



Stalin planned to build a 'Palace of the Soviets' to be crowned by a 150 foot tall statue of Lenin. Thankfully, it was never built.

Which class rules in the USSR?

Workers' states, systems where new ruling classes exploit the workers, or societies with no ruling class at all? At Workers' Liberty 89, Martin Thomas (Socialist Organiser), Robert Brenner (Against the Current), Oliver Macdonald (Labour Focus on Eastern Europe and Socialist Outlook), Frank Furedi (author of 'The Soviet Union Demystified'), and a comrade from the Iranian Marxist group 'Socialism and Revolution' debated the nature of the Eastern Bloc

"Trotsky thought the bureaucracy...couldn't be defined as a class...on the evidence of the last 50 years that argument obviously does not hold"

Martin Thomas

Marxists have been arguing about the nature of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc for a very long time.

A lot of this discussion has been conducted around which label we should apply to these states. Are they socialist? Are they workers' states which are not socialist but nevertheless workers' states of some sort? Are they state capitalist, or bureaucratic collectivist?

The argument that goes on under those labels is important. It's also important to recognise that very often the label doesn't tell you what the substantive theory is. For example, there are groupings who say these states are degenerated and deformed workers' states, but the actual substance of their theory is that these are some new form of bureaucratic society, not really anything to do with the working class but in some way progressive compared to capitalism.

And likewise under the labels bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism there are quite a variety of different perspectives.

So it is important to look at what the underlying issues are, the substantive issues that we've got to resolve.

The first one is, are these states indeed socialist? If not, are they maybe, however, the next stage that follows capitalism? Is the Marxist notion that capitalism through its contradictions generates the basis for socialism wrong? Is it not the fact that capitalism, through its contradictions, generates the basis for this sort of society, a bureaucratic sort of society?

What sort of forces create these states? And what should be our attitude to those sort of forces? Do we ally with them, and if so, when and under what circumstances?

Those are the underlying issues. What place do these systems have in history? How do they relate to the historical perspective we have as Marxists?

I want to make one note before starting on the substantive questions. Socialist Organiser as a tendency doesn't have a formal position on what label we should apply to the Eastern Bloc states. My personal view is that these societies are a form of state capitalism. Probably a majority of comrades in Socialist Organiser have a different view, and would be closer to the view which Robert Brenner will be arguing.

We think the important thing is to gain agreement on the perspectives and the programme, and that's what we're based on as an organisation. The rest of it we are debating openly.

What is the evidence from the last 40, 50 or 60 years of the operation of these systems?

Although the title of this debate is focused on the Soviet Union, the evidence is not just from the Soviet

Union or even mainly from the Soviet Union.

Firstly, what do these systems do in terms of developing the productive forces? It used to be conventional wisdom on the left that whatever else about the Stalinist states, however bad their political regime, they were much better at economic development than market capitalism. There is a bit of a consensus developing now to exactly the opposite effect — namely that they are generally much worse.

Both are oversimplifications. What we can certainly say is the Eastern Bloc systems are within the same general historical period, the same epoch. They are roughly speaking **parallel** to the societies we recognise as capitalist in the development of the productive forces.

They build up industry, they develop working classes. China, for example, now has a working class of maybe 100 million workers developed over the last 40 years.

The Eastern Bloc systems develop the productive forces but they do not develop the productive forces in a way that is qualitatively superior to capitalism.

Within that framework, within a given level of development of productive forces, on the whole these systems are **worse** for the working class than market capitalism. If you compare the conditions of the working class in North Korea and South Korea, or East Germany and West Germany, there are some respects in which the working class is better off in the Eastern Bloc states, the Stalinist states. There are some; but the overwhelming balance is that the working class is **worse off** and worse off particularly in that it is denied the possibility of organising independently — of organising its own trade unions.

Of course there are market capitalist states in which workers are also banned from organising. But not all of them, and not even all of the worst despotisms. Even in South Korea there are some small cracks and openings which don't exist in North Korea.

The third thing we notice from the evidence of the last 50 or 60 years is that these societies do not emerge from highly developed capitalism. They are not systems which arise when capitalism has developed to an extremely high degree and its internal contradictions have matured. They have generally arisen in countries of under-developed capitalism, in countries where capitalism is combined with all sorts of archaic structures.

And you can't say they arose there because it was impossible for these countries to develop on a capitalist basis. A lot of Trotskyists used to say that, but I think if you look back at the experience of capitalist development in Asia over the last 40 years, it's not tenable to say that if the Maoists hadn't won, China could not have developed industrially on a capitalist basis. Eventually, and at whatever cost, it could have developed.

So the Eastern Bloc systems don't emerge, as some comrades within our movement have argued, from some absolute necessity of the development of the productive forces. They are created

consciously, created sometimes through quite bitter and heroic struggles by particular social groups.

The Maoists weren't just a reflection of the abstract needs of history. They fought a long and bitter struggle. The Vietnamese Stalinists fought a tremendous war to create their system. It didn't just emerge spontaneously.

The groups which create these systems generally came out of the middle class and the petty bourgeoisie, which is an extremely large class in many countries of underdeveloped capitalism. They are groups from the middle class welded together in militarised formations. They conduct wars, build up a military bureaucratic apparatus in the course of the struggle, and then that military bureaucratic apparatus becomes the core of the new ruling group once they've won victory.

As for that new ruling group — Trotsky thought that the **bureaucracy** in the Soviet Union couldn't be defined as a class. He thought that it was too unstable, its perspectives were unclear, it didn't have any clear role in history.

If you look at the ruling groups in the Stalinist states, on the evidence of the last 50 years that argument obviously does not hold. In China, for example, the ruling group, the Stalinist bureaucracy, is in no sense a usurper of an economic structure that somebody else created. They created that economic structure, they moulded that society, they **nationalised industry**, they **drafted** the economic plans, they organised agriculture, they created that system.

And moreover, as ruling groups they reproduce themselves in a more or less **stable fashion**. Obviously they have crises like all ruling classes do, they have divisions like all ruling classes do, but on the whole there is a tremendous degree of continuity in that bureaucracy. It has even been able to carry out very sharp, radical changes in policy, in China and in other countries, without civil war and sometimes without even a change in personnel at the top.

The evidence is also that these systems, if they develop in powerful large states, are imperialist. There is a great deal of pettyfogging about this on the left. People say they don't correspond to what Lenin defined as imperialism in 1916.

They don't exactly. But neither does anything else today. Neither does the US, Britain...they're not exactly the form of imperialism that Lenin analysed in 1916.

So either we throw out the word imperialism altogether, or we look at the various different forms of imperialism that have existed in history, and say this is certainly a form of imperialism and one that is in no way more progressive than the imperialism of the United States or Britain or countries like that.

Those six points I have made are some of the basic facts that we can derive from the history of the last 40 or 50 years. There is then a debate about what label you apply to that system, but facts are clear.

These are societies that bitterly repress workers. They are nevertheless also societies that develop working classes — develop working classes that struggle

and behave and develop programmes and ideas as we would expect, on the basis of Marxist theory, a working class to behave, working classes that are capable of making socialist revolutions. If you look at the experience of Hungary, Poland and China there is no doubt about that.

What political conclusions does this lead to? Firstly, these are not societies in any way transitional from capitalism to socialism. They are not a step forward or progressive compared to capitalism.

The fact they have nationalised property does not make them progressive compared to capitalism. Indeed, if you look closely at the writings, classical Marxism never thought that nationalised property in and of itself was necessarily working class or socialist.

Secondly, they don't represent a wiping away of the possibilities for socialist revolution and the replacement of the working class by a class which has no socialist possibilities. At the same time they create the most terrible suffering they also create their own gravediggers — the working class.

From that general perspective, it follows that in some circumstances and in some issues we do ally with the groups that **make these revolutions**. For example, we ally with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua against US imperialism and the Contras on the issue of national self-determination.

We do not think that a stabilised Sandinista regime would represent socialism, or even a new society qualitatively superior to capitalism, but on the issue of national self-determination we side with them.

We side with the Vietnamese Stalinists against the United States.

But there is no general rule that says we have to side with Stalinists, and if comrades have theories which say that we should have that general rule they should just think about Cambodia and think where that rule would lead them in Cambodia.

These are systems which are going to be overthrown and replaced by something better through working class struggle. Our basic task is to support that working-class struggle without any hesitations based on illusions that maybe those societies are a bit progressive.

The key test on this has been the struggle of Solidarnosc. The key issue has been whether we support the Polish workers against their state. We don't say we can't support a boycott of Polish goods because after all Poland is different from a capitalist state. We don't refuse to support the breaking of links with the state unions in the Eastern Bloc because after all they're something to do with the working class.

No! We should have supported Solidarnosc's call for a boycott of Polish goods at the time of the military coup. We should support Solidarnosc as a workers' movement unconditionally, irrespective of what political ideas it comes forward with at any particular time. We should also support unconditionally the breaking of links with state trade unions in these countries, and the creation of links with the genuine movement.

**"There was a workers' state.
This workers' state degenerated.
Now this degeneration has gone
so far that we can no longer call
it a workers' state"**

**T, a comrade from
'Socialism and Revolution'**

You cannot overemphasise the **political** importance of this debate.

The Soviet Union, being such a major social and economic power in the world, overshadows class struggle everywhere. The way we orient towards that class struggle depends on our analysis of the character of the Soviet Union.

It is a question which has baffled Trotskyism ever since its foundation. Major crises of Trotskyism have been due to their different approaches to this question. Major splits inside Trotskyism have been due to different approaches to this question. So we cannot over-emphasise the importance of this question for the major divisions today within Trotskyism, which in practical revolutionary terms would sometimes put us on different sides of the barricades.

When someone calling himself Trotskyist says I welcome the Soviet army invading West Berlin or expects the Soviet army to bring socialism to Afghanistan; that should indicate the importance of this question.

We ourselves believe that one of the major deficiencies of Trotskyism is on this question.

I do not claim, and we do not claim as a group, that we have all the answers. I am thinking aloud. Our group has been thinking aloud about the question for 4 or 5 years. We want to share some of our ideas with you and debate them. I don't think it is wise to jump to hasty conclusions.

Our approach, as far as we can see it, is still within the tradition of Trotskyism, despite the fact that it has found problems with that tradition.

What was Trotsky's position? There are two problems with Trotsky's position. First of all, it was an algebraic formula, related to ongoing events taking place in the Soviet Union. The workers' state was established, the workers' state degenerated, a caste inside the state seized political power from the working class, and Trotsky called it a degenerated workers' state.

He said that the counter-revolution which was behind that degeneration was incomplete. There was no total return to capitalism, therefore it was incomplete. It was a Thermidor, not a proper, total thorough counter-revolution. There were gains of October which we should still defend.

That was an algebraic formula. Since Trotsky formulated that theory many decades have passed. How much has the USSR degenerated now?

Degeneration is not a fixed quantity, it is an algebraic term which takes different arithmetic quantities. How much

can the USSR degenerate before we can no longer call it a workers' state?

Those comrades who still defend that formula (with whatever content behind it) should now be able to offer a more precise description.

Yet they simply repeat the algebraic formula.

You could argue that 'degenerated workers' state' means it was a workers' state which degenerated and is no longer a workers' state. That could be the meaning of that terminology. Or is it still a workers' state? Two entirely different approaches and both approaches have in fact co-existed inside Trotskyism.

We ourselves are more of the view that there was a workers' state but it has degenerated so it is no longer a workers' state. Fully fledged capitalism has not returned. But simply because capitalism has not returned we cannot call it a workers' state.

We do not only have black and white in the world. You can have exceptional transitional formations which, given a certain balance of forces can last 40 years, 50 years, or 60 years, although they are unbalanced, transitional, unstable forms.

What has remained of those gains of October that we talked about? What do we mean by those gains? Who is to say that simply nationalised property is a major gain we should defend? If there is nothing else remaining, everything else has degenerated, who can argue that simply the question of nationalised property is enough for us to call the USSR a workers' state?

These are the points that have to be tackled. There has not been enough concrete studies of these questions — the degree of degeneration, the degree of success of the counter-revolution, the historical success of counter-revolution in the Soviet Union, and the nature of these so-called gains of October.

And that is not the only problem Trotsky's position has. Another major problem is that if you want to talk about the class character of the Soviet Union you must have a theory of transition from capitalism to socialism.

And Marxism was not all that well armed before the October revolution with a theory of transition from capitalism to socialism.

A strong tradition inside Trotskyism has been to call these societies not only degenerated workers' states but also transitional societies — societies that are in between capitalism and socialism. But the concept of transition cannot be separated from political rule of the working class.

You cannot say a society is in transition between capitalism and socialism unless the working class has actual political power, not just some mysterious social power.

Trotskyism seems to have fudged that question or abandoned that approach.

If you do not have political power by the working class, who decides on the so-called plan? Who actually runs the plan? If you cannot organise the plan on the basis of political power of the working class who decides how to exchange

various products in that society?

Unless those things are decided according to human needs, and that can only be guaranteed by the political power of the working class, how can nationalisation lead to socialisation? Nationalised property can remain nationalised property but it will never be transformed into socialised property unless the forces of production are planned and organised on the basis of need not on the basis of spontaneous economic forces as they exist in capitalist societies. If they are not organised on the basis of need, there is absolutely no reason why these societies should be in transition towards socialism.

As Trotsky himself formulated it, either there is a revolution and the working class takes political power and leads these societies towards socialism — or there is a bureaucratic spiral back to capitalism. That is the true historical perspective for the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc.

We have seen this spiral of bureaucratic degeneration which has created further and further conditions for the return of capitalism.

We cannot call societies in which the working class does not have political power workers' states, or we would end up also having the formula of deformed workers' states, workers' states created without the working class actually doing anything. We would have some form of mysterious social power of the working class that reflects itself simply through nationalised property.

The political dangers in such a position we have seen for the last 50 or 60 years in the adaptations of Trotskyism towards Stalinist forces and petty bourgeois forces.

We don't have the resources or capabilities in our own small group to arrive at finished conclusions. It obviously needs international debate and the contributions of many other comrades and many other experiences.

But I think the basic approach of Trotsky was correct. There was a workers' state. This workers' state degenerated. Now this degeneration has gone so far that we can no longer call it a workers' state.

Soviet society is not a society in transition. Just because something is in between capitalism and socialism or is neither capitalism nor socialism does not mean we call it a transitional society. A transitional society is only a society in which there is direct political rule by the working class so that the economic planning is based on needs and not on spontaneous economic forces, or the interests of various groups inside the bureaucracy.

Has the bureaucracy become a ruling class? I don't think so.

There is not yet a ruling class in the Soviet Union. We cannot yet, I think call it capitalism.

Martin refers to China or Vietnam, but I think that's the wrong approach. Unless we had the Soviet Union we would not have had China or Vietnam. You cannot explain Vietnam without first understanding the Soviet Union. A certain balance of forces was created in-

ternationally which led to many peculiar formations; we must first understand what is behind that balance of forces and the nature of the Soviet Union itself. It is best to limit the discussion to the nature of the Soviet Union rather than expand it to all these areas.

"...we have a bureaucratic ruling class collectively organised in a state, politically excluding the workers in order to take a surplus"

Robert Brenner

Class structure is the key to society's economic dynamic, its laws of motion and forms of crisis.

It is also key to the forms of political struggle. It gives some idea of the political limits of reform in different societies. All told, class analysis is all about the potential for change or transformation of different sorts of society.

In all societies there are property relations that define how various people — the rulers and the exploited — have access to the means of production and to the social product. These social relations will be reproduced regularly and they are crucial because they define what is necessary for the individuals in the society to maintain themselves and improve their condition.

They define economic rationality, the rules of maintenance of the individuals in the society. Every class structure has a different form of rationality and therefore a different form of development.

We live in a capitalist society and we tend to take capitalism as our starting point for analysing class societies. This can be dangerous because in historical terms capitalist societies are an extremely peculiar species. What's peculiar is that in this society both the members of the exploiting class and the exploited working class are separated from their means of production.

They don't have the means to maintain themselves directly available. They have to buy them on the market — capitalists do and workers do.

Historically that is unique and has unique results. Capitalists since they have to buy in the market, have no choice but to sell something in order to survive. They have to sell competitively. They have to maximise the relationship between the cost of the things they buy and the price that they sell for or rate of profit. They have to cut costs, they have to specialise, they have to accumulate, they have to innovate.

And to survive, they have to produce a product that is socially necessary, that is, to meet demand.

This involves peculiar, unprecedented and unparalleled, convergence between what is in the interests of the individual rulers and what is in the interest of the development of the productive forces. The convergence operates only up to a point, because the system also generates disastrous crises, but up to a point, there is a tremendous

convergence between what the rulers as individuals find it in their interest to do and what is needed for the development of the productive forces.

Workers also have to sell a commodity to survive. They have to sell their labour power as a commodity.

This form of exploitation gives the capitalists as a ruling class an unprecedented control over the labour process. The workers can be fired — and this is the most efficient means ever for disciplining a labour force. The capitalists can discipline labour without having to spend a lot of money on coercion and control.

The bureaucratic collectivist societies are more like pre-capitalist societies in many ways, than capitalist societies. In two fundamental respects bureaucratic collectivist societies are parallel to pre-capitalist societies.

First there is the merger of the direct producers with the means of production, the means of subsistence.

Secondly in these societies, precisely because of this merger of the direct producers with the means of subsistence, it requires a political extra-economic process to get the surplus. The rulers have to organise themselves politically to get the surplus.

It is necessary to organise politically to maintain oneself as the dominant class. There is no real separation between the state and the ruling class, and the key function of political organisation is exploitation.

To be a member of the ruling class you have to be a member of the state and if you are a direct producer you are politically excluded from the state.

I see bureaucratic collectivism as based on surplus extraction by extra-economic coercion. It may seem as if the state takes a surplus by virtue of ownership as if it's some kind of big capitalist, as in a society with wage labour and labour power as a commodity, but in fact that is only the way it appears. In fact workers are merged with the means of subsistence because they can't be fired.

Why can't they be fired? Not because of any gains of the workers in the so-called workers' states, but because it's not in the interest of the ruling class either as a class or individually to fire them. So long as they produce a surplus they should be hired. There is no interest in a surplus army of unemployed if you own the means of production and you are trying to maximise output.

The same is not true under capitalism. Capitalists don't give a damn about total output. All they care about is the rate of profit and the size of the profit of their individual firms. A surplus army of unemployed is rational because it involves their ability to maintain and reproduce their exploitation.

Under bureaucratic collectivism this kind of surplus army can't be rationally created and isn't created.

So we have a bureaucratic ruling class collectively organised in a state, politically excluding the workers in order to take a surplus.

What's the dynamic of this society? In the first place, this particular ruling class

exists in a capitalist environment. So there is a tremendous pressure on the bureaucratic ruling class to accumulate. To compete politically it has to invest its surplus and try to develop the productive forces through a command economy, through what they'd call a plan. However, they can't actually accomplish this very well.

The social relations of reproduction and the property relations of the system make it exceedingly difficult for the ruling class to organise the development of the productive forces. Unlike with capitalism, there is a sharp disjuncture between the requirements of the individuals in the system and the needs of development.

There is no pressure on them to compete to stay alive. None of the units have to innovate, or to produce in response to demand. On the part of the units and the managers in the units, who have to meet the political requirements of the plan there is a tremendous interest in preventing the planners from getting any information about what's going on in the particular units. There is a tremendous need to get as much material and hoard as much labour as possible. Their concern is unbridled growth of their own unit, to maintain their position in the management hierarchy and the state/party hierarchy.

On the other hand the workers have no control over the surplus, so they have no incentive to work. But they can't be fired.

So in a sense bureaucratic collectivism has the worst of both worlds. It has an alienated labour force just like capitalism; but it has none of capitalism's competitive pressure on the individual units to transform production.

The historical result of this is that bureaucratic societies can accomplish and have accomplished a significant development of the productive forces. But the way they do this is by a political process of combining the machinery at hand with a growing labour force.

They can do this up to a point and produce a relatively small number of goods, but to be able to produce many goods requires being able to respond to a diversified demand — not just consumer demand but the demand for millions of tiny products that go into production of goods.

These societies also have a tremendous difficulty transforming the means of production.

So the Soviet Union can achieve quite a degree of growth through the extension of the labour force bringing people in from the countryside. And they can begin to re-equip them.

But in terms of development of productive forces the USSR has a completely inferior capacity, because each unit, unlike under capitalism, has none of the drive that capitalist units have to transform the means of production, transform technology and so on in order to respond to demand.

That problem produces the pressure for reform. It's an attempt to get the advantages of a market society within that set of non-capitalist property relations.

The contradictions of reform are built into that.

"As far as we can tell, the bureaucracy is ideologically committed to introducing capitalism in some modified form".

Frank Furedi

I do not believe it is possible to discuss what people have alluded to as theories or as definitions, primarily because from a Marxist point of view they are more pure labelling than anything else.

There is a real danger that we will get into a discussion of definitions and concepts which encompass a whole range from Nicaragua to China to the Soviet Union, all more or less seen as pretty much the same thing. By being robustly resistant to facts you can talk about the Soviet Union model as being 60 years old and ignore that within the Soviet Union there are very important breaks and developments. Today's Soviet society is not at all comparable to the '20s.

We must have some notion of specificity, rather than to dissolve everything and assume that we know everything. There is a lot of laziness going around, a desire to go for a label rather than to look at the facts and talk about what is going on in the Soviet Union not by talking about China and Nicaragua but by talking about the Soviet Union itself.

I want to look at the main trends of development.

At the moment all that you can do is point to certain obvious areas of development without coming to any hard and fast conclusions.

Looking at the Soviet Union today, in such flux and such tremendous change, it seems clear that the Soviet Union cannot be understood in terms of any imminent inherent trends of development contained within it. It is very much the result of a series of historical accidents. Its durability and the fact that it has lasted so long, albeit with tremendous changes, is very much the consequence of the weakness of capitalism and the problems that capitalism has had over the last 100 years and particularly the last 50 or 60 years. Its survival is in many respects due more to the international context than to anything internal.

If you look at the discussions that are going on in the Soviet Union today, it is very evident that individual Soviet bureaucrats would like to become a class. They talk very favourably about Swedish social democracy.

If you talk to them one to one, they say they would like to be capitalists.

At the recent conference in Oxford where everybody was talking about workers' states and state capitalism, there were these East Europeans and Soviet bureaucrats in the lounge looking at the price of cars and different consumer goods. That's what they are in-

terested in, rather than discussing state capitalism or workers' states.

They would very much like to be a class. However, this individual psychological aspiration to be part of a class is not really founded on anything objective or material within Soviet society.

The reason for that is to do with the nature of the system as it's evolving at the present moment and as it has evolved. At present over the last 4 years it's not possible to point towards any internal dynamic towards raising the productive forces. There is no developmental tendencies within Soviet society that you can point to. There is no automatic reproductive mechanism within society.

Those comrades who have got all these fancy theories should go to the Soviet Union and you will see for yourself that even within the Soviet Union social relations in Tashkent or in Georgia or in Armenia are very very different than they are in the Ukraine or in Byelorussia.

You will see for yourself that the inability of Soviet society to reproduce itself in a serious sense is very very important.

And because there is no dynamic towards development of the productive forces, there is insufficient surplus for the creation of a class. Plenty of goods are produced in Soviet society, but that still begs the question of how you transform those goods into a tangible surplus which the bureaucracy can use.

That key problem — the inability to sustain and reproduce surpluses on a sufficient basis, creates tremendous difficulties for them and ultimately calls in to question their coherence. That's why they can only survive through artificial political means. There is nothing within society itself, except their hatred for the working class, that endows them with any degree of coherence.

So there is an absence of an economic regulator — there is no equivalent to the law of value for example in capitalism — there is no mechanism for the distribution of resources. The spontaneous forces within society and the tendencies towards chaos are very strong, and can only be curbed through political means.

The dominant expression of this is the tendency towards fragmentation, both on a regional and geographical level but also with industry. The bureaucrats are not even able to establish a social division of labour except in certain industries through very artificial means, through what they call priority allocation.

To look at the present situation is 100 times more interesting than talking about definitions. For more than a decade the Soviet leadership has been pretty much aware that they have reached an impasse. They are fairly clear that the tinkering, economic reforms and perestroika, simply do not work.

They are concerned that there is no generalising tendency within the Soviet Union. There is no way in which you can generalise any reform. There is no way in which you can reproduce any policy that may work in a particular area.

As a result of that the Soviet Union is

becoming more and more a number of different social economies.

The bureaucrats have begun to rethink their general strategy, both in terms of the Soviet situation and more widely internationally. Now, in 1989, only those who are absolutely fiercely against looking at the information could argue that there is anything in common between the Soviet Union and Vietnam or Nicaragua. You really have to be the most vehement dogmatist to suggest that Vietnam — which is basically still capitalist because they explicitly refuse to transform capitalism — or Nicaragua, where they've installed a mixed economy, have got anything in common with the Soviet Union.

For that matter there is plenty of information about the nature of Soviet Asia. There is plenty of information for example about the Baltic states where collectivisation was never anywhere near as extensive as in the Soviet Union. Very different social relations are obvious there.

In China, you have an expatriate Chinese capitalist class directly intervening within China itself, and the law of value in fact exists in a more direct and immediate way than it does in Eastern Europe.

But in the USSR we have to be very clear about the lack of generating capacity or reproductive capacity of Soviet society. And so the bureaucrats are increasingly at least at the ideological level prepared to return to the market. The most far-reaching development, the newest development, whose implications we still don't understand, is that sometime in the late '70s or early '80s a growing section of the Soviet bureaucracy consciously began to explore the possibility of how they can introduce not just piecemeal reform but the market mechanism in a broad sense — at the ideological level, not the practical level.

A corollary of that is that whereas in the past political power and political means were sufficient to give the bureaucracy coherence, that is now no longer in operation. Local bosses, local mafias, and local communist parties are fragmenting on regional and industrial lines.

It is very difficult to implement policy, not just economic policy but even political policy, in many parts of the Soviet Union. It is simply no longer possible for the Kremlin and the Central Committee to cohere society together and endow the bureaucracy with some kind of coherence as it was possible in the past.

This loss of identity, this inability to speak with one voice, is becoming the most fascinating and interesting element within Soviet society.

As far as we can tell the bureaucracy is ideologically committed to introducing capitalism in some modified form. They don't call it capitalism, they call it the mixed economy or a market without capitalism but what they really have in mind is Sweden and Scandinavia. Now there's no danger of Sweden extending into the Soviet Union at this particular stage in time, but that's what they want

to do intellectually.

Practically they realise that this is a very difficult operation. You have to remember that the reason why you are a bureaucrat in the Soviet Union isn't because you are an entrepreneur or particularly creative but because you can say 'yes' and you can crawl and you are able to act as a bureaucrat. It is very difficult for them to transform themselves though in places like Poland and Hungary they are now doing that.

In Poland you have a Minister of Finance who is a millionaire and who has bought his factory. There are now something like 400 or 500 communist party bureaucrats that are privatising their own factories, buying them themselves so that they can emerge as the future capitalist class. Obviously it's much easier in Eastern Europe than in the Soviet Union.

The only section of Soviet society which is 100% committed to capitalism is the intelligentsia. They are anti-working class, anti-proletarian, they love the market, they love Thatcher and they would like to see the introduction of capitalism into the Soviet Union.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view they are not a particularly strong section of society. They don't carry much social weight within the Soviet Union. They do influence the media and culture, but that is about all.

The working class response is very interesting. In the working class you have a sort of intellectual abstentionism. Working class people do not say yea or nay to capitalism in any kind of rhetorical intellectual sense. What they are indicating is that they are absolutely fervently against perestroika; and you have to remember that perestroika, if it were implemented, would represent that first step to capitalism.

At the moment all that perestroika means is labour discipline and a higher and more intensive level of exploitation. Workers are reacting against it. As a result the bureaucrats can't introduce price rises within the Soviet Union because of working class opposition.

We are living in a state of flux. We are now confronted with a new problem. The debates about workers' states versus state capitalism and everything else were pretty sad in the 1960s. Today they are a real crime. Today we are confronted with a question that we have never been confronted with before, which is the possibility of a transition from a post-capitalist society back to capitalism. That was something that revolutionaries have never had to confront — now it is a practical possibility.

Whatever will come out of it, whichever possibility is eventually realised, obviously does not depend only on the internal developments in the Soviet Union itself. There is the international dimension.

To our surprise, those of us that are Trotskyists or Leninists or Marxists, world capitalism is not particularly keen on returning the Soviet Union to capitalism.

They are so scared about upsetting the

world equilibrium which has served them so well they are very very careful.

And if capitalism were restored in the Soviet Union not every capitalist country would benefit equally. America certainly wouldn't benefit, the most dominant country, because they would not be the most efficient imperialist state. Germany would, Japan would, France and Italy would.

So you are getting a very differential response, and you can see this differential response to Polish events, Hungarian events, Chinese and Soviet events.

In response to the Chinese events, the whole of the imperialist world is very careful. We don't get the anti-Communist hysteria as over Hungary in '56 or Czechoslovakia in '68.

What's really taking place now is a very interesting convergence on the political level between imperialism and the status quo leaderships in the Soviet Union and other places. There are major upheavals taking place in the east, the corrosion and erosion of these societies and at the same time both the Soviet bureaucracy and the imperialist world order are actively mobilising against that erosion.

That is a new problem for us which we must investigate and try to work out before its consequences become all too evident.

"If we use a conception of power based on social relations of production in the Soviet Union, we find that the working class has immense social power"

Oliver Macdonald

I very much agree with what Frank Furedi said about labels or purely formal discussions ripped out of historical context.

To illustrate my point — this discussion about bureaucratic collectivism first came up in the '40s. At that time the real substance of this discussion was whether or not there was a new mode of production emerging in the East which socialists had not foreseen, potentially a new, very dynamic mode of production that was of an appalling character because it was exploiting and oppressing the working class, but had been created by the most dedicated socialists and Marxists. There was the possibility that this new monster was going to come and sweep us all away.

Today that sort of view is not around, for the simple reason that the states of the East have been losing the struggle between the social systems over the post-war period. There's no point in beating around the bush on that. These states — not simply the regimes or political leaderships of these states — have their backs to the wall in the great social struggle that has been going on between the two social systems.

Therefore, we get a quite different substance of the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, much more the sort of thing that Bob has been talking about, namely that bureaucratic collectivism is really a sort of pre-capitalist way towards capitalism.

That was more or less what Bob was saying — that it's a useful sort of mechanism for industrialisation, but once you reach the threshold of capitalism these formations disappear and we have capitalism. So these societies aren't some new historical phase.

Frank posed a very important question — do we think as socialists that there is anything worth preserving in the East against the onslaught of capitalism? Yes or no? This is not an academic question, it's an important issue that confronts us. Is there anything that socialists should be concerned about as to whether they restore capitalism or not in the East? Yes or no? It's a fundamental world historical issue for us.

One of the things I like about Frank's book, and also his speech, is that I get a sneaking feeling that Frank thinks there is perhaps something worth preserving against capitalist onslaught in the East. The only thing I would say is, come out and say it loud and clear, Frank, because that's also my position.

I don't want to see these states being overthrown and returned to capitalism, though I do want to see the political regimes in these states being overthrown by the working class, in political revolution.

Mine is a position which is not very often argued on the left. I think these states are workers' states.

Why is it that the case for these states being workers' states has not really been adequately defended? In all my time on the left I have very rarely heard people getting up and self-confidently defending the theory of degenerated workers' states. Nobody wants to do it. Why?

Of course one argument may be that it's because there is no argument there, but I think that there are other reasons for this.

Let me just refer back to that debate in the '40s. In that debate the bureaucratic collectivists did give us a couple of very concrete scientific tests that should be applied to the future evolution of the Soviet Union. The Shachtmanites said in the 1940s debate that there would be two key tests.

One test was whether or not in the Soviet Union there was going to be a continued trend towards huge social inequalities between different social groups. The second test was whether or not there was going to be the continuation of terror. If these two things go on, they said, there will be in effect a bureaucratic collectivist sort of slave society.

In fact, in the Soviet Union there has been a reversal of the trend towards personal inequalities. The Soviet Union under Brezhnev was massively more egalitarian — with all the poverty and all the extreme wealth of the top bureaucrats — than societies in the

West. And as for terror, the story speaks for itself.

But bureaucratic collectivist theory has been immensely popular. Why? My argument is this: the left in the West is completely awash with one particular form of bourgeois social theory, namely Weberianism. Weberianism is what explains the tremendous fashion for bureaucratic collectivist theories and the utter rejection of workers' state theories.

Why people reject workers' state theories is because they cannot answer one question. The question is: how can you argue that ordinary working people in the Soviet Union have any power at all? Their answer is we can't argue that they've got any power at all. Power is entirely in the hands of the bureaucracy. Therefore we can't argue that the Soviet Union is in any sense a workers' state.

If you adopt a Weberian theory of power and how it operates, this is absolutely consistent and obvious. If on the other hand you adopt what I take to be a Marxist conception of power, then things are not nearly so obvious.

Let me give you some examples from what Bob was saying. Bob, of course, presupposed what he had to demonstrate. He presupposed that there was a ruling class in the Soviet Union. He never explained why he thought there was a ruling class. In other words, he presupposed that decisive power, social power, is in the hands of some narrow group.

He got into a little bit of difficulty trying to explain why they don't have unemployment in the Soviet Union. In Bob's view this is nothing to do with the working class having any power in the Soviet Union. Therefore it must be to do with the inclinations of the bureaucrats. They don't want unemployment.

Why don't they want unemployment? Don't they want to get richer? Surely it would be a good idea to sack a few workers. He says something about the workers being tied to the means of production. Why are they tied? Why not sack them? They would certainly, by all accounts, love to sack them at the moment. Is there not a problem of power here?

Now let me just indicate what I mean very simply. Power is not simply the government's formal right to lock you up in jail, but the agenda which any government has given to it — the limits of its agenda given to it by the social relations of production.

If we use a conception of power based on social relations of production in the Soviet Union, we find that the working class has immense social power.

Its social power does not mean that it has any formal political rights, but it has immense social power, for example the power to prevent unemployment, the power to generate tremendous pressures towards egalitarian social policy, the power to demand and to assert things like, for example, the freezing of prices, and so on.

Frank says that we're headed towards capitalism in the Soviet Union, and this is Gorbachev's policy. Why is it that Gorbachev has completely stopped in his

tracks over freezing prices in the Soviet Union? Why, when the working class has allegedly got no power?

Unfortunately, everybody thinks in terms of these Weberian bureaucrats. Who are these Weberian bureaucrats? The poor devil who was at the conference in Oxford, looking at ads for consumer goods, has been slaving away in some administrative job. If he is such a great member of the ruling class, why is he so eager to get his hands on all these little gadgets?

There are a large number of bureaucrats in the Soviet Union, Weberian bureaucrats, desk workers. They are not any more oppressive than the bureaucrats running the National Health Service or the Social Service departments locally — who, we are told, using the same Weberian conceptions, are viciously oppressing us.

What a pile of nonsense! The people who rule the Soviet Union are not Weberian bureaucrats at all. They are not desk workers. They are highly

political officials, state officials. They are very energetic people, by and large, who are not concerned with consumer goods a great deal. Some of them are corrupt, but you've also got the Ligachev types, the ascetic types.

These people are **political leaders**. They are bureaucrats in Trotsky's sense. There is bureaucratic rule in Trotsky's sense, not because they are desk workers but because they politically exclude the working class completely from political power.

It's in that sense and not in a sense of Weberian bureaucratic structures that we can talk about bureaucratic rule.

And I'll just make this point. Ask yourself this question. Do you think that because there are no political rights for workers in these states that means workers have no power as a collective force? If you say yes, I say that is a capitulation to the overwhelmingly dominant ideology in Anglo-American academic and intellectual circles, namely the ideology of Weberianism.

Responses to the discussion

"You have to appreciate that Stalinism is something within the workers' movement in order to understand these societies"

Oliver Macdonald

Stalinism has been a tremendous millstone around the neck of the left. But we've got to face the brutal reality of what we're talking about here. The bitter reality is that Stalinism is a phenomenon of the working class movement.

We may wish it out of the working class movement, that it was never a part of that movement, but it is within the working class movement.

I became more deeply convinced of the degenerated workers' state theory — the workers' state theory — in the early '80s.

Let me give you some examples. In 1970 the regime drew a dividing line down the strike committee in Szczecin. One leading figure on that strike committee had the political police stuff his head in a gas oven. Another leader of that strike committee became by 1980 the party secretary for the Szczecin region — one of the top bureaucrats.

Another person involved in the 1970 events was the party secretary in a shipyard and in 1980 he brought the workers out on strike.

Who went on strike in August 1980? Who led the strikes in 1980? Overwhelmingly it was people in the Communist Party. The decisive move in those strikes in 1980 was in the mines. One in three of the workers in the crucial mines was in the Communist Party.

It was a gigantic crisis within Stalinism, within the Communist Party, which is also within the working class

movement in Poland. And ever since 1980 the working class movement has been in a gigantic crisis.

Don't think it's just a crisis of Stalinism. It is a tremendous crisis of working class socialism in Poland.

Take the Klebanov affair: you see the same phenomenon. Klebanov was hounded and witchhunted and destroyed. Why, **politically** why? Because in the Donbas mines something like one third of the miners were completely won over to the bureaucratic apparatus in the mines. They got benefits out of it.

I had a lot of dealings with the KOR people in Poland. I spoke to the main people, people like Litinski, who were involved with Robotnik and so on. And they convinced me that the workers who were on the party committees in the big factories in Poland on the one hand considered that the working class was the ruling class in Poland, and on the other hand were bitterly opposed to Gierek's policies and were prepared to go along with the movement from below.

You have to appreciate that Stalinism is something within the workers' movement in order to understand these societies.

Some people think that these states work with terror and coercion. This is just nonsense. It's absolute nonsense. Of course they use coercion, of course they stuff people's heads into gas ovens and so on. Certainly they do that. But the idea that that is why they have continued in power is just nonsense.

They have continued in power because they have had the capacity to reproduce themselves in the working class.

Political power is not a precondition for bourgeois rule, why should it be a precondition for working class rule? The question is whether the bourgeoisie can

veto moves to transform the social relations of production and whether the working class can veto moves. In Eastern Europe the working class has been able to veto moves up till now. Whether they'll be able to do that right the way through I don't know.

Let's not forget, comrades, that when we talk about unemployment we're not talking about some particular little right, we're talking about whether you have the gigantic coercive class power of the capitalist market. And if you don't have that capacity to say 'you dock workers, to hell with you! Out you go! Get out!' and ruin their lives, if you don't have that power, as you don't in Eastern Europe, then you are in a very weak position.

It's all very well to say there are no democratic rights in the Eastern Bloc. Quite right, there are no democratic political rights for the working class of the Soviet Union.

But in Britain in the early 1980s public opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of full employment. No political party in this country was in favour of full employment. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union there are no open political parties, and yet these regimes lack the political power to introduce unemployment. Why? Why is this?

These communist states in the East are weak states. Think about it, they are weak states.

The Stalinist project is an absurd project. What are they saying? They are saying to everyone in society, 'comrades, leave it all to us. We take full responsibility for everything and you shut up.' And of course they can't manage everything. So they piss people off right across the board.

They are tremendously over-committed. They have committed themselves right across the board to do everything. That makes them very weak.

A strong state is a state freed from all social commitments — the Thatcherite state, for example, the Nazi state, for example. They made no commitments to guarantee anything to anybody. They said to you 'look after yourselves'.

Gorbachev is trying to make the Soviet state a strong state. He's trying to say 'we're going to get rid of all these commitments'.

If you want to understand these societies, in my opinion, you've got to start thinking of Stalinism not as this great monster state which is terrorising everybody, but as a weak state, weaker and weaker as time has gone on, which has been doing ethically disgusting things but has been increasingly shown to be absolutely bankrupt and weak.

And in becoming weak it has weakened the workers' state as a whole vis a vis imperialism.

"...the longer Stalinism lasts, the more difficult it is for the bureaucrats to assimilate new societies into their own social pattern"

Frank Furedi

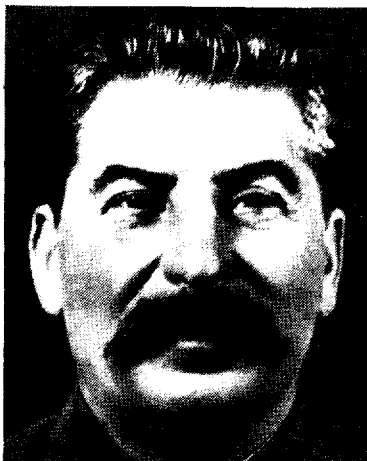
Engels and Marx insisted time and time

again that there are many many states without classes. In fact what they said is that the closer history moves towards capitalism, the more the divergence between social groups and states begins to converge. It's only under capitalism that the state and the class are fully convergent.

In fact the question what is the class basis of a state is a question you can only ask under capitalism. It's a non-question under any other society.

The reason why you ask that question only under capitalism is because only under capitalism does the neutral appearance of the state confuse the real class character of it. For the first time in history the class nature of a state is confused and mystified by its neutral appearances, and therefore becomes a theoretical problem.

In feudal Britain no-one was going to say it was a neutral state. Everyone



knew it was the king's state.

We see that Kampuchea is fighting Vietnam, Vietnam is fighting China, China is against the Soviet Union, China has a strategic alliance with American imperialism. So I find it very difficult to define a general something common to all these states.

I know Vietnam decided not to imitate what happened in the Soviet Union. In Nicaragua the same thing.

The point is that, the longer Stalinism lasts, the more difficult it is for the bureaucrats to assimilate new societies into their own social pattern. The Baltic states have very very different social relations than you will find in the Russian or Ukrainian parts of the USSR. If you go to the Asian part, it is very very different again. To imagine there is a common 'something' is in fact Weberian sociology, because the logic of what you are saying is that it's repressive so that defines it. Well so is Chile, so is South Africa. Where do you stop? Which repressive states are Stalinist and which repressive states are capitalist?

I could say that everytime I meet somebody from Socialist Organiser they've got brown eyes. I meet six people in Socialist Organiser with brown eyes and therefore I declare that if a comrade has blue eyes they can't be from Socialist Organiser.

That is a false construction but that is the logic that you are using. You never spell out what is that general

'something' that is being generalised and reproduced over there. It is assumed. You all assume that there is something there that is being reproduced time and time again.

I want to come to the question of tactics and strategy. A Marxist never confuses theoretical questions with tactical questions. If I am in a meeting like this I will argue bitterly against the communist or so-called communist system in the East because I am among left wing people.

If, on the other hand I am on the street and somebody says 'go back to Russia' I'm not going to say 'I'm not like that, I'm really democratic'. Often I hear new comrades say 'We're not like these Chinese bureaucrats' and I say: 'you are wrong, you are giving into the anti-communist prejudice.'

When I go back home to Hungary and talk to people, I talk to a lot of anti-working class reactionaries. I must almost sound like a Stalinist because in those circumstances your job is not to criticise Stalinism — nobody likes Stalinism in Hungary or Poland — your job is to criticise the illusions that people have in the market economy and in capitalism.

Tactics are important. The way you raise issues is always in relation to consciousness. The consciousness of a bourgeois, a left wing activist, and a Hungarian Stalinist or anti-Stalinist are very very different and the way you approach it politically has got to be in relation to that. It isn't just one big consciousness. It's very very important for us to bear that in mind.

Afghanistan is a practical expression of whether you understand Marxism or not. It's fairly straightforward. You're against the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union because you recognise it denies the right to self-determination and can only discredit the forces of communism. On the other hand, when the Russian side pulls out and imperialism is moving in on Afghanistan and trying to impose an imperialist solution, we are against that. We want the imperialists and the Mohajedin to be defeated because now the balance has changed.

It has got to be an open-ended, flexible approach, addressing the problems as they arise. If you haven't got that, then you've got a problem.

"...it is clearly the bureaucrats' state and the bureaucrats' class rule"

Robert Brenner

I think Frank gave the lie to himself in a moment of naivete when he said you don't have to ask in a feudal society what's the class nature of the state. It's obviously the feudal lords' state.

You barely have to ask it about the Soviet Union because it is clearly the bureaucrats' state and the bureaucrats' class rule, exactly in line with the analogy that you made.

There is a more serious objection. Do they actually extract a surplus? Is there a definable group that extracts a surplus?

But to me it couldn't be more obvious that there's a definable group that extracts a surplus. You have to be crazy to think there is no growth in the Soviet Union or that none of the surplus has gone back into the means of production. I would want to see this system overthrown yesterday, but you'd have to be crazy to deny that even the working class has enjoyed some increase in consumption and there has been reinvestment.

I can't believe Oliver MacDonald! Yes, there were some increases in the standard of living under Brezhnev. Those are the statistics he knows about. But can you deny that the definite group that runs the state and controls the surplus is massively differentiated in terms of consumption — even though it is a paltry level of consumption compared to the United States.

You can define the bureaucracy as the leading elements within the state or in the party — it's more or less the same. There are massive differences in education, massive differences in day to day consumption.

What it comes down to is saying that these are not capitalist states because the surplus is not extracted through the exchange of labour power and there is no law of value. As Frank rightly says, there are all kinds of differences, there are no tendencies towards homogenisation because there's no tendency towards an average rate of profit.

There wasn't under feudalism, there wasn't under Roman society, so there's no homogenisation going on, but that doesn't say there's no system that is reproduced.

To deny that the system reproduces itself you would have to say that somehow the system can't get commodities to the workers, to get dressed or to get food the next day. That is the degree to which you are taking a point that has some sense, which is the USSR's inability to develop the productive forces the way capitalism does. You take it into some kind of idea that this is a society in which a ruling class does not reproduce itself and take responsibility for the reproduction of the society as a whole.

Why does all this really matter? It matters in two fundamental respects.

It has to do with assessing the potential for reform in this society. Precisely because there is a ruling class, precisely because the dominant class takes its surplus and reproduces itself on the basis of its monopoly control of the state, you can't get any degree of democratisation.

You cannot even expect as much democratisation as under capitalism where there is a separation between the taking of a surplus and the state. You can't expect that in these countries where the taking of the surplus is equal to the reproduction of the ruling class.

If there is anything which the experience of Solidarity shows in 1980/81 it is that there was no element within the state that was willing to respond to the workers' demands in the smallest degree. I remember Oliver told us at the time that we should look to a section of the Communist Party, but what happen-

ed was that no section of the Communist Party split (although many communists split, which is a completely different question). The state did not crack, the state repressed the workers' movement entirely, without leaving a smidgeon of democracy.

On the question of the reforms Frank is right to say that they can't develop the productive forces the way they would do under capitalism. Therefore they want to decentralise. They want to bring in the mechanisms of capitalism within a bureaucratic system of property.

So they decentralise. They give the firms their own controls over investment over loans and everything else. But what do these firms do? Do these firms unemploy the workers, do the firms slim down production?

Absolutely not, because these firms are tied to the state and state property. There's no pressure to maximise the rate of profit or optimise the rate of profit. All they do is accumulate workers. They don't unemploy them, they accumulate them. They accumulate means of production, and the crisis of the system is only exacerbated.

The answer for the bureaucracy would presumably be capitalism, because then you would have private property, development of productive forces etc.

Why don't they go that way? Because they are not a capitalist class. They are a ruling class based on the state, and there is no way in which those who are in the ruling class can simply tinker with the social system and turn themselves into capitalist private owners. If they could possibly do that they would, but that they draw back everytime is a sign that they are a ruling class that cannot take the necessary step to develop the productive forces.

They want to be capitalist but they can't maintain that themselves by taking that step.

"You can have transitional unstable formations"

T, 'Socialism and Revolution'

We can't always say we must either have a workers state or a bourgeois state. That is the fallacy that we have kept on sticking to for the last 50 or 60 years.

It is not theoretically justified. You can have transitional unstable formations. The Soviet Union is one such state. It is important if we want to explain Eastern Europe, China, Yugoslavia to first understand the Soviet Union.

For example in the North of Iran we have a province called Gilan. There was a Soviet republic in Gilan. The reason that Soviet republic came into existence was because we had the Russian revolution. If the Russian revolution had not happened, that republic would not have lasted 2 days, never mind 8 months. It was crushed after 7-8 months, but nevertheless the balance of force brought this peculiar so-called soviet republic of Gilan into existence. It was not a soviet republic, but a coalition of the Com-

munist Party and a bourgeois nationalist guerilla army under the leadership of a character that could be called the Khomeini of that time.

If that sort of state had lasted for 4-5 years, we couldn't have just referred to the class formation in Gilan and tried to analyse that state. That would be absolutely impossible. The only way one could have explained it was from the balance of forces that created this peculiar and unstable formation.

Because of the Russian revolution a certain balance of forces was created internationally which has influenced many events.

Even laying aside the balance of forces in the question of developing productive forces by some petty bourgeois or bourgeois nationalist forces, the Soviet Motherland is indispensable. Look at Khomeini. We have cars which are translations of Polish and Russian cars. The mullahs who consider that anybody who is an atheist must be shot and killed have copied many things from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in so far as they see them as a very nice instrument for keeping the workers suppressed and providing the means of sustenance for reactionary groups. Even out of emulation you can have an extension of the Soviet system.

Unless we understand the Soviet Union we cannot explain the Soviet Union, then we can try to reunderstand and re-examine all the other questions. And we should not be too hasty to abandon Trotsky's framework, because one fundamental question in that approach was that capitalism has not yet returned. That idea I think has proved its importance.

Some comrades say the bureaucrats would like to be capitalists but are not capable of becoming good capitalists. If mullahs in Tehran can become capitalists I don't see why technocrats in Moscow cannot become capitalists. Wanting to become capitalists depends on certain material requirements, not just the capabilities of individuals.

Historically we have reached a stage in which those material conditions have been better and better prepared for capitalism, but we have not as yet gone all the way.

That does not mean we should call it a workers' state.

That basic Trotskyist approach with these modifications is still more in tune with what is happening internationally than some of the new formulations.

"Our choice is neither the market nor Stalinism. What we fight for is workers' control, workers' liberty and socialism"

Martin Thomas

If you are faced with a choice between capitalism and Stalinism, do you say Stalinism is better and worth defending? I would argue no.

In some of the Stalinist states, not all of them but some of them, there is more

job security than there is in Britain, for example. In Franco's Spain there was more job security than there is in bourgeois democratic Spain now. So should we have been on the streets demanding the maintenance of Franco, no to any bourgeois democracy in Spain? No, obviously not. You can't take one feature of a system, a feature which is obviously a method of control, as decisive.

The bureaucrats do have to control the working class. They can't just do anything they want. Obviously the working class in the Soviet Union does have a certain power to resist. The working class has a power to resist in Britain, too. But if the railworkers win their strike will we say that the workers must be the ruling class in Britain?

You can't use partial features to say that the Stalinist system is generally better.

I'm a bit puzzled by Frank's position on this, because his conclusions seem to be tending towards the idea that the Stalinist states are in some ways a bit better. For example, he says they are 'post-capitalist', i.e. they're something after capitalism, something further on in historical progress.

But the way he actually describes the system, the logic of his theory, is that the system in the Soviet Union is a massive regression on capitalism. In fact it's a massive regression on feudalism, or even slavery, because he says it has no dynamic for the development of the productive forces.

Slavery in the Roman Empire did develop the productive forces. Feudalism developed the productive forces. If the system really has no dynamic of development of the productive forces, no dynamic of the extraction of a surplus, we should think it a very good thing if slavery is reintroduced in the Soviet Union. We are not moralists. Socialism depends on the development of the productive forces. If the system can't do it and slavery can, then slavery will be progress.

The comrade's conclusions are completely at odds with his theory. It's completely incoherent.

Our choice is neither the market nor Stalinism. What we fight for is workers' control, workers' liberty and socialism. That's our alternative both to the market and to Stalinism.

And so far as we are not able to realise that objective, we don't take sides between them. We defend particular things in the Soviet Union. We would fight to defend the job security. At the same time, however, in Nicaragua we would fight to defend the limited liberties that workers there have against the imposition of a fully fledged Stalinist state, and in Cambodia we would have fought against the military victory of the Stalinists there.

We take sides on the concrete issues. We defend even limited liberties. We defend trade union rights. We are in favour of greater availability of consumer goods and so on, but we also defend job security.

These systems are not better than capitalism.

C L R James

C L R James died on 31 May, at the age of 88.

Born in Trinidad in 1901, he was an agitator for West Indian and African independence, and an associate of the pioneering West Indian and African nationalists; organiser of black sharecroppers in the racist Deep South of the US; a militant in the US and British Trotskyist movement; a prominent mainstream Trinidadian politician in the late '50s and early '60s; a lone aged prophet for the generation of black militants who became active in the '60s and '70s; and author of many books and articles on a wide range of subjects.

James wrote one very important book, *The Black Jacobins*, about the rising of the blacks of Santo Domingo under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, and at least one very useful book, *World Revolution*, a history of the Communist International to 1936.

James grew up in a world awash with national chauvinism and then with hysterical pseudo-scientific zoological racism, all of it superimposed on the staple centuries-old anti-black racism which had been woven from the slave trade into the fabric of post-Renaissance European and American society.

No wonder James was an outsider. That much came to him with his community, its geography, and the colour of his skin. The rest, a life-long commitment to the struggle of the oppressed, and all he did with voice, pen and organisational work in that cause, he generated in himself.

By the time he died James enjoyed considerable fame. It was commonplace in the last decade and a half to find breathlessly lauding articles about James in the bourgeois press. It was natural and easy enough — especially, perhaps, for journalists with a narrow modern mainstream education and a narrow experience of life — to weave the facts of James's broad life and broader achievements into heroic myth and story.

The classless universality of the world-wide black cause overshadows the 'narrowness' of the revolutionary working-class commitment of James's middle years, and anyway James himself had shed that 'narrowness', though he remained a socialist and called himself a Marxist still.

In exchange for what had James shed that 'narrowness'? He broke with the Trotskyist movement in 1951, when he left the Socialist Workers' Party of the USA. Together with others, he had made many just criticisms of that movement and the direction it had taken.

Post-war Trotskyism was being given shape in its attempt to analyse Stalinism, which was now plainly no longer what it had seemed to Trotsky — a transitory regime, which could not be designated a new exploiting society only because it was transitory, with its dominant bureaucracy a malignant social growth rather than an organically functioning ruling class. James advocated his own 'state capitalist' analysis, and talked of the danger of what he called 'Pabloism' replacing Trotskyism.

The problem was that 'Trotskyism' no longer existed as a ready-made complete doctrine. It had to be recreated and recast. But when James left the Trotskyist movement in 1951, he moved not towards a recreated, recast, renovated Trotskyism, but radically away from Leninism altogether.

He resorted to cloudy and sometimes almost mystical generalities about the spontaneous generation of socialism by way of the everyday activities of the existing labour movement. It was no longer necessary to

build a Leninist party. History had superseded Lenin.

Thus James paralleled the 'orthodox' Trotskyist movement, which responded to defeat by looking to other forces, even other classes than the working class, to carry out the 'world revolution'. They too broke with Leninism, though without acknowledging it. Both James and the 'orthodox' Trotskyists said: we are defeated, but nevertheless we are winning. Both moved from a rational conception of a movement to be built which would lead the working class to achieve socialism, to a 'millennarian' concept of Revolution which had no clear notion of ends and means, of the who and what of it.

Today, the reappearance of the Chinese working class shows how monstrous was the acceptance by some would-be Trotskyists of the Chinese Stalinist party as the force to lead the socialist revolution.

The defeats suffered by the British working class show how senseless was the regression of James (and others, among them until 1968 Tony Cliff of the British SWP, though he did not go as far as James) to a belief in the self-sufficiency of working-class spontaneity. For few post-war working classes were more creatively militant and innovative as to means of struggle than the British working class was in the '60s and early '70s. Militancy alone was not enough.

Modern history has not rendered the ideas associated with Lenin and Trotsky out of date; on the contrary, it is one long series of negative vindications of the idea that the working class, even when militant and creative, cannot win unless its vanguard militants have succeeded in building a Marxist cadre organisation within the broad workers' movement.

At least James looked to the workers and oppressed groups. How he went from those ideas to become the secretary of Dr Eric Williams's ruling party in Trinidad is something of a mystery to me. He fell out with Eric Williams and was put under arrest and deported.

James P Cannon, who had persuaded C L R James to go to the United States and help the Trotskyist movement in the vital work of organising black workers there, said of James after his departure from the ranks of the Socialist Workers' Party USA: '*The Johnsonites were personal cultist followers of Johnson as a Messiah... [Johnson] was the name James used inside the SWP]. A cult requires unthinking fools for the rank and file. But that is not all. In order for a cult to exist, it is not enough for a leader to have personal followers — every leader has personal influence more or less — but a cult leader has to be a cultist himself*'.

These are harsh words, but they are probably fair, and better than the prevalent uncritical sentimentalising of James. James broke with Trotskyism not for something better but to pursue an erratic, meandering course which, taken all in all, was worse than the post-Trotsky Trotskyism he criticised before his departure in 1951. He remained broadly in our camp, but he leaves us little to build on for the future.

The latter-day public cult of James in Britain was a strange thing. Amidst all the lavish journalistic praise, James must sometimes have taken offence, or at least paused to consider if some of it was concerned less with his undeniable status as a very capable human being with important achievements to his credit, than with a cult of him as a token black revolutionary.

Jack Cleary