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Tony Cliff

The theory of bureaucratic collectivism: A critique

(1948)

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Introduction

For obvious reasons, discussion of the nature of Soviet society was central to the thinking of most socialists of the last generation.

The conception of Russia under Stalin and his heirs as socialism, or a deformed kind of socialism (“degenerated workers’ state” in the language of dogmatic “orthodox” Trotskyists), has met two kinds of critique by Marxists. The first, to which the present writer subscribes, defines the Stalinist regime as state capitalist. The second sees it as neither socialism of any sort – nor capitalism. This last school of thought coined a special term for the Stalinist regime – Bureaucratic Collectivism. The first writer to coin this term was the Italian Marxist, Bruno R, in his book **La Bureaucratism du Monde** (Paris 1939). The same term was adopted and the idea developed (without acknowledgement of the work of Bruno R) by the American socialist, Max Shachtman.

The subject of the present article is an evaluation and criticism of this thesis.

It is difficult to make a critique of Bureaucratic Collectivism because the authors never actually published a developed account of the theory. It is true that Shachtman wrote hundreds of pages of criticism of the theory that Stalinist Russia was a socialist country or a workers’ state of any sort .(he dismissed the theory of state capitalism in a sentence or two). But he wrote scarcely a paragraph on the laws of motion of the “Bureaucratic Collectivist” economy, and made no analysis at all of the *specific* character of the class struggle within it. The place of Bureaucratic Collectivist society in the chain of historical development is not clearly stated, and, in any case, Shachtman’s account is often inconsistent.

A central thesis of the present article is that the theoretical poverty of the theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism is not accidental. We will try to show that the theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism is only *negative*; it is thus empty, abstract, and therefore arbitrary.

Criticism of the theory will suggest a number of characteristics that are common – implicitly at least – to other conceptions of Stalinism – from that of the apologists to that of George Orwell’s **1984**. In criticising the theory, the strength or weakness of the alternative theory of Stalinist Russia – as state capitalist – will emerge.

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The Place of Bureaucratic Collectivism in History

At first glance what is more plausible than describing Stalinist Russia as neither a capitalist nor a workers' state? But this simplification is of little value, for it tells us little about the regime; feudalism too was neither capitalism nor socialism, similarly slave society, and any other regime that has not existed but is created by our imagination. Spinoza was right when he said that "definition is negation", but not all negations are definitions. The statement that the Stalinist regime was neither capitalist nor socialist left the latter's historical identity undetermined. Hence Shachtman could say on one occasion that Bureaucratic Collectivism was more progressive than capitalism (however unprogressive it was, compared with socialism), and, a few years later, that it was more reactionary than capitalism.

Shachtman first called Russia a Bureaucratic Collectivist state in 1941. A resolution on the Russian question passed at the 1941 Convention of his organisation, the now-defunct Workers' Party, stated:

From the standpoint of socialism, the bureaucratic collectivist state is a reactionary social order; in relation to the capitalist world, it is on an historically more progressive plane.

On the basis of this, a policy of "conditional defensism" was adopted. The Resolution states:

The revolutionary proletariat can consider a revolutionary (that is, a critical, entirely independent, class) defensist position with regard to the Stalinist regime only under conditions where the decisive issue in the war is the attempt by a hostile force to restore capitalism in Russia, where this issue is not subordinated to other, more dominant, issues. Thus, in case of a civil war in which one section of the bureaucracy seeks to restore capitalist private property, it is possible for the revolutionary vanguard to fight with the army of the Stalinist regime against the army of capitalist restoration. Thus, in case of a war by which world imperialism seeks to subdue the Soviet Union and acquire a new lease of life by reducing Russia to an imperialist colony, it is possible for the proletariat to take a revolutionary defensist position in Russia. Thus, in case of civil war organised against the existing regime by an army basing itself on "popular discontent" but actually on the capitalist and semi-capitalist elements still existing in the country, and aspiring to the restoration of capitalism, it is again possible that the proletariat would fight in the army of Stalin against the army of capitalist reaction. In all those or similar cases, the critical support of the proletariat is possible only if the proletariat is not yet prepared itself to overthrow the Stalinist regime.

In logic, when, a few months after this Convention, Hitler's Germany attacked Russia, Shachtman and his followers should have come to the defence of Russia, as it was "on an

historically more progressive plane”.

The argument Shachtman put now was that, even though Russia was more progressive than capitalist Germany, her war was nevertheless only a subordinate part of the total war, the basic character of which was a struggle between two capitalist imperialist camps. He wrote:

The character of the war, the conduct of the war and (for the present) the outcome of the war, are determined by the two couples of imperialist titans which dominate each camp respectively, the United States and Great Britain, and Germany and Japan. (Within each of the two, in turn, there is a senior and a junior partner!) *All* the other countries in the two great coalitions are reduced to vassalage to the giants which differs in each case only in degree. This vassalage is determined by the economic (industrial-technical), and therefore the financial, and therefore the political, and therefore the military, domination of the war by the two great “power-couples”. Italy is less dependent upon the masters of its coalition than Hungary, and Hungary less than Slovakia. But these facts do not alter the state of the vassalage – they only determine its degree. Stalinist Russia is less dependent upon the masters of its coalition than China (it would lead us too far afield to show in what sense, however, it is even more dependent upon US-England than China), and China less than the Philippines. But again, these facts only determine the degree of their vassalage. Except, therefore, for inconsequential cranks and special pleaders in the bourgeois world, everyone in it understands the total nature of the war as a whole; the total nature of each coalition; the relative position and weight of each sector of the coalition; the mutual interdependence of all fronts. [1]

Thus, although Bureaucratic Collectivism is more progressive than capitalism, a defeatist position was adopted because of Russia's vassalage to Anglo-American imperialism. The **New International** of September 1941 emphasised the point:

Stalin has lost the last vestige of independence ... Soviet diplomacy is already dictated in London.

We shall not dwell on the factual mistakes. These are less serious than the method by which Shachtman arrives at his conclusions. Marxism demands that from sociological definitions we draw political conclusions. When the course of the war contradicted his judgement of Russia as a vassal state, Shachtman should have rejected his previous defeatist position, for Bureaucratic Collectivism, he said, is more progressive than capitalism. Instead, he held to the political conclusion of defeatism and altered the sociological basis. Bureaucratic Collectivism now came to be called the new barbarism, the decline of civilisation, etc. Yet in no document did he give any new analysis of the Russian economy after the Resolution of the 1941 Convention.

The only two constant elements in the theory have been: first, the conclusion that in any concrete conditions, Stalinist Russia must not be defended (no matter that the concrete conditions change all the time); second, that the name of the Stalinist regime is Bureaucratic Collectivism.

With regard to the first element, serious Marxists, while seeking to hold consistently to the

same principles, often change their tactics, as tactics must change with changing circumstances. Marxists should not decide on one tactic and hold to it when the justification for it is proved incorrect. This is eclecticism, impressionism. But exactly this approach was adopted by Shachtman. He draws the same conclusion from two opposite and mutually exclusive assumptions, the one that Bureaucratic Collectivism is more progressive than capitalism, the other that it is the image of barbarism, more reactionary. Defeatism is the tactic. Why? Once because Russia was not the main power, but only a vassal of Anglo-American imperialism, now because Russia is a major imperialist power which threatens to conquer the world.

As for the name, we might well repeat Marx's apt criticism of Proudhon, who used to invent lofty words, thinking in this way to advance science. Marx quoted the following: "wo Begriffe felhen, Da stellt zur rechten Zeit ein Wort sich ein." (Where there is a lack of ideas, an empty phrase will do.)

In Marx's and Engels' analysis of capitalism, the fundamentals – the place of capitalism in history, its internal contradictions, etc. – remained constant from their first approach to the problem until the end of their lives. Their later years brought only elaborations of and additions to the basic theme. The theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism in its short history has had a much less happy fate. Shachtman first considered Bureaucratic Collectivism more progressive than capitalism, and then as "totalitarian barbarism". Another proponent of the theory, Bruno R, at *one and the same time* considers it both a slave society and the threshold of a peaceful transition to communism

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Bruno R on Bureaucratic Collectivism

Bruno R differs from Shachtman in many fundamentals. His analysis of the genesis of Bureaucratic Collectivism, for instance, is basically different from Shachtman's. They agree on the genesis of the system in Russia. But when they step beyond its borders, they are at variance. While the Resolution of the Workers' Party Convention of 1941 maintained that "bureaucratic collectivism is a nationally-limited phenomenon, appearing in history in the course of a single conjuncture of circumstances", Bruno R saw it as a society which would replace capitalism on a world scale through the expropriation of the bourgeoisie by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the fascist bureaucracy. However, on the characterisation, description, and analysis of Bureaucratic Collectivism *as such* – as a social order – they are in entire agreement.

In his book **La Bureaucratiation du Monde** (Paris 1939), Bruno R writes:

In our opinion, the USSR represents a new type of society led by a new social class: that is our conclusion. Collectivised property actually belongs to this class which has introduced a new – and superior – system of production. Exploitation is transferred from the individual to the class. [2]

In our opinion, the Stalinist regime is an intermediary regime; it eliminates outdated capitalism, but does not rule out Socialism for the future. It is a new social form based on class property and class exploitation. [3]

In our opinion, in the USSR, the property owners are the bureaucrats, for it is they who hold force in their hands. It is they who direct the economy as was usual amongst the bourgeoisie; it is they who appropriate the profits to themselves, as was usual amongst all exploiting classes, and it is they who fix wages and the prices of goods: once again, it is the bureaucrats. [4]

What is the character of the ruled class? Does there exist a Russian proletariat, or, just as the bourgeoisie was substituted by a new exploiting class, is the proletariat substituted by a new exploited class? Bruno R answers thus:

Exploitation occurs exactly as in a society based on slavery: the subject of the State works for the one master who has bought him, he becomes a part of his master's capital, he represents the livestock which must be cared for and housed and whose reproduction is a matter of great importance for the master. The payment of a so-called wage, consisting partly of State services and goods, should not induce us into error and lead us to suppose the existence of a Socialist form of remuneration: for indeed, it only means the upkeep of a slave! The sole fundamental difference is that in ancient times the slaves did not have the honour or carrying arms, whilst the modern slaves are skilfully trained in the art of war ... The Russian working class are no longer proletarians; they are merely slaves. It is a class of slaves in its economic substance and in its social manifestations. It kneels as the "little Father" passes by and deifies him, it assumes all the characteristics of servility and allows itself to be tossed about from one end of the immense empire to the other. It digs canals, builds roads and railways, just as in ancient times this same class erected the Pyramids or the Coliseum.

A small part of this class have not yet lost themselves in complete agnosticism; retaining their faith, they meet in caves for purposes of discussion, as of old, the Christians praying in the catacombs. From time to time the Pretorians organise a raid and round everybody up. "Monster" trials are staged, in the style of Nero, and the accused, instead of defending themselves, say "mea culpa". The Russian workers differ completely from the proletarians in every respect, they have become State subjects and have acquired all the characteristics of slaves.

They no longer have anything in common with free workers except the sweat on their brow. The Marxists will truly need Diogenes' lamp if they intend to find any proletarians in the Soviet towns. [5]

Even though Bruno R describes Stalinist Russia as the renewal of slavery (with all the historical retrogression connected with it), he nevertheless says that this regime is more progressive than capitalism, and, further, that it leads directly, without leaps or struggles, to communist society. He says:

We believe that the new society will lead directly to Socialism, because of the enormous volume attained by production.

The leaders (so will now be called those whom we have contemptuously labelled bureaucrats and the new class will be called leading class), having satisfied their material, intellectual and moral needs, may of course find a pleasurable occupation in the constant material, intellectual and moral elevation of the working class. [6]

The totalitarian State should not impress the Marxists. For the time being, it is totalitarian rather in the political than in the economic sense. These factors will be reversed in the course of the forthcoming and normal social developments. The totalitarian State will more and more lose its political characteristics and retain only its administrative characteristics. At the end of this process we will have a classless society and Socialism. [7]

A new “withering away” – of “collective slavery”, of “totalitarian bureaucratic collectivism”, in communism! And this development Bruno R proudly proclaims “*the triumph of historical materialism*“! (See particularly the chapter in his book under this name.)

Bruno R’s Bureaucratic Collectivism leads directly, automatically, to communism. It is undoubtedly a materialist conception, but it is not dialectical; it is a mechanical, fatalist approach to history which denies the class struggle of the oppressed as the necessary motive force.

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The Stalinist Regime – Barbarism?

Shachtman writes about the Stalinist regime:

It is the cruel realisation 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. [8]

If the Stalinist regime denotes the decline of civilisation, the reactionary negation of capitalism, then, of course, it is more reactionary than the latter. Capitalism has to be defended from Stalinist barbarism.

But Shachtman ties himself in knots.

When Marx spoke of the “common ruin of the contending classes” – as in Rome after slave society disintegrated – it was associated with a general decline of the productive forces. The

Stalinist regime, with its dynamic development of the productive forces, certainly does not fit this description.

Barbarism in Marx's concept meant the death of the embryo of the future in the womb of the old society. The embryo of socialism in the body of capitalism is social, collective, large-scale production, and associated with it, the working class. The Stalinist regime not only did not weaken these elements, but spurred them on.

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The Motive for Exploitation in Bureaucratic Collectivist Society

Shachtman explains the motive for exploitation in Bureaucratic Collectivist society thus: "In the Stalinist State, production is carried on and extended for the satisfaction of the needs of the bureaucracy, for the increasing of its wealth, its privileges, its power."

Now if the motive for exploitation under Bureaucratic Collectivism was simply the needs of the rulers, how does this relate to the general historical roots of exploitation in different social systems?

Engels explains why, in the past, society was divided into exploiters and exploited:

The division of society into an exploiting and an exploited class, a ruling and an oppressed class, was the necessary outcome of the low development of production hitherto. So long as the sum of social labour yielded a product which only slightly exceeded what was necessary for the bare existence of all; so long, therefore, *as all or almost all the time of the great majority of the members of society was absorbed in labour, so long was society necessarily divided into classes.* Alongside of this great majority exclusively absorbed in labour, there developed a class, freed from direct productive labour, which managed the general business of society: the direction of labour, affairs of state, justice, science, art and so forth. [9]

In an economy in which the motive for production is the production of use values for the rulers, there are certain limits to the extent of exploitation. Thus, for instance, in feudal society, village and town alike were subjugated to the feudal lords' need for consumption goods, and so long as the produce which the serfs gave to their lord was not widely marketed, "the walls of his stomach set the limits to his exploitation of the peasant" (Marx). This does not explain the existence of exploitation under capitalism. The walls of the capitalist's stomach are undoubtedly much wider than those of the feudal lord of the Middle Ages, but, at the same time, the

productive capacity of capitalism is incomparably greater than that of feudalism. We should therefore be quite mistaken if we explained the increase in the exploitation of the mass of workers as the result of the widening of the walls of the bourgeoisie's stomach.

The need for capital accumulation, dictated by the anarchic competition between capitals, is the motivation for exploitation under capitalism.

Actually, if the Bureaucratic Collectivist economy is geared to the "needs of the bureaucracy" – is not subordinated to capital accumulation – there is no reason why the rate of exploitation should not decrease in time, and as the productive forces in the modern world are dynamic – this will lead, willy-nilly, to the "withering away of exploitation".

With the dynamism of highly developed productive forces, an economy based on gratifying the needs of the rulers can be arbitrarily described as leading to the millennium or to 1984. Bruno R's dream and George Orwell's nightmare – and anything in between – are possible under such a system. The Bureaucratic Collectivist theory is thus entirely capricious and arbitrary in defining the limitation and direction of exploitation under the regime it presumes to define.

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Class Relations under Bureaucratic Collectivism

The essence of Shachtman's position is summed up in the statement that the rulers of Russia under Stalin were neither workers nor private owners of capital. What is decisive, according to the Marxist method, in defining the class nature of any society? As the history of all class society is the history of the class struggle, it is clear that what does determine the place of any regime in the chain of historical development are these factors which determine the character of the class struggle in it. Now, the character, the methods and the aims of the class struggle of the oppressed class are dependent on the nature of the oppressed class itself: the position it has in the process of production, the relation between its members in this process, and its relation to the owners of the means of production. These are *not* determined by the mode of appropriation or mode of recruitment of the *ruling* class. A few examples will explain this.

We know that in the Middle Ages the feudal lord had the right to bequeath his feudal rights to his heirs; on the other hand the bishop did not have this right, nor even that of raising a family. The feudal lord was the son of a feudal lord, a nobleman; the bishops were recruited from different classes and layers of society, often from the peasantry. (Engels pointed to the plebeian

origin of the upper hierarchy of the Church – and even of a number of Popes – as one of the causes for the stability of the Church in the Middle Ages.) Thus the mode of recruitment of the bishops was *different* from that of the private feudal lords. As regards the form of appropriation, the difference was equally great: the feudal lord, as an owner, was entitled to all the rent he could collect from his serfs, while the bishop was legally propertyless and, as such, entitled only to a “salary”. But did these differences between the mode of appropriation and the mode of recruitment of the feudal lords and the upper hierarchy of the Church make any *basic* difference to the class struggle of the serfs on Church land, or on the lord’s land? Of course not. The peasant with his primitive means of production, with the individualistic mode of production, had the same relation to other peasants, the same relation to the means of production (primarily the land), and the same relation to his exploiter, whether he was a feudal lord or a collective exploiter – the upper clergy (or as Kautsky calls them in a book, highly recommended by Engels, the “Papacy Class”).

Similarly, in slave society there was besides the private ownership of slaves, collective state ownership, as in Sparta. [\[10\]](#)

From the standpoint of the exploiters the question of their mode of appropriation and recruitment is of prime importance. Thus, for instance, Kautsky, in **Thomas More and his Utopia**, says:

It looked as if the Church aspired to become the sole landed proprietor in Christendom. But the mightiest were to be curbed. The nobles were always hostile to the Church; when the latter acquired too much land, the king turned to the nobles for assistance in setting limits to the pretensions of the Church. Moreover, the Church was weakened by the invasion of Heathen tribes and the Mohammedans. [\[11\]](#)

The Church acquired, not without a struggle (in which one of the weapons it used was the forging of deeds of gift), about a third of all the land in Europe as a whole, in some countries the majority share of the land (e.g. Hungary, Bohemia). Perhaps, therefore, the nobles considered the differences between themselves and the upper clergy – in their origin, and mode of appropriation – of importance.

But from the standpoint of the class struggle of the serfs or the rising bourgeoisie against feudalism, these differences were of quite *secondary* importance. It would not be correct to say that they were of no importance, as the differences in the composition of the ruling class to some extent conditioned the struggle of the serfs or the rising bourgeoisie. Thus, for instance, the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the Church made the struggle of the serfs against the Church much more difficult than their struggle against individual landlords; the ideological justification of feudal ownership was different in form when blue blood and coats of arms were presented than when religious phrases were quoted in Latin. And the fact that while Church property was officially called “patrimonium pauperum” (the inheritance of the poor),

private feudal property was not endowed with this exalted title, helps to show that these judicial differences were not unimportant. But from the standpoint of the historical process as a whole, i.e. from the standpoint of the class struggle, all the differences in the mode of appropriation and method of recruitment of the different groups are only secondary.

Shachtman and Bruno R (as well as “orthodox” Trotskyists) forget Marx’s statement of a century ago: that the form of property considered independently of the laws of motion of the economy, from the relations of production, is a metaphysical abstraction.

Thus the big differences between the mode of appropriation and recruitment of the Russian bureaucrats and that of the bourgeoisie, in itself, does not at all prove that Russia represents a non-capitalist society, a new class society of Bureaucratic Collectivism. To prove this, it is necessary to show that the *nature* of the ruled class – its conditions of life and struggle – is fundamentally different in Russia from what exists, even for Shachtman, in capitalism. And this is exactly what Bruno R, and later Shachtman, tried to do.

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The Nature of the Working Class in Russia

On the question of whether the workers in Russia are proletarians, the proponents of the theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism answer, and must answer, that they are not. They compare the Russian with the classical worker who was “free” of the means of production and also free of any legal impediments to selling his labour power. It is true that there often were legal impediments to the movement of Russian workers from one enterprise to another. But is this a sufficient reason to say that the Russian worker was not a proletarian? If so, there is no doubt that the German worker under Hitler was also not a proletarian. Or, at the other extreme, workers in power are also not proletarians inasmuch as they are not “free” as a collective from the means of production. No doubt an American worker is very different from an indentured girl in a Japanese factory who is under contract for a number of years and must live in the company’s barracks for that time. But basically they are members of one and the same class. They were born together with the most dynamic form of production history has every known, they are united by the process of social production, they are in actuality the antithesis of capital, and in potentiality socialism itself (because of the dynamics of a modern economy, no legal impediments in fact put an end *altogether* to the movement of workers from one enterprise to another under Stalin’s regime).

Hilferding, Bruno R, and Dwight MacDonald were consistent and maintained that just as they

did not consider a Russian worker to be a proletarian, so they did not consider a worker in Hitler's Germany to be a proletarian. The Shachtmanites tried to avoid this conclusion. In so doing they were led to falsify facts. For instance, they claim that the German workers under Hitler were freer to move than the Russian, that they were freer to bargain with their employers, and that slave labour was never as widespread in Germany as in Russia. Thus Irving Howe, one of Shachtman's followers at the time, wrote:

The Nazis did not use slave labor to the extent that Stalinist Russia has; under the Hitler regime, slave labor never became as indispensable a part of Germany's national economy as it has become for Russia under Stalin... industry under Hitler was still largely based on "free labor" (in the Marxist sense; that is, free from ownership of the means of production and thereby forced to sell labor power, but also possessing the freedom to decide whether or not to sell this labor power). For all of the Hitlerite restrictions, there was considerable bargaining between the capitalist and proletarian, as well as between capitalists for workers during labor shortages. [12]

In reality the Russian worker, notwithstanding all restrictions, moves from one factory to another *much more* than the German worker, or, for that matter, than any other worker in the whole world. As early as September 1930, workers were prohibited from changing their place of work without special permission, and year after year brought new prohibitions. Despite this, the rate of turnover was tremendous. In 1928, as against 100 workers employed in industry 92.4 leavings were registered; in 1929, 115.2; 1930, 152.4; 1931, 136.8; 1932, 135.3; 1933, 122.4; 1934, 96.7; 1935, 86.1. In later years figures were not published, but it is clear that the large turnover continued, to which the frequent declamations in the press bear witness. Even the war did not put an end to it. The German administration was incomparably more efficient in combating the free movement of labour under Hitler. This, in addition to other factors (especially the relatively much greater dynamism of the Russian economy), made the labour turnover in Germany much lower than in Russia.

What about the slave camps in Stalin's Russia? Shachtman tried to suggest that slave labour was the basic factor of production in Russia. But this is absolutely wrong. The labour of prisoners is suitable only for manual work where modern technique is not used. It is therefore employed in the construction of factories, roads, etc. Despite its cheapness, it is necessarily only of secondary importance to the labour of workers, as "unfree" labour is always relatively unproductive. If not for the fact that slave labour were an impediment to the rise of the productivity of labour, the decline of Roman society would not have taken place. Likewise, although in different circumstances, slavery would not have been abolished in the United States. In the face of special circumstances – the lack of means of production and the abundance of labour power – it is explicable that the Stalinist bureaucracy should introduce and use slave labour on a large scale. But it is clear that the main historical tendency is in an opposite direction. All the factories in Russia producing tanks and aeroplanes, machinery, etc., were run on wage labour. During the war Hitler's Germany found it expedient to use twelve million

foreign workers, most of whom had been recruited as prisoners and forced labourers.

Marx maintained that the historical tendency towards the degradation of the *proletariat*, its increased oppression by capital, is fundamental to capitalism, whereas the substitution of the proletariat by a new, or rather, ancient, class of slaves is quite contrary to the general tendency of history. As we have said, only a lack of means of production and an abundance of labour power can explain the widespread use of prison labour in Stalin's Russia. Hence its almost complete disappearance since the death of Stalin, since Russia reached industrial maturity.

Shachtman's theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism must lead to its logical conclusion. If the Russian worker is not a proletarian, the German worker under Hitler was not a proletarian, and in Hitler's Germany there was not a wage labour system, but a system of "collective slavery". Accordingly, the ruling class in Hitler's Germany could not be called a capitalist class, as capitalists are exploiters of proletarians. Bruno R, Dwight MacDonald and Hilferding, at least, have the merit of consistency. They drew these conclusions and were therefore justified in calling Hitler's Germany Bureaucratic Collectivist (Bruno R and Dwight MacDonald) or a "Totalitarian State Economy" (Hilferding).

If we accepted that workers employed by the Stalinist state are not proletarians, we should have to come to the absurd conclusion that in the Western Powers' zones of Berlin the workers are proletarians, but in the Russian zone those employed in the nationalised German enterprises are not proletarians, while those employed in the Russian zone by private industry are proletarians!

Again, we should have to come to the absurd conclusion that non-workers under Stalin have been gradually transformed after his death into proletarians.

Above all, if Shachtman is right and there is no proletariat in the Stalinist regime, Marxism as a method, as a guide for the proletariat as the subject of historical change, becomes superfluous, meaningless. To speak about Marxism in a society without a proletariat, is to make of Marxism a supra-historical theory.

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Historical Limitations of Bureaucratic Collectivism

If one accepts the state capitalist nature of the Stalinist regime, one not only accepts its laws of motion – the accumulation of capital as dictated by the pressure of world capitalism – but also

the historical limitations of its role. Once capital is amassed and the working class is massive, the ground is undermined beneath the feet of the bureaucracy.

For a Marxist who thinks Russia is state capitalist, the historical mission of the bourgeoisie is the socialisation of labour and the concentration of the means of production. On a world scale this task had already been fulfilled. In Russia the revolution removed the impediments to the development of the productive forces, put an end to the remnants of feudalism, built up a monopoly of foreign trade which defends the development of the productive forces of the country from the devastating pressure of world capitalism, and also gave a tremendous lever to the development of the productive forces in the form of state ownership of the means of production. Under such conditions, all the impediments to the historical mission of capitalism – the socialisation of labour and the concentration of the means of production which are necessary prerequisites for the establishment of socialism, and which the bourgeoisie was not able to fulfil – are abolished. *Post-October Russia stood before the fulfilment of the historical mission of the bourgeoisie*, which Lenin summed up in two postulates: “increase in the productive forces of social labour and the socialisation of labour”.

Once the Stalinist bureaucracy created a massive working class and massive concentrated capital, the objective prerequisites for the overthrow of the bureaucracy had been laid. The Stalinist bureaucracy thus created its own grave-digger (hence the post-Stalin convulsions in Russia and Eastern Europe).

The theory of bureaucratic Collectivism is inherently incapable of saying anything about the historical role and limitations of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Hence socialism also appears simply as a Utopian dream, not a necessary solution to contradictions inherent in the Stalinist regime itself. Abstracted from the contradictions of capitalism, the urge towards socialism becomes merely an idealistic chimera.

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Attitude to the Stalinist Parties

From the assumption that Bureaucratic Collectivism is more reactionary than capitalism, Shachtman draws the conclusion that if a choice has to be made between Social Democratic Parties which support capitalism and Communist Parties – agents of Bureaucratic Collectivism – a socialist should side with the former against the latter.

Thus Shachtman wrote in September 1948:

Stalinism is a reactionary, totalitarian, anti-bourgeois and anti-proletarian current IN the labor movement but not OF the labor movement ... where, as is the general rule nowadays, the militants are not yet strong enough to fight for leadership directly; where the fight for control of the labor movement is, in effect, between the reformists and the Stalinists, it would be absurd for the militants to proclaim their “neutrality” and fatal for them to support the Stalinists. Without any hesitation, they should follow the general line, inside the labor movement, of supporting the reformist officialdom against the Stalinist officialdom. In other words, where it is not yet possible to win the unions for the leadership of revolutionary militants, we forthrightly prefer the leadership of reformists who aim in their own way to maintain a labor movement, to the leadership of the Stalinist totalitarians who aim to exterminate it ... while the revolutionists are not the equal of the reformists and the reformists are not the equal of the revolutionists, the two are now necessary and proper allies against Stalinism. The scores that have to be settled with reformism – those will be settled on a working-class basis and in a working-class way, and not under the leadership or in alliance with totalitarian reaction. [13]

Again there is a lack of historical perspective, of real analysis of social forces, an oversimplification. The dual role of the Communist Parties in the West – as agents of Moscow and as a collection of fighting individual militants, strangled by the same bureaucracy – is completely overlooked. Shachtman’s attitude to the Communist Parties, if adopted by any socialists in the West, would: firstly, strengthen the right-wing Social Democratic Parties; and, secondly, strengthen the hold of the Communist Party leadership on their rank and file. It is a sure way to liquidate any independent working-class tendency.

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In Conclusion

The theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism is supra-historical, negative and abstract. It does not define the economic laws of motion of the system, explain its inherent contradictions and the motivation of the class struggle. It is completely arbitrary. Hence it does not give a perspective, nor can it serve as a basis for a strategy for socialists.

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References

- [1.](#) *China in the World War*, **New International**, June 1942.
- [2.](#) **La Bureaucratization du Monde**, p.31.
- [3.](#) **Ibid.**, p.95.
- [4.](#) **Ibid.**, p.56.
- [5.](#) **Ibid.**, pp.72-4.
- [6.](#) **Ibid.**, p.283.
- [7.](#) **Ibid.**, p.284.
- [8.](#) Max Shachtman, **The Bureaucratic Revolution**, New York 1962, p.32.
- [9.](#) Engels, **Socialism Utopian and Scientific**, in Marx/Engels, **Selected Works**, Vol.I, p.183. My emphasis – TC.
- [10.](#) Kautsky describes this regime: “The Spartans made up the minority, perhaps a tenth of the population. Their state was based on real War Communism, the barrack communism of the ruling class. Plato drew his ideal of the State from it. The ideal differed from real Sparta only in that it was not the military chiefs but the ‘philosophers’, that is, the intellectuals, who directed the war communism.” **Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung**, Zweiten Band, Berlin 1927, pp.132-3.
- [11.](#) Karl Kautsky, **Thomas More and his Utopias**, p.38.
- [12.](#) **New International**, December 1947.
- [13.](#) Max Shachtman, **op cit.**, pp306, 308-9. A by-product of this hysterical anti-Stalinism is softness, even idealisation, of Social Democracy: “In most of the countries of Europe west of the barbed-wire frontiers, the socialist parties not only represent the sole serious alternative to the futile and futureless parties of the *status quo* but are the political instrument of the democratic working class.”

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