UNDERSTANDING THE CLASS CHARACTER OF THE SOVIET UNION

It has increasingly been argued that the demise of the Soviet Union was an indication of the inability to establish socialist regimes in order to replace capitalism. It has been suggested that the Bolshevik government in Russia was always an expression of the domination of a political party over society and that this development meant that the perspective of a popular and democratic form of socialism was an illusion that was expressed by the elitist character of the rule of the Bolsheviks. In other words, the only manner in which the revolutionary regime could be consolidated and strengthened was in terms of the domination of the role of the elite party, and this meant that all the claims that society was based on the democratic role of the political organisation of the Soviets was an illusion. But revolutionary Marxists would dispute these conclusions and instead provide a different type of analysis of the history of the USSR. One important analysis has been developed by Mike Haynes in his book: “Russia, class and power 1917-2000” (Bookmarks, London 2002) He is concerned to reject what he considers to be the anti-communist totalitarian approach that suggests that any attempt to create a revolutionary regime would result in an authoritarian type of society. This is an important and principled objective, but it also has to be established if there is any continuity between Leninism and Stalinism. The point is that the regime of Lenin became effectively the expression of the supremacy of a single party, and this aspect was continued by the role of the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Stalin. Thus, we have to establish whether despite this aspect of continuity between Leninism and Stalinism were there also important differences that mean the attempt to suggest the continuity of these two types of regime is an expression of anti-communist bias rather than the conclusion of a justified view of the society that was established by the Bolsheviks. The point is that it never became possible to develop a regime based on the genuine expression of the role of Soviet democracy. Instead, there was a situation of political polarisation which meant that the only manner in which the regime established by the October revolution could be maintained was in terms of the increasing ascendency of the role of the single party state. This situation was expressed by the fact that most of the other political parties were tenacious opponents of the Bolsheviks and so acted to try and overthrow this revolutionary regime in the process of civil war. Even the Mensheviks had an ambiguous role which meant that they vacillated in regard to the position they adopted towards the Bolshevik regime. In other words, it seemed that the increasing domination of the Bolshevik was an inevitable expression of the political polarisation of the period 1918-21. But did this development mean that a genuine workers state could be established given the apparent lack of the role of political democracy within society and even within the Bolsheviks themselves the possibility for genuine discussion of policy become denied by the increasing autocratic character of the role of political leadership. Hence the major issue became, in what sense could it be suggested that the Bolsheviks were able to act on behalf of the workers in order to in some sense express the role of a party that presided over a genuine workers state? Or could it alternatively be implied that this very aspect of the domination of a single party became the basis to deny that there was any effective expression of democracy within society, and so in that manner what was being created was a new type of exploitative social formation that was replacing the possibility to establish a genuine society that was making progress towards the realisation of socialism. The general view of most Trotskyist type groups is to consider that it was essentially with the Stalinist regime that the prospect for the realisation of a new exploitative society was realised. Indeed, this is the overall approach of Haynes. But we will have to evaluate this view and instead try to consider whether this understanding underestimates the possibility of continuity between the Leninist and Stalinist regimes. Is it dogmatic to contend that Leninism was principled and progressive whist only Stalinism is elitist and opportunist? In other words, we have to understand the importance of the unfavourable situation in which the revolutionary regime was established and how this had an important impact in relation to the possibility to develop a genuinely democratic expression of the creation of an authentic socialist society. In other words, Haynes considers himself to be a defender of Leninism against the bureaucratic limitations of Stalinism, but could it be suggested that this perspective results in a dogmatic and one-sided understanding of the history of the USSR?

This possible criticism could be suggested in terms of the fact that Haynes supports the view of people like Tony Cliff in defining the USSR since Stalin’s domination as bureaucratic state capitalism. But the problem with this understanding is that Stalin himself suggested that the USSR was an expression of a society that was achieving the realisation of the aim of socialism. Hence the issue that Haynes will have to address, and which it could be suggested that Cliff failed to do, was to indicate the relationship between the ideology of socialism and the character of the society that was being developed under the domination of the party elite. How is it possible, in other words to develop a state capitalist society, when the very emphasis of the party ideology is about the successful construction of a socialist economy that is resulting in the liberation of the members of society. In other words, in order to establish a convincing justification of the perspective of state capitalism it will have to be shown that there is an inherent contradiction between theory and practice. That the claim that socialism is being constructed in the USSR is a deceptive perspective that is essentially merely the empirical justification of the domination of the party elite. However, the problem will be that it can also be suggested that Stalin and his cronies did consider that socialism was being genuinely developed in the USSR. Hence, they considered that this aspect was quite compatible with the ideology of the leaders of the Communist party. In this manner they could consider the opposition of Trotsky to be an expression of counter-revolutionary politics. Thus, it is implied that what was actually being created was a type of bureaucratic socialism in which the aspects of socialist ideology and aspirations were being modified in terms of the interests of the party elite. In this manner a form of exploitative society was being created as an outcome of the ideological and political distortion of the initial ideology of the Bolsheviks. But this development could not be capitalism because this would imply a process of change that would not be compatible with the continuation of the political supremacy of the Stalinist defined communist party. In other words, the realisation of capitalism would not be compatible with the ideology of the Stalinist led communist party which contended that it was building socialism. However, a society based on the role of a nationalised economy, collectivisation of agriculture, and centralised political control, could be defined as socialism. In other words, we have to contemplate the possibility that this distortion of socialism was possible in the elitist terms of the role of an authoritarian and oppressive single party regime. Thus, if a type of capitalism had been restored this would have meant the effective rejection of all of the principles of Bolshevism. But instead of contemplating this type of reactionary change, Stalin instead contemplated the reconciliation of a type of socialism with the justification of the elite rule of the Bolshevik party. This could not in any sense be a form of genuine socialism which would be based on the highest levels of economic and political democracy. Instead, what was being developed was the reconciliation of a perspective of socialism with the importance of the supremacy of the role of the party elite. Certainly, this approach was a distortion of what could be defined as a genuine form of socialism, but it could still be defined as bureaucratic socialism because aspects of what would constitute socialism was being reconciled with the elite domination of society by the role of the party. In this context we also have to suggest that the regime established by Lenin was unable to become a genuine type of workers state because of the unfavourable economic and political circumstances of its development. Instead, it has to be suggested that Lenin’s regime was characterised by the party ruling on behalf of the working class. This aspect was inevitable because the workers were never able to establish their own form of control and development of society in terms of the principles of participatory democracy. But as long as Lenin was the leader of the Bolsheviks it could be suggested that there was a situation of genuine revolutionary leadership which meant that the party acted on behalf of the workers. But this aspect was ended by the effective counterrevolution carried out under Stalin’s leadership of the Bolsheviks.

Haynes outlines the development of popular discontent in 1917 which led to the end of the domination of Tsarism. The outcome of this mass unrest was the generation of popular support for the Bolsheviks which created the conditions for the seizure of power. In this period of mass discontent, the Bolsheviks with their radical approach were able to obtain popular support for their aims of the revolutionary seizure of power. It could be suggested that the most class-conscious workers supported the Bolsheviks and so the process of the seizure of power was based on a dynamic interaction of the role of party and class. However, after the revolution the major problem was that of the necessity to organise the economy in an efficient manner. There was discussion about the respective merits of the trade unions or factory committees as the basis for the organisation of the development of production. But ultimately neither of these popular organs became the basis to generate increased production because of the serious character of the economic crisis. Instead, it became to be considered that there was no alternative to the introduction of one-man management. It could be argued that this development was inevitable because of the limitations of the role of the trade unions and factory committees, but the problem was that these popular organs were not utilised in an effective manner in order to supervise the activity of the management of the enterprises. Formally the trade unions were considered to be the necessary expression of the supervision of the management, but it is questionable whether this approach was realised in an effective manner. Haynes suggests that it was the role of the Bolshevik party which ensured that the character of society still represented the aspirations of the workers in a limited manner, but this situation could not express the possibility for the creation of a genuine socialist regime: “The popular base of the revolution that was established in 1917 was undercut, and this led to a degree of separation of party and class. In the 1920’s external and internal pressures continued to mould the new regime. An important layer of the Bolshevik party and the state bureaucracy began to move away from the central message of 1917 – the need to reconstruct society from the bottom up.” (p43-44) But it could be suggested that the economic and political problems of the period 1918-23 undermined the credibility of the various types of justification of the necessity to develop a popular participatory regime. In these serious circumstances when the economic and social cohesion of the workers and peasants was being undermined by the serious social problems of the situation of crisis, it seemed that the only effective basis to maintain the stability of society was by the consolidation of the influence of the role of the party. In these circumstances Lenin tried to advocate policies that would attempt to tackle the important economic problems, and it could be argued that with the introduction of the New Economic Policy that some success was achieved. This was because the major task of obtaining the economic and political support of the peasants for the aims of the revolutionary regime were realised by the introduction of the NEP. Indeed, it could be argued that the previous approach of war communism was a general failure because the perspective that was adopted was that of obtaining grain from the peasants by the utilisation of the role of state coercion. But Haynes seems to deny the necessity of the role of NEP, and instead emphasises that what seemed to result was the increased economic importance of the role of the trader in goods and the rich peasants, or kulaks. However, this aspect should be considered to be of secondary importance because what was occurring was the general situation of the revival of the economy. The point is that the workers were able to obtain food more effectively because of the increased incentives for the peasants to produce food for sale, via the role of the NEP merchants. Furthermore, there was the development of the production of goods by industry in order to create the conditions for trade with the countryside. Haynes implies that there was an inherent problem with this approach, which was expressed by Bukharin’s support for the possibility of the peasants to enrich themselves via this role of trade between industry and agriculture. But it could be suggested that there was not an alternative to this approach unless the aspect of compromise and developing incentives for the peasants was to be abandoned. The choice was between the gradualist approach of the NEP or the introduction of a more coercive type of economic system. It was suggested by critics of the Bukharin pro NEP approach that the result of this perspective was the strengthening of an important influence of a sector of society that was interested in the restoration of capitalism, but what was actually occurring was the development of an economic relationship between the city and countryside based on the supply of goods by the peasants to the workers because of the prices they could obtain for their products. Hence the argument against this economic approach was ideological because it was considered that this approach led to the strengthening of the influences of capitalism within the economy. But the criticism of this view was that the majority of industry had been nationalised and brought under the domination of the role of the state. This situation enabled the state to be able to define the character of economic relations with the peasants. In this context the issue of the supposed problem of the private character of the economic activity of the peasants was an exaggerated view because this type of productive activity could still be connected to the interests of the nationalised industrial economy in terms of providing the goods that the workers of the cities required in order to meet their needs. Hence there was no need to transform the character of the economy in a radical manner. Instead, it should be modified in terms of the development of the increased influence of the workers in the organisation and administration of the role of industry. But the bureaucratic elite around Stalin was not interested in these rational types of objectives. Instead, there aim was to intensify the domination of the party elite in relation to the consolidation of the role of the state in the organising of the character of the economy: “The eventual solution that the group around Stalin would find was a policy of state directed industrialisation. Resources would be squeezed from both peasants and workers to help build up a heavy industrial base to support a strong military defence of Russia.” (p63) This emphasis on what could be described as a process of conscious accumulation by the state by the exploitation of primarily the peasantry was a development that was unprecedented. Therefore, the very conception of socialism was made a formality because the effective emphasis on the subordination of the workers and peasants to the economic aims of the party state effectively modified and undermined the very perspective that what was being created was a socialist economy that would ultimately result in the economic liberation of the producers. This meant that the objective of socialism became essentially disconnected from the increasingly repressive character of the economic and political policies of the degenerating worker’s state. It could be argued that the period of the NEP expressed the continuation intention of the workers state to try and reconcile its increasingly elite aims with the interests of the workers and peasants in terms of the generation of the possibility for the increased prosperity of these two different sections of society. This was because Stalin had to accept the influence of the approach of Bukharin, which was essential to his consolidation of political power on the basis of this alliance. Therefore, the perspective of Bukharin was based on a commitment to the continuation of the NEP and the attempt to connect the aims of the peasants to the development of the economic effectiveness of the industrial sector of production. But when Stalin considered that the influence of Bukharin was challenging his domination of the party, he acted in an irrational manner to end the role of the NEP. This meant an end to the proletariat and peasant alliance which meant the only alternative was to develop the domination of the economy by Stalin’s elite supporters. The point is that the choice was between the continuation of the NEP or the alternative development of a bureaucratic economy under the control of the party elite. Unfortunately, Trotsky could not recognise this choice and in an ambiguous manner seemed to suggest some type of support for the end of the role of the NEP. Thus, Trotsky did not recognise that Bukharin was the possible progressive ally in this situation because he was concerned with the interests of the workers and peasants rather than the primary aims of consolidating the domination of the bureaucracy over the economy and society. The logical development would have been the creation of an alliance between Trotsky’s left opposition and the emerging right opposition of Bukharin. But this never happened because in an ambiguous manner Trotsky considered that his approach was closer to that of Stalin. Thus, Trotsky could not recognise that Bukharin was trying to develop a genuine socialist economy in the economic conditions of Russia. Instead, Trotsky seemed to share Stalin’s concerns about the supposedly increasing economic power of the kulaks and the undermining of the interests of the nationalised economy. Only by about 1932 did Trotsky modify his economic analysis and come to recognise the reactionary approach of Stalin in more consistent terms.

In other words, the political problem was that both Bukharin and Trotsky did not effectively recognise that Stalin was carrying out an effective counterrevolution in which all aspects of the continued responsiveness of the role of the party state to the interests of the workers and peasants was being ended. This meant that the consolidation of elite domination over the economy was connected to the development of the influence of Stalin and his obedient supporters. Thus, it was both necessary and possible to establish an alliance of Bukharin and Trotsky in terms of the defence of the aims of socialism against the consolidation of a bureaucratic economy. But Bukharin would not consider the possibility of alliance with Trotsky, and Trotsky still insisted on defining the USSR as a type of workers state despite the process of economic and political degeneration. In other words, the approach of Bukharin and Trotsky was both sectarian and indecisive and was not able to establish an effective response to the ending of the role of the deformed workers state by Stalin. It could be argued that such an alliance would not be successful given the consolidation of the domination of society by the role of the Stalin elite. But this criticism is not the most important issue. The point is that a Bukharin-Trotsky alliance would have inspired the workers and peasants to engage in acts of opposition to the actions of the party bureaucracy. But without this development the people were confused and not able to articulate their discontent in a constructive and effective manner. It has been argued by supporters of Trotsky that Bukharin defended the opportunist and nationalist perspective of socialism in one country. This point is correct, but Bukharin advocated this apparently opportunist approach in terms of the progressive perspective of the necessity for the development of the worker and peasant alliance. Would it not have been possible to develop an alliance between the supporters of Bukharin and Trotsky in terms of defence of the NEP and the recognition of the connection between the consolidation of the regime in Russia with the aim of international revolution. The adoption of this approach would mean that the issue of socialism in one country would become of secondary theoretical and political importance. But nobody seemed to be able to promote this type of compromise in order to achieve unity of the two groups opposed to the aims of Stalin. In other words, the issue was about opposing the increasing domination of society by the party elite of Stalin, but the left and right oppositions were still divided by issues that had become of secondary importance. The limitations of this sectarianism were indicated by Stalin’s imposition of the bureaucratic collectivisation of agriculture which indicated that the only principled and feasible alternative policy was to continue the New Economic policy, and to relate the consolidation of this aspect to the development of international revolution. In other words, the approach of Bukharin was compatible with this perspective, because he never rejected the importance of the aim of international revolution in his support for socialism in one country. Unfortunately, Trotsky could not appreciate this aspect of Bukharin’s politics in relation to his analysis of the opportunist limitations of Bukharin’s leadership of the Communist International. But the point was that these political failures of Bukharin were not deliberate, and instead were because of theoretical limitations as expressed by the theory of the stabilisation of international capitalism. Ultimately Bukharin was still concerned with the aim of the promotion of international revolution and considered that this objective was compatible with socialism in one country. Therefore, the aspects of sincerity in the approach of Bukharin and Trotsky should have created the possibility of unity between them, and opposition to the unprincipled cynicism of Stalin. Such a development did not occur because of the inability of both Bukharin and Trotsky to evaluate the unprincipled character of the politics of Stalin in a more effective manner.

Haynes seems to be unable to support these types of conclusions because he effectively accepts that the central issue was between an international revolutionary perspective or socialism in one country. (p69) But the false aspect of this political divide was that Trotsky did not reject the necessity to introduce measures that would facilitate the consolidation of the regime, and so he did not support the ending of the NEP because he continued to recognise its importance in terms of developing the economic connections between the interests of the peasants and workers. Indeed, his argument in favour of the development of industry was in order to provide more industrial goods for the realisation of the aims of the peasants for the successful development of their economic activity. Hence there was no contradiction between an increasing emphasis on the generation of a greater tempo of economic activity of industry in relation to the realisation of the interests of the peasants. However, Bukharin’s pragmatic argument for the justification of socialism in one country, which was the stabilisation of international capitalism, did not seem to be unprincipled and instead was apparently connected to developments in the class struggle. Therefore, the issue of difference between the various sections of the party leadership must have appeared to be obscure to the membership. What did not seem to be understood was the necessity to oppose the consolidation of the Stalin group as the dominant aspect in the role of the party and state. But the very increased ascendency of Stalin seemed to be obscured by the very fact of his alliance with Bukharin, who seemed to the dominant partner in relation to determining the policy of this group. This is why Trotsky emphasising opposing what he considered to be the opportunist politics of Bukharin, such as criticising the perspective of the international stabilisation of capitalism and socialism in one country. Therefore, the consolidation of the domination of society by the Stalin clique was not considered to be the primary problem. But it could be argued that the major problem of the Left and united opposition was that it defended an approach that was based on moral values rather than practical politics. As Haynes comments: “When Trotsky and others insisted that the original goals of international revolution remained a precondition for a real deepening of the revolution (rather than some economic progress), many no doubt felt that socialism in one country was practical politics compared with revolutionary romanticism.” (p69) But Haynes does not seem to make a suggestion as to how Trotsky could have tried to strengthen the credibility of his perspective. The point is that if he had connected the issue of the success of the NEP to the development of the international revolution it would seem that in this manner it would have been possible to establish a more credible and effective rejection of the approach of socialism in one country. But Haynes does not consider these options because he seems to consider that the role of the NEP was increasingly untenable because of its apparent failure to promote industrial development: “But if more rapid development was attempted it would come up against the limits of NEP. From late 1927 these limits began to be stretched. This underpinned the idea of faster industrialisation. It underpinned the harsher line in the countryside.” (p77) Thus for Stalin the approach of NEP could only be of temporary importance because it would ultimately indicate limitations in relation to the aim of more effective economic development. But the political problem was that this perspective was essentially shared by Trotsky who was critical of the role of the NEP for these very reasons of its apparent failure to promote economic efficiency. Hence it seemed that politically the differences between Bukharin and Trotsky were important in relation to having different conceptions of the process of the advance that could be established in relation to the realisation of socialism. The tragedy was that in a certain sense the approach of Bukharin and Trotsky was compatible because of having a shared aim of the genuine development of socialism. Haynes comments: “Whatever the political deficiencies of his opponents – whether Trotsky the strongest, or Bukharin one of the weakest – it is to their credit that they held as long as they could to a different vision that was still marked by ideas of emancipation that characterised 1917.” (p78) Hence the problem was that whilst both Trotsky and Bukharin shared the aim of aspiring to realise socialism, they had different perspectives about how this objective could be realised. The issue that they had differences about concerned the question of socialism in one country. But the increasing repressive approach of Stalin indicated that the most important problem was that of the development of an authoritarian economy and political system. In other words, there was a necessity to establish a political alliance of the forces of the left and right oppositions in order to reject the consolidation of an authoritarian regime of the party elite led by Stalin. Haynes defines the approach that Stalin adopted as the expression of a counter-revolution from above. But this very reactionary character of the role of the party elite was indication that a common approach could have been adopted to defend the workers state from being changed by this process of counter-revolution. The point is that the increased pace of industrialisation combined with the repressive pace of collectivisation of agriculture, despite being irrational in economic terms, did contribute to the increased domination of the party elite over the economy: “Did collectivisation serve any purpose? The answer is yes. Bloody irrationalities there may have been, but breakneck industrialisation needed the regimentation and control of the countryside, and the smashing of potential peasant resistance. Food had to be squeezed out of the villages for export despite the rural starvation. Between 1928 and 1932, for example, although grain output fell by 10 percent, peasant deliveries doubled as the urban population dependent on state rations grew from 26 million to over 40 million.” (p91) In other words there was no rational economic logic to this development, which only resulted in the effective decrease of agricultural production and the alienation of the peasants in relation to the objectives of the government with regards to the role of agricultural production. But it meant that the political influence of the peasants was ended with this development of collectivisation. The peasants could no longer express the role of an independent form of production that would enable them to have an influence in regard to the character of the general economy. Stalin was prepared to allow for the possibility of the effective decline of the efficiency of agricultural production if the overall result was the increased subordination of the peasants to the aims of the state with regards to economic activity. Thus, there was no rationality to this repressive approach of Stalin in relation to the introduction of collectivisation. Instead, the major motive was the aim of the increased economic control over the activity of the peasants, who became organised in collective farms under the supervision of the party state. It is questionable whether production actually increased because of these measures, but the issue of efficiency was entirely secondary to the intention of Stalin to consolidate the domination of the state over the activity of the peasants.

This development was accompanied by the consolidation of centralised economic control of management in the various factories, and so ended any remaining influence of the role of the trade unions: “Soviet workers were now the creators of wealth in a system over which they had no control, and in which they had fewer defences than workers in bourgeois democratic states where free trade unions existed. But they shared a common fate with workers the world over. The fundamental fact determining their lives was now the logic of exploitation enforced by competitive accumulation.” (p95) Haynes would define this system as state capitalism. But it questionable whether this understanding is credible given the lack of the role of genuinely independent companies under the control of capitalists. Instead, there was centralised state domination of the economy under the controlling influence of the role of the party elite. Also, in ideological terms this development was justified as an expression of the leadership importance of the party in supervising the creation of a socialist economy. Hence it could not be suggested in ideological terms that there was any justification of what could be defined as a type of capitalist economy. Therefore, given the distinct economic objectives of the party elite to create what they defined as socialism could it be said in credible terms that what was being developed was a type of capitalist economy that was occurring despite this complete lack of ideological justification by the party? In contrast it could be suggested that the domination of the party elite in economic terms on the basis of the justification of what could be described as bureaucratic socialism was the basis to understand the system. This aspect did not mean that there was any aspect of genuine socialism in the social system. Therefore, Trotsky’s definition of a degenerated workers state was problematical because of this assumption that the nationalised economy of the USSR represented an important aspect of what could constitute genuine socialism.

In other words, the concept of bureaucratic socialism is not utilised in order to justify the view that there is an expression of the significance of an aspect of genuine socialism in the social system of the USSR. On the contrary the importance of the aspect of the bureaucratic socialism is what defines the ideology of the party elite that controls society, and this ideology is utilised in order to justify the aspect of the domination of the mode of production by what is effectively a new ruling class that utilises its ascendency in order to attempt to extract a surplus from the production of the workers. Thus, because of the continued ideological importance of the October revolution which was based on the claim that this event would result in the liberation of the workers, it is not possible for the Stalinist elite to justify the view that it is a new exploitative class. Instead, there is a theory and practice contradiction in the process of the domination of the elite. It justifies its supremacy in terms of the claim that its actions contribute to the realisation of the economic and political liberation of the workers and peasants, but in an effective and practical manner the bureaucracy dominates the process of production in order to systematically extract a surplus from the producers. The fact that this aspect is not realised in an efficient manner does not mean that this process of exploitation does not occur. In other words, the lack of workers control of the means of production means that the bureaucracy determines the objectives of the process of economic activity, and it would be irrational to suggest that this aspect is not utilised in order to extract a surplus from the production of the workers. Why is this system not defined as state capitalist? The classical form of capitalist economy is based on the primary importance of the domination of the role of companies. The role of the state is to generally support this aspect and so is not concerned to dominate the economy in terms of state capitalism. Thus, we can suggest that if state capitalism developed it would be the result of exceptional circumstances as occurred in the period of the second world war in the UK. Therefore, if state capitalism developed in the USSR it would have been on the basis of the development of classical capitalist companies that would be connected to the economic aims of the state in an inter-connected manner. But given the historical circumstances of the importance of the October revolution this could not occur in the Soviet Union. Instead, the party elite claiming to act on behalf of the people developed a centralised economy based on the domination of the state, and in this manner, it claimed to be expressing the development of socialism. Hence in ideological terms what was being justified was an elitist conception of socialism. But in terms of economic practice the continued subordination of the producers to the process of the extraction of the surplus by the party elite meant that the aspect of socialism was only a formality. In actuality what was important was the extraction of a surplus in terms of the character of a type of bureaucratic mode of production. Thus, what was being developed was the economic domination of the bureaucracy in a new exploitative type of society. However, the ideology of socialism was still important in order to justify the rule of the bureaucracy as the supposed aspect of continuity with the October revolution. In other words, given the importance of the October revolution the party elite could not suggest that it had rejected the aims of this event. Instead, it had to utilise Marxist theory in order to try and emphasise that the role of the party represented the interests of the workers and so was consistent with the aim of creating a socialist society. Therefore, this meant there was a theory and practice inconsistency in the character of society. In theory the continued importance of the aim of socialism was being upheld, but in practice the role of the producers was subordinated to the exploitative domination of the party elite who were effectively a new ruling class. In other words, the utilisation of the term bureaucratic socialism does not mean there was something still progressive about society, but instead what is being suggested is the role of a new exploitative mode of production which in an inconsistent manner is ideologically defended by the justification that this expresses a valid and principled form of socialist economy and society.

How does the concept of bureaucratic socialism relate to Trotsky’s perspective of the character of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state? Trotsky utilised this conception in order to suggest that in the degenerated workers state the role of the nationalised economy still expressed important economic gains for the workers such as full employment and the advantages of a planned economy which resulted in some benefits for the workers. But this perspective seems to deny the significance of the aspect of the exploitation of the workers in the process of production and instead there is an emphasis on the inequality caused by the role of distribution. But the point is that the character of distribution is connected to the character of the aspect of production. It is the domination of the party elite within the economy which enables it to extract a surplus from the workers and so ensure their supremacy over the relations of production. Only the lack of the aspect of the private ownership of the means of production means that this exploitative system cannot be defined as a new version of capitalism. However, both bureaucratic socialism and capitalism are based on the role of the exploitation of the producers within the relations of production. Therefore, the aspect of inequality within the relations of production that Trotsky emphasises is actually a secondary manifestation of the importance of the economic exploitation of the producers. This means the nationalised economy is not the expression of the continuation of a type of workers state but is instead the basis to understand the character of the exploitative subordination of the workers within the relations of production. The counterrevolution carried out by Stalinism was not concerned to maintain a type of workers state but instead was based on ending any influence of the workers in relation to the activity of the economy. Thus, the subordination of the workers within the relations of production meant the concept of a degenerated workers state could not be sustained. The party elite had developed distinct interests which were connected to maintaining the situation of the exploitation of the workers within the relations of production. This meant the actual theoretical issue was about deciding whether this development was an expression of a new form of capitalism or could be defined as a new type of exploitative mode of production. Hence Trotsky’s view that the nationalised economy expressed the continuing gains of the October revolution was a perspective that failed to establish the importance of the aspects of exploitation within the social formation. In other words, we would suggest that the concept of bureaucratic socialism expresses more satisfactorily the character of a new exploitative mode of production, but which is justified in terms of an inconsistent and untenable ideology of elitist socialism. The aspect of the bureaucratic is what primarily defines the emerging social formation, but a formal ideology of socialism is utilised in order to justify the view that the party Is acting on behalf of the workers and peasants. In this context the nationalised economy is not the continuation of the legacy of the October revolution, but instead the character of this economic structure has been changed so that the subordination of the producers to the party elite has become its major characteristic. Any aspect of the influence of the trade unions has been ended, and instead the relations of production are defined by the necessity to ensure the continuation of the bureaucratic domination of the party and managers in order to extract a surplus from the workers. It could be argued that the only major difference between this system and capitalism is the lack of the importance of private ownership of the means of production. However, there is a common aspect with the capitalist system which is the exploitation of wage labour as a result of the domination of an exploiting class within the relations of production. In this context there are more similarities with capitalism than differences. But it would also be wrong to define this society as capitalist because this view is based on denying the important differences between capitalism and bureaucratic socialism. However, there are also similarities between these two types of mode of production., which is expressed by the aspect of the exploitation of the producers.

Haynes defines the character of the Soviet Union in the 1930’s in the following manner: “Soviet workers were now the creators of wealth in a system over which they had no control, and in which they had fewer defences than workers in the bourgeois democratic states where free trade unions existed. But they shared a common fate with workers the world over. The fundamental factor determining their lives was now the logic of exploitation enforced by competitive accumulation.” (p95) But this aspect of the subordination of the role of labour within the relations of production is not sufficient to establish the credibility of the view that this situation expressed the development of a type of capitalist system. The obvious point was that there were no capitalists who owned factories and the means of production. Instead, the state was the dominant expression of defining the character and objectives of the process of production. Therefore, the crucial issue is whether the state is able to organise the economy in terms of the logic of the process of capital accumulation. But the character of the aspect of the domination of the party elite is to ensure the possibility for the continuation of the supremacy of this new ruling class. In this context the importance of profits is subordinated to the aim of expressing the ideological view that a socialist society superior to capitalism is being created. Hence economic objectives are subordinated to the political importance of the approach that a society superior to capitalism is being created. In this context the domination of the economy by the party elite is said to be in the interests of society in general. Thus, capitalism is considered to be an inferior system of private ownership of the means of production which has been replaced by the role of the socialist state in the organisation of the character of economic development. This system is ideologically considered to be superior to capitalism because the aspect of continual economic crisis and mass unemployment has been apparently overcome. The point is that a genuine regression to a capitalist economic system could not be contemplated by the Stalinist elite because this would raise important questions about the credibility of the October revolution and the development of the ascendency of the role of the party. But Haynes, following Cliff, considers that it is possible to have a type of state capitalist economy even though the party has an ideology based on the claim that the society being created is socialist. Hence ideology is entirely subordinated to apparent economic imperatives of the necessity of competitive accumulation between the western capitalist powers and the Soviet Union. But the lack of capitalist forms of ownership of the means of production means that the type of economy that is being developed cannot be considered to be an expression of state capitalism. In other words, the state cannot be an omnipotent capitalist controlling all aspects of economic activity. Capitalism requires the ascendency of private ownership of the means of production by companies who are in competition with each other for markets. Only in this manner is the possibility of profit possible, or the realisation of the connection between the exploitation of labour and the ability to sell more goods than competitor companies. The only aspect of this situation which is similar to Stalinism is the aspect of the subordination of labour within the relations of production. But the lack of competition within Stalinist economies means that the process of accumulation is based essentially on the exploitation of labour, and this situation is expressed by the organisation of the economy by the role of the state. In other words, the lack of a competitive market is an expression of the difference between Stalinism and capitalism. There is the common aspect of the exploitation of labour within the relations of production, but the important differences means that the character of the subordination of the workers within the economic system is defined by distinct objectives of the party state. This means that ideology is more important than in capitalist countries. Within capitalism the primary aspect of social reality is the necessity of capital accumulation via the role of market competition. But under Stalinism the aspect of economics is subordinated to the ideological claim that a successful socialist society is being created. Thus, the emphasis is on the realisation of increasing productivity and the illusory claim that the material standards of the workers and peasants is continually increasing. This means that ideology is actually a more important aspect of the character of the role of the bureaucratic socialist economy. Within capitalist societies it is ideologically assumed that the system is superior and the most efficient that is possible in economic terms. In contrast the Stalinist elite has to claim that socialism is being constructed and so the people benefit from economic development. But this means that the ideology of Stalinism is often not credible because there is often a difference between the claims of the party and the actual aspects of reality which indicate that the material position of the workers is not improving. In this context it is only possible for Stalinism to continue its domination because of the importance of the role of the coercive apparatus of the state. There is a general understanding within the people that a principled socialist type of society is not being created. In other words, it could be suggested that there was always a situation of ideological crisis within the Soviet Union because of the differences between the theory and practice of the ruling ideology. This meant that ultimately the leaders of the Soviet communist party had to make the traditional appeal of popular nationalism in order to obtain support for their objectives as in the second world war. The point is that the standpoint of bureaucratic socialism is not credible because the only genuine form of socialism is one that is popular and democratic. There is an obvious contradiction between the privileged role of the party elite and the ideology of socialism that implies that society is being organised in terms of the benefit of the people. This means that such an ideology cannot be tenable and instead the only effective aspect of reality is the commitment of the party elite to maintaining its domination over the economy and society in general. There is an obvious contradiction between the aspect of the exploitation of the producers in the economy and the contrasting ideological claims that socialism is being created. This theory and practice contradiction means that the ruling elite is unpopular with the people and so can only ensure the continuation of its domination in terms of a situation of the role of state coercion.

But ultimately the system is likely to decline because it is economically inferior to the major capitalist economies. This situation means that the advanced capitalist countries dominate the world economy and so are able to define its character. In contrast Stalinism could only consolidate its domination by a process of expansion in the immediate situation after the end of the second world war. But increasingly the greater dynamism of the capitalist countries undermined the continuation of the economic credibility of the so-called socialist states, and so this meant the domination of the Soviet Union was called into question because of this situation. This aspect was also connected to the development of popular unrest in countries like Hungary. Therefore, the inferiority of bureaucratic socialism meant that it could not express a tenable alternative to capitalism and as Haynes outlines the system could only be maintained by the role of a policy of state repression. In this context the ideas of Trotsky’s opposition were opposed by the role of the coercive apparatus of the state, but they could never be undermined. This was because of the theory and practice contradiction between the claim that genuine socialism was being created and the actual reality of an authoritarian regime that was utilising state repression as the major aspect for the continued ascendency of the party elite. Therefore, there was always a serious ideological crisis of the Stalinist regimes which meant that it was possible to facilitate the process of the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1989-91. But primarily the Stalinist countries were inferior to capitalism because the economic character of bureaucratic socialism was more inefficient and less productive. This meant that the bureaucratic socialist system was always likely to be undermined by pressures that would express the necessity to develop alternative capitalist types of economic practices. Indeed, this option was always preferable to the party bureaucracy because the only genuine alternative was to accept the necessity of a popular form of socialism. But such a development would result in the undermining of the economic and political power of the Stalinist elite. Therefore, a process of ideological crisis developed which meant that the Stalinist regimes could not be tenable in the long term. The result was the political developments of 1989-91 which led to the demise of the Stalinist regimes.

This instability of the Stalinist regimes was connected to the important contradiction between actual economic practices and the emphasis on the ideology of socialism. On the one hand the role of the party elite was to uphold economic practices that promoted the possibility to extract a surplus from the production of the workers and peasants. But on the other hand, they supported a formal ideology of socialism which emphasised the common interests of the people in the development of production in order to create the material conditions for an egalitarian type of society. Thus, there was a contradiction between theory and practice which is not present within capitalism. Trotsky explains this aspect in terms of the role of a degenerated workers state. But the lack of any effective economic power of the workers means that this perspective is problematical. Haynes outlines an alternative approach which emphasises the connection of state ownership with the imperatives of capital accumulation: “No less important has been the rise of state industry which, despite privatisation, remains an essential part of modern capitalism. Here too there is no private ownership in a narrow legalistic sense – it is the state which is effectively in charge. There is no legal inheritance mechanism, but this does not mean that there is no class rule, no exploitation, no alienation of power from one class to another. What counts, whether in the manager dominated company or the state enterprise, is the way a class of people emerge to control and administer the competitive accumulation of companies and states. It is this competition which determines the nature of the system and the class relations within it. The reproduction of capital determines the reproduction of capitalists, not the reproduction of capitalists the reproduction of capital.” (p133-134) This perspective may explain the relationship of the state to the capitalist economy in some capitalist countries but it is questionable whether this approach is able to explain the economic character of the Soviet Union. The important point is that an anti-capitalist revolution occurred in October 1917 which led to the development of a nationalised economy in which the state was the most important aspect for understanding economic activity. This situation was only modified by the advent of Stalinism which meant that all aspects of participatory economic and political democracy were replaced by the autocratic domination of the role of an elite political party. But this situation did not mean the development of a state capitalist economy because the party elite was able to achieve its economic domination in terms of the bureaucratic control of a nationalised economy. If this had meant the reintroduction of capitalism the aspect of the role of the market would have become dominant and the process of competition between rival economic companies established. Hayes implies that the aspect of competition occurred between the Soviet economy and those of the various western capitalist countries, but in actuality there was little interrelationship between these different aspects of the world economy. The Stalinist USSR was generally self-sufficient and the ruling class ensured its domination by the subordination of the workers and peasants to the economic aims of bureaucratic socialism which meant the development of the productive forces in order to create a surplus that could be controlled by the new ruling class. But the logic of this process of accumulation was different to that of capitalism because it was created by a state controlled nationalised economy rather than the aspect of competition between rival companies. Nor did competition occurred with western capitalism because the USSR was based on a generally self-sufficient economy. Hence the basis of the system was essentially connected to the extraction of a surplus from the production of the workers and peasants. In other words, Haynes’s version of the state capitalist theory describes a fictional type of economy that did not essentially exist in reality. The role of the state in a genuinely capitalist economy is not to dominate the process of economic activity but instead to assist the development of the role of various companies in terms of the realisation of a process of accumulation. This aspect could not occur in the Soviet Union because capitalism had been replaced by a different economic system which evolved from a type of potential socialism into becoming bureaucratic socialism in which the workers had to accept the directives of management and the state. But this nationalised economy lacked the aspect of competition between companies of a genuine capitalist society, and instead the workers were exploited, and a surplus extracted in terms of the distinct character of this different mode of production.

In other words, in the USSR there was no aspect of the individual character of the role of different companies in competition with each other with regards to the aim of establishing supremacy in the market. Instead, the state dominated the character of the process of production and economic activity in general. Thus, the implicit assumption being made by Haynes is that there is a state capitalist society because the role of the state is to exploit the workers in order to obtain a surplus in order to facilitate the possibility of continued expanded production. If this was all that was necessary in order to define a type of capitalism, then the USSR would have been capitalist. But capitalism is related to the aspect of competition between companies in national and international economies. In contrast within the Stalinist USSR this possibility of competition cannot occur because the state controls all aspects of productive activity. Profit is made not by the expression of the role of competition but instead because the state can ensure that the level of wages is at a level that enables the workers to produce a surplus that is under the control of the management of the various nationalised enterprises. Ultimately this surplus enables five-year plans of production to be developed which aim to convert this surplus into the basis of the expansion of the economy. There is also an important ideological reason why this economic system has to be different from that of capitalism. If it could be shown that so-called socialism was essentially the same as capitalism this situation would discredit the ideology of the party which was trying to suggest that a new emancipatory society was being developed. Therefore, aspects of society that developed in the years of a genuine revolutionary regime had to be maintained and yet modified in order to establish a new type of exploitative economy. In this manner the nationalised economy could not be replaced by private ownership of the means of production and instead this aspect was modified by the generation of a process of a systematic exploitation of the producers in order to benefit the new ruling class. But there is an essential similarity with capitalism in that a surplus is created in the process of production that is under the exclusive control of a new dominant ruling class. In other words, the character of the system is defined by the role of production and so Trotsky’s view that a nationalised economy is progressive but that the aspect of distribution of the results of production is reactionary is an untenable view that does not explain the possibility for the new ruling class to extract a surplus from the producers because of the very character of the relations of production. But this outcome is also the ultimate result of the defeat of the popular character of the revolutionary process of 1917, and so the ideology of the new ruling class is to claim that what has occurred is compatible with the initial objectives of the revolutionary process. Thus, the aspect of exploitation is justified by the denial of this very development and instead the approach of mythology was utilised in order to suggest that the party is still a genuine revolutionary leadership that is facilitating the consolidation of an authentic socialist society. This meant that there was a contradiction between theory and practice, but it could be suggested that this aspect is not different to the ideological justification of capitalism which is based on the understanding that the domination of capital is in the interests of society in general. The ruling elite in the Soviet Union could not deny the mythology that it was building genuine socialism because such an admission would imply that its domination of society was not justified. Instead, it had to contend that the party was leading the process of the creation of authentic socialism and so in this manner its elite role was necessary and progressive. Therefore, a contradiction between theory and practice had to be an essential aspect of the very character of the social formation. But without the claim that socialism was being created the system would have lacked any ideological credibility. This is why we can define Stalinism as bureaucratic socialism because the essential mythology that socialism was being developed was an essential aspect for explaining the character of this new type of exploitative social system.

In other words, the ideology of bureaucratic socialism was an integral aspect of the very character of the new social formation. This meant the domination of the economy by the role of the party elite was justified in terms of the view that this aspect was necessary in order to develop the material basis for the successful expression of socialism in economic terms. It could be suggested that this meant there was a theory and practice inconsistency because the aim of socialism was utilised in order to suggest that the aspects of inequality within society were necessary in order to achieve this objective of an ultimately development of an emancipatory social formation. But in practice the extraction of a surplus from the workers and peasants was the basis for the functioning of the economy but this was justified as the expression of the basis of the development of the material basis for the realisation of a more egalitarian society. Thus, the aspect of inequality was considered to be a temporary expression of a situation that was an inevitable necessity of the process of creating the material basis for the development of a more egalitarian society. The fact that the role of the party was the necessary leadership of the process of the creation of socialism seemed to be justification of the aspect of economic inequality and the situation of the domination of the party elite over the relations of production. However, Haynes seems to deny the importance of ideology and instead defines the situation in essentially economic terms: “Workers and peasants were now subordinated to the unhindered pressure of accumulation, while those above them emerged as a state bourgeoisie administering this process. This structural relationship of control of the means of production on the one hand, and subordination to them on the other, was the objective basis of power of the Soviet ruling class.”(p140) Such an understanding indicates the aspect of the exploitation of the producers who were subordinated within the economic relations to the domination of the party elite, but what this aspect is not connected to is the importance of ideology which justified the aspect of inequality in terms of being a necessary aspect of the creation of socialism. If this development was essentially an expression of state capitalism, then the ideology of socialism would be completely false and illusory. But instead, the subordination of the producers in economic terms was justified as being a necessary aspect of the creation of socialism. Hence the aspect of the exploitation of the workers was considered to be a necessary development in the process of the creation of socialism. In other words, the aim of socialism was reduced to being the justification of an extraction of a surplus from the producers in the act of production. Obviously, this economic aspect was the most important part of the system, but it could not be justified without the suggestion that this was a necessary development in relation to the creation of socialism. The defenders of the state capitalist view would imply that this is a conception that is most able to explain the economic importance of the aspect of exploitative accumulation, but the objection to this understanding is that it does not explain the significance of ideology. The point is that the extraction of a surplus from the producers is not openly justified as under capitalism as being an expression of the possibility of economic development but is instead ideologically glossed over as a necessary aspect of the promotion of the aim of socialism. In other words, there is a theory and practice inconsistency because the apparently egalitarian objective of socialism is reduced to the justification of the domination of the party elite over the process of production. This contradiction is understandable because the aspect of inequality is considered to be a necessary aspect of the creation of socialism. But, in contrast a state capitalist economy would not be justified in terms of an ideology of bureaucratic socialism, and instead would be based on the elaboration of an ideological approach that was compatible with that type of system. This did not occur, and instead the ideology of bureaucratic socialism explains the justification of the domination of the economy by the party and its ability to utilise this situation in order to realise the material conditions of a more egalitarian type of society. The fact that this ideology had important false aspects does not mean that bureaucratic socialism does not explain the combination of the domination of the economy by the party in terms of the supposed interests of the workers.

One of the problems with the approach of Haynes is that he cannot explain the changes that occurred in the Yeltsin era. The point is that Yeltsin promoted the restoration of capitalism because of the very fact that the character of the economy in the Stalinist era was not capitalist. Yeltsin understood that the de-nationalisation of the economy had to occur if its character was to become capitalist. This meant that bureaucratic socialism had to be ended and replaced by a system that did express in a genuine and effective manner the logic and imperatives of the process of capital accumulation. This was a process of counterrevolution because it was defined by the reactionary objectives of Yeltsin who aimed to replace bureaucratic socialism with a capitalist alternative. In this context the popular mobilisation of the people was on the basis of an ideology of democracy which actually expressed the interests of the capitalist system. However, the alternative was not to defend the continuation of bureaucratic socialism. Instead, the only principled approach would have been to strive to realise a genuine democratic socialism, and in this manner attempt to establish the genuine economic and political ascendency of the working class. But the problem was that the aim of socialism seemed to have been associated with the role of the Stalinist communist party. The influence of an alternative and principled conception of socialism did not become important in these circumstances of change. Therefore, the very identification of the aim of socialism with the role of Stalinism seemed to undermine the credibility of this objective. But, in contrast it seemed to be the expression of a genuine democratic revolution to support the restoration of capitalism. This is why Yeltsin led what could be called a popular process of change and seemed to express the democratic aspirations of the people of the Soviet Union. But principled Marxists could not support either the conservative Stalinist forces or the Yeltsin movement. Instead, it was necessary to develop an independent movement in favour of genuine revolutionary change that could create the basis of the development of an authentic socialist society. But the workers were disorientated by this period of change in 1991 and instead the ultimate expression of the aim of socialism was in the distorted form of a new popular Stalinist movement. Thus, there was no alternative than to try and create a genuine revolutionary party that would have as its major objective the development of opposition to Yeltsin’s perspective of the restoration of capitalism.

In other words, this situation indicated the regressive ideological role of Stalinism which had resulted in the discrediting of even a principled expression of the aim of socialism. Hence it was necessary to develop a genuine revolutionary party that could begin the process of the development of the influence of the ideas of a genuine socialism. But instead of that this possibility was distorted and undermined by the development of Stalinist parties that promoted the perspective of a return to the Stalinist era. In this context the forces of a genuine socialism were undermined and opposed by this ideological influence of the continuation of bureaucratic socialism. This situation has been complicated by the fact that Russia has become one of the most important capitalist countries within the world economy. Hence the politics of nostalgic Stalinism are completely ineffective. Instead, it is necessary to re-establish the importance of genuine Marxism if the workers are to develop a party that will be able to respond to the challenges posed by the restoration of capitalism in Russia.

It also has to be indicated that in order to understand the character of the Stalinist Soviet Union it is necessary to recognise the importance of ideology. This issue is analysed by David Priestland in his book: ‘Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization’ (Oxford University Press, 2007) He suggests that the ideology of the Communist party after the revolution was based on the following approach: “What, then, were the conventions of Marxism-Leninism? Central to the ideology and its coherence was the notion that the Soviet people, led by the party, were following a particular historical path of development, progressing towards the ultimate goal of communism. The legitimacy of the party, the organization declared to be the only body that knew how to reach communism, derived from the principle, as did the party’s view of what was good and what was bad: all that promoted progress towards communism was approved of, and all that blocked it was not.” (p18) In other words the practice of the party in government was connected to this ideological perspective of the attempt to create a socialist and then communist type of society. It could be suggested that the practice of the Bolsheviks, especially under Stalin’s leadership, was in contradiction to the possibility to realise this aim, but this aim of communism motivated the actions of the communist government, even if there was a theory and practice inconsistency because the actual policies and practices undermined the possibility to realise a genuine socialist society. However, the importance of ideology would indicate that the type of society that was being constructed was not a form of state capitalism, because this would mean the development of a type of theory and practice inconsistency that would reduce the actions of the Bolshevik leaders to the expression of crude cynicism. Instead, it was considered that the very necessity of the Bolshevik leadership was in order to advance the possibility of the realisation of the aim of communism: “The ideology also incorporated two very different visions of the type of politics needed to achieve the goal, each of which implied a different view of legitimate authority. The first assumed that the best way to make progress was to rely on the special ‘consciousness’ of the collective, the working class or its representative, the party; this implied a charismatic view of authority, as power was to be exercised by people who had extraordinary qualities or access to some higher truth. The second held that knowledge of science and technology would bring the regime towards communism, and assumed a Weberian ‘rational’ view of authority: power was to be in the hands of officials who were specifically trained for their job and had technical abilities.”(p20) But it could be suggested that this apparently contradictory perspective became increasing resolved in terms of the acceptance of the importance of the reconciliation of the role of the party with the recognition of the necessity of the domination of the different aspects of the economy by the influence of managers of productive units and the related end of all expression of the democracy of the role of the producers. Thus, the consolidation of the supremacy of the party was logically and consistently connected to the end of all aspects of the democratic expression of the influence of the producers within the process of production. However, as Priestland mentions this development created an ideological issue of how could a genuine socialist society be created if the workers become subordinate in terms of the aspect of influence within the relations of production. These issues could only be formally resolved in terms of the generation of the perspective that the party should act on behalf of the workers in order to promote the aims of socialism. But it could be suggested that this development was opposed to the realisation of the major objective of the October revolution which was the possibility to express the importance of the participatory democracy of the role of the Soviets. Already by early 1918 the aspect of workers democracy in the organisation of production had become replaced by the role of one management of the various enterprises. But this could be suggested as being of an empirical necessity rather than a justification of a different and less participatory conception of how to realise socialism. However, Priestland suggests that there was an ideological reason for this development because Lenin, even in his most radical writings, had not become a consistent supporter of the role of participatory democracy for the organisation of socialist society: “Lenin’s writings of 1917 on the socialist future are, therefore, marked by a profound tension between populist voluntarism and elitist scientism. He was generally optimistic that socialism could be achieved very soon by a responsible, revolutionary proletariat – a belief that was to become the core of the populist revivalism of the Bolshevik left. But he occasionally undermined it with a recognition that the dictates of science and expertise would have to be taken into account, and that technical experts would have to have a great deal of power in the new state – the basis of Bolshevik technicism.” (p82) Hence there was a tendency to still define the character of the organisation of socialist society in elitist terms. This ambiguity can be understood in the following terms: “During 1917, then Lenin was able to forge a set of ideas that had a real populist resonance within Marxism and using the language of Russian populist socialism. At the same time, by promising that participatory democracy and the struggle against the ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘bureaucracy’ Lenin appeared to provide a solution to Russia’s problems and gave him the confidence to mobilize supporters and take the initiative.” (p85) But the very serious character of the economic situation after the revolution meant that it was not possible to realise this perspective of participatory economic democracy. But this meant that the connection of the revolutionary process with the popular objectives of the workers became seriously undermined and replaced by an approach that emphasised the necessity of elite organisation of the economy by the role of managers. In this context the ideas of the Workers Opposition which emphasised the importance of the participatory democracy of the producers had been defeated at party conferences between 1920-21, and so the result was the increasing importance of an elitist view that the organisation of the economy should not involve the democratic role of the producers. Instead, the emphasis was on how the party should develop the New Economic Policy. The major political problem was that the emerging Left Opposition was not in favour of the necessity of the participatory economic democracy of the producers, and so the issues of contention became about how to develop the NEP in the most effective manner. This aspect became connected to differences about the relationship of the possibility of international revolution to the issue of the building of socialism in one country. It was assumed between 1924-28 that this task was connected to the consolidation of the NEP, or the process of the exchange of the industrial products of the workers for the agricultural goods of the peasants. Therefore, it could be suggested that despite the opportunist rejection of the importance of the aim of international revolution, which was justified in terms of the theory of the stabilisation of international capitalism, the regime could be defined as a deformed workers state which in some sense acted to realise the aspirations of the working class and peasants. It was recognised that the possibility of the development of the economy depended on the success of this relationship of workers and peasants, and this aspect expressed the influence of Bukharin on the role of policy. But increasing this influence was undermined by the success of Stalin in a power struggle and so the political situation was created of the possibility of changes in economic policy. It could be argued that it was necessary to establish a different approach based on the new challenges posed by a situation in which the role of the NEP was no longer considered to be sufficient in order to ensure continued economic development. Priestland suggests that in an opportunist manner, Stalin was adopting the programme of the United Left Opposition: “Like the left, he combined the demand for mass participation and mobilization with a call for greater socialization of the economy (although he used methods the left would never have accepted, and went much further than they did in calling for centralization and economic leaps forward).”(p190) But the point is that there was never any intention to develop in a genuine manner a participatory type of economic democracy, but instead this approach was based on the undermining of the influence of the left and right oppositions. The ultimate aim was to prepare the political basis for the increasing centralised organisation of the economy: “The policies of this period were indeed intended to strengthen and centralize the state and economy……. Stalin insisted that a Bolshevik elite, armed with a faith in socialism and breaking through the limits of bourgeois science, could push the economy and the policy towards a socialist system. The market was to be eliminated, the state and society were to be completely unified and integrated, all ‘backwardness’ was to be overcome and extraordinary feats of production were to be achieved; the concessions made to ‘backward’ groups under the NEP, such as the peasantry were no longer acceptable.” (p191) Thus an authoritarian approach was justified in the populist terms of the renewal of class struggle and the that advances towards the consolidation of socialism was to be established. The criticism of Bukharin was labelled as being the expression of a right deviation that represented the interests of the restoration of capitalism. But in actuality the interests of the workers were being undermined because the aspect of prosperity that had been associated with the NEP was ended by this new development of economic policy. The only possible result of this situation could be the intensification of the exploitation of the workers in relation to the end of the NEP which had been based on the connection of the prosperity of the workers with that of the peasants. Instead, the effective undermining of the material situation of the workers was justified in terms of the vague notion of the consolidation of socialism. This very development indicated that there was no longer any genuine connection of the ideological theory of socialism with actual practice that was based on the intensification of the process of the extraction of a surplus from the workers. Indeed, it could be argued that this process of exploitation only became systematically realised in the 1928-29 period. However, this very development was justified in terms of the view that the peasantry, especially the kulaks, were able to establish a situation in which they dominated the process of economic activity for their own advantage. The fact that the workers had been able to obtain food as a result of the role of the NEP was ignored and instead it was maintained by the Soviet government that it would be necessary to end the situation of the apparent ability of the peasants to dictate the terms of productive activity to their advantage. This meant the introduction of the collectivisation of the process of agriculture, which actually meant the decline of the production of the peasantry because of the dislocation of the peasant economy. It is also questionable whether this approach was popular with the workers who often had close relations to the peasants. In other words, this development would seem to be irrational if it were not for the fact that the collectivisation of agriculture when combined with the intensification of the control of industry by the party elite meant that the conditions for the extraction of a surplus was intensified. However, this development was irrational because the coercive character of these measures meant that the level of production of the peasants dramatically declined because of the situation of the chaos introduced into the process of agriculture production. Thus, the development of collectivisation of agriculture was essentially a political measure to consolidate the domination of the economy by the party elite almost regardless of the effect that this situation had in relation to the level of production. The point was that the effective expression of a relationship between city and countryside based on the exchange of industrial goods for agricultural products was ended and replaced by a situation of the effective undermining of the economic stability of the countryside. The economic irrationality of this policy meant that it could only be justified in the narrow political terms of the attempt to end the influence of the peasants, and instead subordinate them to the development of a form of repressive collective production with the enforced development of collective farms. The fact that this approach could not result in the development of a higher level of surplus obtained from the peasants, meant that this approach was motivated by Stalin’s aims to end the influence of the peasants within the economy. Instead, they were effectively recreated as serfs under the control of the state which organised the character of the agricultural economy in terms of the creation of collective farms.

But Priestland describes this development in terms of the increasing refusal of the peasants to cooperate with the state in order to deliver food at low prices: “By early 1928, the continuing grain shortages, caused by the peasants refusal to deliver grain to the state for the low prices they were being offered, forced the leadership to make a choice between feeding workers and maintaining the ambitious industrialization targets on the one hand, and preserving the market relations of the NEP on the other. In early January, during a trip to Siberia to investigate the reasons for low grain procurements, Stalin made it clear that he had decided on the first option and was willing to undermine market relations and the NEP. The market and material incentives, he argued could no longer be relied on to motivate the peasantry to produce and deliver grain. The kulaks were refusing to give up the grain for a fair price, he claimed, and only force and class struggle would ensure that they delivered it.” (p193) But the point was that Stalin was not concerned about the high prices of agricultural products, but instead was motivated by the aim of realising greater control over the agricultural economy so that its character and objectives would be increasingly defined by the objectives of the state. The ideological justification of this approach was defined by the view that the kulaks had too much economic power and so were able to oppose the objectives of the socialist state, but the actual reason for this development was the aim of establishing the control of the government over the role of agriculture. This aim was not economically rational because its implementation in terms of the formation of collective farms that the peasants did not want could not result in increased economic efficiency and productivity. But what it meant was that the peasants had become subordinated to the domination of the aims of the state and no longer had an aspect of economic independence which meant they could no longer define the character of the relations between agriculture and industry. Hence the introduction of collective farms meant the end of the independent character of agriculture and this policy was irrational because it meant the peasants were no longer motivated to provide food for the workers. Instead, they were essentially alienated from the aims of production except to try and create food for themselves, but even this task was undermined by the fact that the state expropriated the results of collective farm production. Hence the peasants had difficulty trying to obtain a situation of subsistence and the workers were no longer sure that they could consistently obtain food. But Stalin was not primarily concerned about these economic problems and instead wanted to consolidate the domination of the state over the peasants, who could no longer assert independent economic power. This situation did not benefit the workers who no longer had the possibility to obtain food in an effective manner. The only beneficiary in this situation was the state that had developed increased economic power over the workers and peasants. The aspect of lower economic efficiency was compensated by the increased ability of the state to obtain a surplus from the workers and peasants.

However, Priestland considers that the approach of Stalin was based on a form of adoption of the perspectives of the united opposition of Zinoviev and Trotsky: “Rather he adopted the revivalist programme of the United Opposition in its entirety, policies designed to establish a centralized, co-ordinated non-market system were not enough, especially in the more advanced, ‘socialist’ sphere. They had to be combined with proletarian ‘democracy’ and ‘class struggle’. Workers were to be mobilized against the ‘bureaucrats’ within the apparatus.” (p201) But this ideological approach was to be an aspect of attempting to develop the motivation of the workers to increase the level of economic efficiency and productivity. Hence the ultimate aim was to generate the possibility to increase the level of the surplus of the economy. Indeed, this objective by 1929 had become the primary aim of Stalin and the party leadership. Thus, it was understood that the necessity to try and obtain the consent of the workers to the aim of the creation of a surplus would actually be based on the influence of a socialist ideology that suggested that such a task was an expression of what would be in the material interests of the workers. Higher levels of production would create the possibility for increasing wages. But this apparent egalitarian ideology was actually based on the justification of the domination of the party over the process of production. It was to the material benefit of the workers that they accept the directives of the party because the possibility to develop economic growth as a result of the acceptance of this type of leadership would ultimately enable the wages of the workers to increase. The ideology of Stalinism suggested that the commitment of the workers to increase production would be to their material benefit, but the actual necessity to increase the level of surplus meant that there was a contradiction between the promises of ideology when compared to the actual practices of economic activity. Hence there was a problem with the aspect of the populist ideology because it seemed to imply that the workers were right to reject the instructions of the managers because they could be defined as bourgeois specialists: “Yet the language of class struggle could also be exploited by another group – the party rank and file workers. The leadership’s attack on communists who were behaving in a bourgeois way could be taken to mean that it was waging war against a new, communist bourgeoisie, and its rhetoric could encourage populist attacks on the apparatus from below. And such a broad definition of class had significant disadvantages for the leadership, because it could incite popular attacks on officials in the leadership which once unleashed could not be easily controlled.”(p218) Hence in order to undermine the development of genuine popular opposition of the people to the role of elitism within the economy, Stalin organised various public trails of bourgeois specialists in order to suggest that the problem was not the control of the economy by the party elite but instead the actions of various corrupt managers. But in actuality the intention to strengthen the development of the subordination of the workers within the process of production was not being undermined. Nevertheless, the problem was that the ideology of the democracy of the workers could not be sustained in the long term given the objectives of the party state to increase the generation of a surplus by the workers. Therefore, this ideological standpoint had to be ended by about 1930. Instead, Stalin adopted an ideological approach of increasing criticism of the workers for not being efficient economic actors and instead having an inclination to eject the necessity of the importance of discipline within the process of production. This changed emphasis indicated that the egalitarian perspective of the period between 1928-30 could not be sustained given the increasing necessity to extract a surplus from the process of production. Hence the ideological approach increasing expressed the renewed importance of the workers to accept the instructions of management and Stalin indicated that the wages of the workers would have to be increasing connected to improvements of the level of productivity. There was an ideological emphasis on the necessity of the workers to realise the requirements of the various five-year plans, and the importance of the role of hierarchy in the process of production was given primary importance. But the point is that this change of policy indicated that the emphasis on the approach of egalitarianism could not be sustained given the necessity to extract a surplus from the workers in the process of production. The standpoint of equality implied that the workers had the right to define the conditions and character of production and so this ideological viewpoint could not be sustained in the long term given the aim of the party bureaucracy to extract a surplus in the process of production. Hence the importance of workers influences in the process of production had to be essentially rejected in relation to the ideology of the party elite. Instead, there was an increasing emphasis on the role of management for the organisation of production and the defining of its objectives, and the discipline of the workers in the process of production was given renewed importance.

Between 1932-35 there were certain modifications of the policy of repression adopted towards the peasantry, but the approach of consolidating collectivisation continued. In other words, the aims of the countryside were defined by the state which ensured that the aspect of the production of the countryside was under the control of the objectives established by the government. However, in order to ensure economic efficiency certain concessions had to be made to the peasantry in order to provide for the possibility of private forms of production as well as the role of the collective farms. It was argued in ideological terms that the society of the USSR was based on the importance of the working class, peasantry and the non-class sector of the intelligentsia. Obviously, the aspect of exploitation could not be admitted because this would be an admission that the aim of socialism was being undermined by the aspect of the importance of domination and subordination within the relations of production. In other words, it could be suggested that there was an ideological crisis in the period 1930-34 because it was difficult to connect the aspect of the increasing systematic extraction of a surplus from industry and agriculture with the objectives of socialism. It could be suggested that only the defeats of the right and left oppositions ensured that this situation of increasing ideological malaise did not result in the development of a new type of oppositional movement. But then Stalin recognised that the economic attempt of the worker Stakhanov to increase production could actually express an ideological pretext to connect the producers to the very objective of the extraction of a surplus from their economic activity. Hence the emphasis was developed of the necessity to emulate the example of Stakhanov. But it could be suggested that workers were reluctant to act in this manner of the individual attempt to increase production. Instead, they recognised the collective character of the process of production and also rejected the aim of uncritical acceptance of the objectives of management to increase output. The Stalinists tried to defend the importance of the Stakhanovite approach by suggesting that it was an expression of the involvement of the workers in the organisation of production. But this view was not supported by the workers who understood that this policy was merely a justification for the development of production for the benefit of management and the party state. Hence it was necessary to establish a different policy in order to sustain the credibility of the regime. The result was the policy of the purging of the party of dissenters who were apparently responsible for the problems of the regime. This situation led to the purge trails in which the followers of Trotsky were accused of being supporters of capitalist restoration. But these trails did not end the increasing unrest with the regime and so the purge trails were extended to increase important figures in the army. But it was eventually recognised that the ideological role of the trails had become discredited because of their repressive character and so were ended by 1939. Instead, Stalin tried to justify the domination of the role of the communist party in his official understanding of the USSR in his official history of the Soviet Union. However, the combination of repression and ideology could not provide a popular basis for the role of the Communist party elite. But ultimately the credibility of the regime was undermined by the fact that the method for the extracting of a surplus from the producers was inefficient and did not generate the possibility of an efficient form of production. Hence the system was only consolidated by the efficient character of the role of the repression of society. Therefore, it was not surprising that the system was ultimately ended by the crisis of the Gorbachev regime in 1991. Stalinism had been what Trotsky described it was the ‘revolution betrayed’.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION OF THE THEORY OF BUREAUCRATIC SOCIALISM WITH THE PERSPECTIVE OF BUREAUCRATIC COLLECTIVISM?

Max Shachtman outlined the view that the USSR represented the system of bureaucratic collectivism in his book: “The Bureaucratic Revolution” (Donald Press, New York 1962) He considers that the type of society that has been presided over by the Stalinist elite in the Soviet Union is that of bureaucratic collectivism, which he defines in the following manner: “I regard this new society and the state that rules it as a unique form of class exploitation and oppression. The vast majority is dominated by a minority which monopolizes all political and economic power and aims at maintaining social relations that are even more alien to socialism than they are to capitalism. The ruling class is unique, in that it does not own the national property which it rules but does ‘own’ the state. It derives its vast economic power and privilege exclusively from the political power it exercises through its chosen instrument, the communist party. The roots of its power over society reposing entirely in this political power, the ruling class cannot permit even such measures of popular political control as are possible under capitalism where the roots of social power lie in property ownership.” (p1) However the very possibility to establish the political power of the ruling class is defined by its ability to establish economic domination over society and so extract a surplus from the producers. Without this aspect the system would not be viable. Therefor it is questionable whether the aspect of the role of the political is dominant and instead this very aspect is consolidated by the connection of this development to the ability to establish the ascendency of the ruling party in the process of production. This situation is connected to the ideology of a type of elitist socialism which suggested that the superior role of the party in the process of production was ensuring the development of the possibility to realise the welfare of the people. The party as a socialist organisation was ensuring that the aims of the role of economic activity was connected to ensuring the welfare of the people in a manner that was superior to capitalism. However, the fact that the workers under capitalism could organise more effectively to establish material improvements seemed to undermine the credibility of this claim. Therefore, the party elite had to ensure that the workers could not learn about the situation of the people in the advanced capitalist countries. Hence ignorance was an actual aspect of the ideology of the ruling elite in order to try and provide credibility to its claim that it was facilitating the realisation of socialism. Shachtman suggests that the alternative to capitalism is either bureaucratic collectivism or genuine socialism, but the point is that in order to try and obtain the support of the workers and peasants for the aims of the elite party, the Stalinists have to claim that they are presiding over the development of a socialist society. Hence the very importance of the aspect of the exploitation of the producers has to be denied as being an aspect of the character of the relations of production. In other words, there has to be an aspect of ideological untruth when the party elite has to justify the situation of its economic and political domination of society. Instead, the ascendency of party has to be expressed in terms of the ideological illusion that what is occurring is the development of a genuine egalitarian socialist society. Also, Shachtman was wrong to suggest that Stalinism was increasing replacing capitalism as the most dominant system. Instead, the expansion of Stalinism was the result of the exceptional circumstances of the military expansion of this system in the situation of the role of the second world war, and the victory of peasant revolution in China. These exceptional circumstances could not be reproduced after this development and instead the very supremacy of world capitalism created the conditions for undermining the strength and credibility of the Stalinist system. Only the possibility of genuine socialism could express an effective alternative to capitalism. Therefore, Stalinism did not represent a credible possible replacement of the domination of world capitalism. Instead, it was only an exceptional development, and the very aspects of economic inefficiency of the system meant that it expressed more aspects of decline than capitalism. This perspective was shown to be credible given the general demise of Stalinism in the 1990’s. Shachtman indicates how the Khrushchev regime was based on the vague promise of the creation of a communist classless society and the immediate improvement of the situation of the people, but the intention to ensure the consolidation of the regime of the party elite was the primary intention of this apparently new political perspective. But he does not outline a perspective of how the people should attempt to organise in political terms in relation to these apparently new conditions of the political relaxation of the coercive character of the regime. Shachtman considers that capitalism is a declining system that cannot express the possibility of an alternative to the limitations of the Stalinist system, but this is a naïve view. The point is that the Stalinist elite had to try to undermine the possibility for the workers to understand the progress that had been made by the working class in the post-war period because of the role of boom and the development of welfare states. Hence the Stalinist elite was on the ideological defensive and essentially were motivated by the necessity to maintain their domination over society. They could not express the possibility of the advance of world revolution in terms of claiming the superiority of socialism, even this view was sometimes expressed in an unconvincing manner. Hence the problem was that bureaucratic socialism was a system that was essentially inferior to capitalism. This meant the ideological credibility of the view that socialism was superior to capitalism lacked political credibility. Only the state power of the party bureaucracy ensured the continuation of the Stalinist system. The major problem was that there was a theory and practice inconsistency in the character of the USSR. In theory it was claimed that genuine socialism was being created, but the authoritarian character of the economic and political system meant that this contention could not be credible. But the ideology of socialism had to be maintained because this was the only manner in which the domination of the party elite could be considered to be necessary. Therefore, this is why the system could be defined as bureaucratic socialism. But such an understanding does not deny the contrast with genuine socialism given the importance of the role of the exploitation of the producers in the relations of production. But this very aspect is justified by the party elite as being integral to the character of socialism, as defined by the importance of its primary role within the relations of production.

Shachtman denies that the Stalinist society could be state capitalist because the former capitalist class has no economic or political influence within the character of the economic and political formation. But it could be suggested that this situation represents state capitalism if it could be suggested that the new ruling class is effectively defined by the aim of capital accumulation in a manner that was similar to what occurred under a capitalist type of system. But the lack of the importance of commodity production for the purpose of market exchange is an expression of the fact that there is not a variant of the role of the capitalist class which attempts to extract a surplus in a manner that is similar to that which occurred under a capitalist economic system. Furthermore, the process of Stalinist expansion in Eastern Europe ultimately ended the domination of capitalism and replaced that system with a state dominated process of economic activity. Hence the process of economic exploitation occurs in terms of the development of new forms of relations of production and is not dependent on the extraction of a surplus connected with the purpose of competitive rivalry of different companies. Instead, the complete domination of the state creates new economic conditions for the extraction of a surplus from the subordinated producers within the relations of production. Indeed, Shachtman seems to agree with this understanding in terms of the following understanding of the development of the domination of the Stalinist elite: “In the last quarter of a century, an epoch of the exceptionally rapid disintegration of capitalism, we have seen that the answer to the failure of the working class may also take another form. Where the bourgeoisie is no longer capable of maintaining (or, as in the case of Russia), of restoring its social order, and the proletariat is not yet able to inaugurate its own, a social interregnum is established by a new ruling class which buries the moribund capitalism and crushes the unborn socialism in the egg. The new ruling class is the Stalinist bureaucracy. Its social order, hostile both to capitalism and socialism, is bureaucratic or totalitarian collectivism. The bourgeoisie is wiped out altogether and the working class is reduced to state slaves.” (p29) We can agree with this understanding of the new social formation dominated by the role of the Stalinist elite, but what we would also suggest is that in ideological terms the supremacy of the party is justified in terms of being the expression of the system of genuine socialism. Thus, the ascendency of the party is upheld in terms of the ideological understanding that this very elite role is an expression of the general interests of society in the process of the construction of socialism. Therefore, the development of what Shachtman defines as bureaucratic collectivism could also be considered to be bureaucratic socialism if we accept the importance of the role of ideology for justifying the aspect of the domination of the party which is said to be providing the aspect of leadership in the development of an alternative to capitalism. Hence the term bureaucratic collectivism is not incorrect, but it is one-sided because it essentially is a definition of the economic aspects of the new social formation. But the point is that this very development is consolidated by the fact that the party elite has to suggest that this situation is connected to the intention to construct socialism. What is problematical in the approach of Shachtman is his suggestion that within capitalist society elements of the middle class and white-collar workers have the conscious aim of the creation of a bureaucratic collectivist society. Instead, it has to be suggested that these sections either support the continuation of capitalism, or alternatively become the basis of the reformist parties that aim to introduce reforms within capitalism. Hence the Stalinist social formation of the USSR was created by the process of the degeneration of what had been the revolutionary party of the workers. Indeed, Shachtman seems to contradict his perspectives when he outlines that the consolidation of bureaucratic collectivism was primarily caused by the expansion of the domination of the Soviet elite as a result of the process of increased control of Eastern Europe. In other words, the possibility of the internal development of bureaucratic collectivism is not likely to occur and is instead primarily the aspect of the process of expansion of Stalinist domination of Eastern Europe. Hence Shachtman’s view that bureaucratic collectivism can occur when the working class fails to establish success in the attempt to overcome capitalism is a dogmatic perspective, because in this situation the domination of capitalism is likely to be consolidated. Indeed, capitalism will determine the character of the world economy until the success of proletarian revolutionary change is realised. But the military expansion of Soviet Stalinism enabled its system to become consolidated in these exceptional circumstances, and this development was justified ideologically as a process of the expansion of socialism. Hence the objective of socialism becomes reduced to being the justification of the domination of the Stalinist elite. This is why it is more precise to define the Stalinist system as bureaucratic socialism. But it would be a mistake to assume that the ideological reference to socialism means that there is a genuine expression of this aspect in the character of the social formation. Instead Shachtman is correct to suggest: “The Stalinist bureaucracy in power is a new ruling, exploitative class. Its social system is a new system of totalitarian exploitation and oppression, not capitalist and yet having nothing in common with socialism. It is the cruel realization of the prediction made by all the great socialist scientists, from Marx and Engels onward, that capitalism must collapse out of an inability to solve its own contradictions and that the alternatives facing mankind are not so much capitalism or socialism as they are socialism or barbarism. Stalinism is that new barbarism.” (p32) But the problem with this definition is that it ignores the importance of ideology. The point is that the very aspect of the domination of the Stalinist party over Soviet society had to be justified in terms of the view that a socialist society was being constructed, and so the character of policies was in the interests of the workers and peasants. In other words, the system would lack ideological credibility if the Stalinist elite had accepted that it had rejected the aims of the Bolsheviks under Lenin’s leadership and instead were consciously attempting to create a new type of exploitative society. Therefore, it had to be suggested that Stalinism was the continuation of the approach of Lenin and that as a result socialism was being created. This ideology was not consciously deceptive because it could be accepted that Stalin genuinely believed that under his leadership the aims of socialism were being expressed and consolidated. Hence there was a theory and practice inconsistency in the character of society. In theory it was being suggested that socialism was being constructed under the supervision of the party, but in practice the aspect of economic exploitation of the producers was being consolidated. Hence the defining aspect of the character of society was that the process of the realisation of the economic surplus was not under the control and supervision of the workers as producers. This development occurred because what had been the workers state acting in terms of these objectives had undergone degeneration and had been replaced with a new type of bureaucratic state that attempted to ensure the extraction of a surplus from the process of production in terms of its own distinct economic interests rather than being the expression of the aims of the workers as producers.

Thus, Shachtman is right to suggest that Trotsky’s equation of the continuation of nationalised property with the role of a degenerated worker’s state seems to deny the importance of the development of new relations of production in which the state ensures the extraction of a surplus from the producers. Furthermore, the characterisation of the degenerated workers state accepts that whilst the workers have no economic or political power this type of society is ensured by the continued importance of a nationalised economy. Hence Shachtman concludes: “Therefore, although the workers have no political power whatsoever, although they are exploited by methods that would not be countenanced in a bourgeois democracy, although their share of the national wealth continues to decline in favour of the share allotted to itself by the bureaucracy, although their economic position grows worse every year, although they have nothing to say about domestic or foreign policy, about economics or politics in general….they remain the ruling class of Russia so long as property remains in the hands of the state.”(p61-62) But as Shachtman observes the effective situation is that the workers have no economic or political power. The system is totally controlled by what is a new ruling class. This understanding is the important aspect of the approach of Shachtman, but the problem is that he does not indicate the type of ideology which justifies this development of a new type of exploitative society. The point is that the Communist party which has become the new ruling class cannot suggest to the workers that it has betrayed the original socialist aspirations of the revolutionary process. Hence it has to justify the very aspect of the importance of the exploitation of the producers in order to generate a surplus as essentially being the expression of the development of the productive forces on the basis of the role of the nationalised economy in order to create the material basis for socialism. Thus, this ruling class cannot admit to the actual situation of the role of exploitation within the relations of production if it is to be able to establish the credibility of the domination of the communist party over the economy and society. This does not mean that the nationalised property relations are somehow a continuing expression of the role of a degenerated workers state as Trotsky claims, because the workers have no economic power and instead are subject to the imperatives of the aspect of exploitation within the relations of production. Instead, the ideology of socialism is being interpreted by the party as the justification of the domination of the party concerning the character and imperatives of the economy, which is based on the extraction of a surplus from the producers. Hence Shachtman Is right to suggest that Trotsky’s acceptance of the concept of political revolution as the only perspective that could bring about progressive change in the character of Russian society was actually an acceptance that the party elite had become a distinct stratum of society with its own distinct interests. Hence the only conclusion that can be made from the understanding that the party can only represent the bureaucracy is actually an indirect admission that it is the expression of a distinct ruling class with interests that are distinct and different from those of the workers. The point is that the nationalised economy which Trotsky considers to be an expression of the continuation of the role of the workers state in a degenerated form, is actually under the domination of the role of the party bureaucracy which has control of the state and so is able to define the character of economic activity which means the aim of the privileged ruling class is to extract a surplus from the workers. Hence the character of the nationalised economy does not in any manner express the influence and interests of the workers but instead represents the aims and interests of a distinct ruling class that is able to dominate the relations of production in order to advance its own aims to extract a surplus from the workers in order to consolidate the possibility of the continuation of this new type of economic activity.

But there is another important reason why Stalinism cannot represent the interests of what could be defined as a degenerated workers state. The process of the domination of Eastern Europe by the Stalinist forces of the USSR cannot mean that in some bureaucratic manner a deformed type of workers state is being created. To accept this perspective would imply that in some limited progressive manner the process of transformation that has occurred is in some manner the expression of the creation of what could be called deformed workers states. There is not in any sense a process of change that in some limited manner expresses the interests of the workers of the countries in which the process of the ending of capitalism occurred. Instead, this development represents the increased possibility for the Soviet ruling class to be able to extend the territory in which it is able to develop the process of the exploitation of the producers. This means that there is nothing progressive about this development and instead what has occurred is the consolidation of the domination of the Soviet ruling class. Hence the task of achieving national liberation is connected to the objective of realising the liberation of the workers and ending the subordination of the workers within the relations of production. But we would argue in contrast to Shachtman that the role of the Soviet Red army had a limited progressive role in bringing about the possibility to end the fascist domination of Eastern Europe during world war two. In this manner it could have been principled to critically support the role of the Red army in this context. Therefore, Shachtman’s refusal to support this perspective could be considered to be a dogmatic approach that is not able to respond to changing circumstances. The point is that there was a contradiction in the actions of the Red army. On the one hand the military action against the forces of German fascism could potentially contribute to the liberation of the people of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, if this development becomes the basis for the establishment of the domination of the nations of eastern Europe then the progressive aspects of this military action of the Red army would be undermined and transformed into becoming the basis of the consolidation of the economic and political power of the Soviet regime. Therefore, it was necessary to promote the perspective of the transformation of the military struggle of the Red army into becoming the basis to generate the possibility of authentic attempts to establish the national liberation of the peoples of Eastern Europe. This objective would be connected to the attempt to democratise the character of the Red army so that it could become supportive of the aims of the peoples of Eastern Europe. But this possibility did not occur and so the aspect of anti-fascist struggle became subordinated to the interests of the Soviet elite to establish domination over Eastern Europe. Hence there are contradictory aspects to the military struggle of the Red army, which has progressive aspects, but they are increasing subordinated to the aim of establishing domination over Eastern Europe. But Shachtman cannot accept the aspect of contradictory features to the military struggle of the Red army and instead comments: “Right now the “defence of nationalized property” means the defence of the economic foundations of bureaucratic totalitarianism and imperialist expansion…That is why it fights for it with such tenacity, with such indifference as to what alliances it makes with what capitalist-imperialist powers at the expense of the working class, with such cruel disregard for the legions of cannon fodder it hurls wastefully into the breach against the enemy. This is why it fights to extend its social base – and thereby its social rule – to whatever other country…. that it has the power to take from the enemy and to be granted its share of the imperialist booty by its allies.” (p116) This aspect is an important component of the aims of Stalin’s Red army, but the complexity is the aspect of necessary struggle to oppose the expansionist objectives of the fascist military armies. Hence Trotsky was not wrong to still emphasise the importance of the defence of the Soviet Union under these circumstances. But this does not mean that it would have been wrong to deny the importance of the necessity of the mass struggles of the people of Eastern Europe to try to establish progress in relation to the aim of national liberation. Indeed, the aim would have been to attempt to develop a genuine process of interaction between the popular struggle for national emancipation and the role of the Red army. Obviously, this development was not realised, but in critical terms it could have been principled to support the actions of the Red army against the forces of fascism. In contrast the revolutionary defeatist approach of Shachtman does not seem able to connect principled politics with empirical realities. The point is that the Red army was conducting a legitimate war of national defence against fascist imperialist invasion of the USSR, and so in this context the approach of revolutionary defeatism was not relevant. Indeed no one supported it because of its impractical aspects. Instead, people either collaborated with the invading German army, or else supported the military defence of the USSR. This did not mean that people were not defending the nationalised economy of the USSR, as the orthodox Trotskyists claimed, but instead were opposing an aggressive act of military expansion and so were defending the national integrity of the Soviet Union. This aspect could have been supported by genuine Marxists in a critical manner whilst calling for the war of national defence to become an expression of authentic popular struggle against fascism.

However Shachtman considers that the character of the military struggle being conducted by the Stalinist red army is defined by agreement with the imperialist objectives of the British and American governments: “Europe’s only hope for survival, to say nothing of progress; its only way out of the barbarism into which it is sinking, its only weapon against being exploited, disfranchised and degraded, either by British, American or Russian imperialism, or a combination of them – is the economic and political unity of the continent. Such unity is an essential necessity for the life of the Old world now. It is realizable only in the form of the United Socialist states of Europe.” (p136) This perspective is the only principled basis of revolutionary perspectives and so should be the basis of the attempt to develop the interests of the international working class. But the problem is that Shachtman also seems to ignore the importance of the fact of the second world war, and the necessity to develop a principled perspective in relation to establishing the interests of the international working class in that context. The point is that the inter-imperialist war is also influenced by the aspect of the necessity to oppose the actions of fascist imperialism and its attempts to dominate Europe. In that context there arises the issue of national liberation of the peoples of Europe from fascist imperialist domination. This situation means that a complex approach has to be developed in relation to the role of the Soviet red army, which it could be considered to contributing to the possibility of the national liberation of the countries of Eastern Europe. However, this perspective is also complicated by the imperialist aims of the various Allied powers. Hence there is the necessity to develop a genuinely independent approach of the workers of Eastern Europe in which they could become able to influence events and so generate the possibility of genuine anti-fascist struggles. But Shachtman seems to be indifferent to discussing this aspect because of his emphasis on the importance of the imperialist objectives of the Allied powers. The problem with this view is not that it is incorrect, but that the aspect of the possibility of genuine peoples struggles against fascism is being ignored. In other words, the potential for the people to be able to influence the development of events is not being evaluated in a consistent manner. Instead, only the options for the ruling classes of the various countries are being analysed in systematic terms. Hence there is no indication of a strategy of the process of national liberation in the context of the second world war. Therefore, the increasing ascendency of the Stalinist elite in Eastern Europe is essentially outlined as being an inevitability.

In other words, one of the major problems with the approach of Shachtman is established in that he seems to be indifferent to the importance of the development of a perspective for how the people can overcome the domination of Stalinism. But this problem can only mean that he considers the social formation of the Stalinist elite to be essentially stable. Hence it could be suggested that the economic limitations of a bureaucratic economy and how they are expressed in an increasing inability to meet the material needs of the people are not established. Instead Shachtman becomes increasing concerned to merely defend his standpoint against the rival approach of people like Deutscher, who supported a variant of the perspective of Trotsky. But the major problem with Shachtman’s approach is that he failed to recognise the importance of the role of the ideology of socialism which was utilised in order to justify the bureaucratic system. This is why we would suggest that the definition of the USSR as bureaucratic collectivist is less explanatory than the term bureaucratic socialist. It is true that Shachtman did establish the importance of exploitation of labour as being an important aspect of the relations of production of Stalinism. But this very aspect was connected to the role of the ideology of a form of socialism. Hence the term bureaucratic socialism seems to explain the various contradictions of the system in the most satisfactory manner. The point is that the bureaucracy could not openly admit to the aspect of exploitation within the relations of production because this would mean conceding that all the gains of the proletarian revolution had been ended. However, in practice the aspect of exploitation in order to extract a surplus had become the basis of the character of the economic system. This was only not capitalism because there was not a situation of competition between rival economic companies based on the aspect of the process of capital accumulation. But in this manner Trotsky was right to suggest that the revolution had been betrayed. But the bureaucracy could not ideologically accept this situation because it would discredit its role. Instead in mythical terms it had to be suggested that socialism was being developed. There was a theory and practice inconsistency that was the very basis of the character of the Stalinist system.