. Instead the nationalised economy would be characterised by decline, stagnation and continual low levels of productivity because of the incompetent role of the bureaucracy. However, the system is able to promote the expansion of the productive forces not because the nationalised economy is progressive, but instead because the bureaucracy is relatively efficient in extracting a surplus from the producers. Far from being a parasitic stratum which has only a dubious relationship to the process of production, the bureaucracy was intensely concerned about the prospects of the economy, and tried to uphold the dynamism of accumulation, and the highest possible level of efficiency of the planning process. Hence the bureaucracy was not defined by the role of distribution and consumption, which was a secondary matter of importance, and instead it considered itself to be the architects of the planning process and the motivational force of the dynamism of accumulation. Hence it is dogmatic to separate the role of the nationalised economy from that of the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy utilised state power in order to ensure that the nationalised economy operated in terms of its imperatives and priorities. It is foolish to try and separate the character of the nationalised economy and the role of the bureaucracy in the following manner described by Grant: “Without doubt, the Soviet economy has taken massive strides forward, but this impulse was not due to the bureaucracy as such, but the nationalised planned economy. The bureaucracy has become a massive brake on the technical and cultural development of Russia.”(13)

If we interpreted Grant literally, it would seem that despite the incompetence of the bureaucracy the nationalised economy was able in an automatic manner, because of its inherent progressive character, and so able to make advances in the development of the productive forces. This standpoint is not only illogical, it is a caricature of the situation. The bureaucracy is closely interested in the performance of the economy, and encouraged the managers and workers to fulfil the targets of the plan. Hence the influence of the bureaucracy is expressed in the ability to develop the productive forces and in its ruthless concern to extract a surplus from the producers. The domination of the bureaucracy over the nationalised economy does not mean that it is in some sense progressive. The only genuinely advanced nationalised economy will be one that is not dominated by the bureaucracy within the relations of production and instead is based on the influence of workers control. This type of nationalised economy will end the hegemonic role of the bureaucracy within the relations of production. In contrast, it is an illusion for Grant to claim that the nationalised economy of the Stalinist regime is in some sense progressive. Only the end of the domination of the bureaucracy within the relations of production will enable the nationalised economy to become transformed and therefore compatible with the interests and aspirations of the producers. This is the central lesson of both of the conceptions of both bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism. Despite their differences both theories are able to explain that the political repression promoted by Stalinism occurs because it promotes an exploitative regime.

In contrast, proletarian Bonapartism suggests that despite the reactionary character of the state, the rule of the working class is maintained in the form of the nationalised economy. This standpoint ignores the fact that the role of Soviet Bonapartism is in order to sustain exploitation within the relations of production. In contrast, Grant assumes in a dogmatic manner that the only explanation for the development of the productive forces in the USSR is because it is based on a nationalised economy that is subject to a regime of proletarian Bonapartism. This is why he rejects the theories of state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, because if these social formations were capable of developing the productive forces in a dynamic manner they would be more progressive than socialism. Instead it is only a distorted form of socialism that is able to explain the process of economic development within the USSR. Hence a process of degeneration has occurred but not to the extent that new forms of class society have been created. Instead, the elite and Bonapartist state presides over the nationalised economy established by the October revolution: “Why cannot the state gain independence from the class, and at the same time (in its own interests) defend the new economic forms created by the revolution?”(14) But the point was that this situation of degeneration occurred, and it led to the formation of a bureaucratic state that was determined to introduce new exploitative relations of production. The intermediate situation of transition could only be upheld for a limited period of time. What was tragic was that the Stalinists recognised that in order to stabilise the regime of Bonapartism required not the defence of the nationalised economy, but its transformation so that it became an expression of the imperatives of the extraction of a surplus from the producers. Hence, in the last analysis, the conception of proletarian Bonapartism – which may apply to the revolutionary regime of Lenin – was no longer applicable by 1930. Instead, Grant utilises this term in order to explain Stalinism. The result is a half-hearted defence of Stalinism as having a limited progressive character, and the nationalised economy is considered to be pre socialist. The actual independence of Stalinism from the working class meant it had become an exploitative ruling class, rather than being the supposed guardians of a semi-progressive nationalised economy.

The problem with the conception of proletarian Bonapartism is that in order to try and overcome any ambiguity, Grant applies it in order to bestow a progressive label onto Stalinism. Hence he comments: “The victory of the USSR in the war was one of the main factors that allowed the Stalinist regime to survive for decades after 1945. To the workers of Russia and the world, it appeared that the bureaucracy was playing a progressive role, not just in defending the planned economy against Hitler, but in extending the nationalized property forms to Eastern Europe, and later China. In reality, these revolutions began where the Russian revolution finished – as monstrous deformed regimes of proletarian Bonapartism. The installation of such regimes, far from weakening the Moscow bureaucracy, enormously strengthened it for a whole historical period.”(15) Thus the concept of proletarian Bonapartism is no longer merely the description of the formation of a transitional state with many contradictions, and instead becomes the historical norm for an epoch. The perspective of proletarian Bonapartism explains the process of 'bureaucratic revolution', or the formation of deformed workers states. The suggestion is that the very process of the transition to socialism will take this form, and the issue of the development of genuine socialism will be postponed until the future. The expansion of the |October revolution in this bureaucratic form had established the validity of the planned economy, and indicated that it is possible that history will take this process of transition before genuine socialism is possible. The incorporation of Eastern Europe within the Soviet bloc enabled new economic gains to be made in the development of the nationalised economy, and the standard of living rose, especially after the end of the era of Stalin.

Grant considers that the historical turning point for the Soviet bureaucracy occurred during the Brezhnev era. The bureaucracy was unable to establish a dynamic economy that could compete with the West. Instead growth rates began to falter: “This meant that the relatively progressive role played by the bureaucracy in building up the productive forces of the Soviet Union had been exhausted. It had become an absolute fetter on the further development of the economy.”(16) The quality of goods was often inferior to similar ones made in the West, but public services and rents were cheap. However the worsening situation went together with increased repression of any dissent, and intellectuals were often persecuted. The system was in an impasse, and the regime was increasingly corrupt. In other words Grant is accepting that by the 1970's proletarian Bonapartism was no longer progressive. Stalinism could not develop the economy, and the ruling elite could maintain its power without intensifying repression. The system had changed from being a relative fetter to one of an absolute fetter.(17) Hence the perspective of proletarian Bonapartism was no longer a guide for understanding a system that had become historically exhausted. Instead the continuation of this type of regime would mean that the system would enter into ever deeper crisis. The only genuine historical alternative was to bring about the genuine socialist transformation of society. Obviously, this standpoint could not be accepted by the Stalinists.

Thus when Gorbachev was elected leader of the CPSU in the mid 1980's, he was confronted with the task of reforming a failing economic and political system. However, as Grant observes, Gorbachev's task of maintaining the system did not mean the introduction of features of genuine socialism like workers control of production. However, Grant rightly observes that the attempt to introduce reforms could encourage the workers to strive for genuine industrial democracy. Gorbachev proposed to introduce measures of partial popular control, whilst the effective domination of the economy was still with the managers and the bureaucracy. Crucially, Gorbachev could not allow the workers genuine rights to organise and co-operate because this would have led to the questioning of the system. Gorbachev did not at this time propose the return to capitalism, but the system was entering into increasing crisis. But the ideological atmosphere was being created for support for the prospect of capitalism: “The impasse of the bureaucratic regime manifested in the slow-down of the economy, had an effect on the psychology of all strata of Soviet society beginning with the bureaucracy itself. The ruling elite became conscious of the fact that it was no longer carrying society forward. Increasingly it felt itself to be a brake on progress, and this malaise pervaded the whole of society.”(18) This perceptive point can be made in a different manner. The fact that Gorbachev no longer conceived policy in terms of the success of socialism, and instead outlined its crisis by emphasising the importance of stagnation, led to a demoralisation of the bureaucracy, and it questioned its own fitness to rule society. Gorbachev had tried to issue a wakeup call for society but instead he only seemed to encourage its disintegration and downfall. Thus, Grant is right to suggest that whilst Gorbachev did not want the restoration of capitalism he was promoting the ideological conditions for this development. His reform programme did not strengthen society, but instead only contributed to the sense of crisis.

Grant considers the reason for this declining political situation was because the demands of the productive forces which were no longer in any sense compatible with the bureaucratic system: “Instead of improving things, Gorbachev's reforms introduced a further element of destabilisation, hastening the dissolution of the system....In the absence of a movement of the working class towards political revolution, the balance tilted sharply towards capitalism.”(19) In 1990 direct measures were taken towards the creation of a market economy, such as the relaxation of restrictions on the private ownership of the means of production. But it was only in October 1990 that a plan for a market economy was finally approved. Gorbachev tried to balance himself between the open restorationists and defenders of the old system. But his approach only contributed to the uncertainty and sense of disintegration. The 1991 coup indicated the extent of the splits within the bureaucracy. The coup failed because it was ineffectively organised and its leaders were not prepared to ruthlessly oppose the leaders of the opposition. The failure of the coup led to the success of Yeltsin and the installation of a pro bourgeois government, even if it had difficulties in re-introducing capitalism.

This convincing analysis of the period of the decline of the system under Gorbachev is an indication that Grant considers that the durability of the Stalinist system was dependant on the period of success of proletarian Bonapartism. This means that he considers that the initial development of an independent state in the era of Stalinism had limited progressive features because it was able to promote the expansion of the productive forces. The situation of political repression and personal dictatorship did not undermine this promising economic situation, and indeed it could be argued that the state was progressive in a limited manner because its primary role was to introduce the plan and uphold the importance of the nationalised economy. This situation was enhanced by the post-war expansion of Stalinism, which led to the creation of more proletarian Bonapartist states. Hence the deformed workers states could promote the international development of the productive forces in terms of the role of the nationalised economy. Grant does not deny the situation of the extraction of the surplus value by the state, but he also effectively considers that this is secondary when compared to the progressive role of the nationalised economy in the process of the development of the productive forces. However, he indicates that under Brezhnev this period of historical progress came to an end. The Soviet economy was unable to compete on the world economy, and this increasingly dire situation led Gorbachev to propose reforms. Grant adopts an orthodox Trotskyist view to deny that the system can be reformed. Instead genuine socialism will result or the restoration of capitalism.

Logically, Grant's approach would allow for the prospect of self-reform. His standpoint assumes that the dynamism of proletarian Bonapartism means that it can revitalise the nationalised economy. The point is that if the Bonapartist state is the effective guardian of the economic basis of socialism, why cannot it undergo a process of political reform and become more compatible with the development of the process of economic innovation? Grant does not answer this question because he has effectively dropped his Bonapartist standpoint. Or, more accurately, he considers that Gorbachev is the Bonapartist who has failed. The system has entered into crisis and so the previous forms of political domination are no longer effective. This means the only options are either the return of capitalism, or genuine socialism. It would seem that the person to blame for this dire situation is Gorbachev, because he had the illusion that reform of the system could have been possible. In other words, even Stalin was a more logical and rational defender of the system because he understood that force would maintain the rule of the bureaucracy more effectively than having illusions in reform. However, it was dogmatic to contend that reforms were not possible: “During the first three months of his period in power – up to, and a few months beyond, the end of 1987 – Gorbachev believed that the Soviet system was reformable. The political system could be significantly liberalized, and economic decision making could be considerably decentralised. Some concessions would be made to market principles, but the market would play an ancillary role. A strong element of central planning would remain, as would state ownership.”(20)

If there had been a serious attempt to develop policy in these terms, it is doubtful that crisis would have been as serious and catastrophic. But instead of developing a coherent programme of economic reform, the process of change came to emphasise the necessity to end the primary political role of the CPSU. This led to concern about the future of the Soviet Union, and in comparison to that concern the issue of economics was not tackled with sufficient detail and clarity. Rice concludes that Gorbachev did not concentrate sufficiently on economic questions.(21) Hence it can be argued that the downfall of the USSR was not pre-determined. It could have been possible for the Gorbachev regime to develop a sensible economic policy which was capable of establishing mass support. The point is the limitations on the development of the productive forces did not mean it was impossible to introduce meaningful economic reforms. The crisis in the system did not mean that any initiative was beyond being difficult. Instead it could have been possible to utilise the situation of democratisation in order to develop mass support for economic reforms. This development did not happen, and instead the issues became reduced to the mere survival of the regime. This meant economic questions were presented to the Supreme Soviet as emergency decrees, rather than being resented as rational and logical policy matters. The result of this situation was that a viable economic plan for the regeneration of society was not developed. Instead by 1990 it appeared that the only option was for the restoration of capitalism and the promotion of socialism seemed to have become unrealistic. This malaise at the level of policy led to a political crisis, and the eventual demise of the USSR.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Ted Grant: From Revolution to Counter-revolution, Wellred London 1997

(2)ibid p96-97

(3)ibid p99-100

(4)ibid p141

(5)ibid p141-142

(6)ibid p135

(7)ibid p168

(8)ibid p193

(9)ibid p194

(10Ibid p200

(11)ibid p204-205

(12)ibid p210

(13)ibid p210-211

(14)ibid p219

(15)ibid p245

(16)ibid p278

(17)ibid p307

(18)ibid p323

(19)ibid p333-334

(20)Archie Brown: The Rise and Fall of Communism, Vintage London 2010 p490

(21)ibid p582-584