

SOME NOTES ON BIG FLAME'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION OF SOVIET-TYPE SOCIETIES  
by V. Graham

What follows are a series of discussion notes in which I try to take up what I consider some of the more serious weaknesses of Bill Campbell's document, "The Class Nature of the Soviet Union and Its Implications for Marxist Theory", and the pamphlet, Century of the Unexpected, on which it is based. I hope to develop these notes into a short critical piece for either publication in our journal or insertion in the discussion bulletin. It should be noted that

not all of my criticisms of Campbell's document apply to the pamphlet on state collectivism, since in some ways Campbell has provided an inadequate summary of the pamphlet's argument.

### 1. Some Minor Points of Disagreement

I should first like to get out of the way some of the least important aspects of the state collectivism argument, so as to clarify what I think the argument is and is not about.

First, I am not going to dwell on whether or not we should call what exists in the Soviet Union a mode of production, or whether the Soviet elite is a ruling class. I think that the arguments put forward in the pamphlet are not entirely convincing, but these quibbles are not really germane to what I think that pamphlet's real weaknesses are. To some extent my differences with the authors of Century of the Unexpected and problems in their theory will come out in the course of these notes.

Secondly, the same applies to the question of whether cdes. Machover, Fantham, and Campbell are correct in saying that state collectivism represents an alternative path to capitalism. I believe that these regimes are quite specifically post-capitalist, i.e., they arise out of the response by their societies to the way that imperialism, with its combined and uneven development, has affected them. This does not, however, seem to me to be the main problem here. I shall make more detailed comments on the difficulties I think the "alternative-to-capitalism" thesis gets us into later on.

### 2. The Driving Forces of Soviet Type Societies

The great strength of the state collectivism thesis as put forward by cdes. Machover and Fantham, is that it provides an analytical framework through which revolutionaries can identify the potentially progressive content of anti-imperialist movements without distorting our assessment of these movements' ability to construct socialism. A second, and related contribution is that they correctly identify the basic source of contradiction in these societies as the working class's position within these societies' system of production relations. They correctly challenge the notion that state property and "planning" are in and of themselves "good" or "proletarian", and allow us, in fact, to reject the very notion that planning as socialists understand it even exists in Soviet and related societies.

My main disagreement with these comrades is that, having correctly criticised both "workers' state" and state capitalist theories of the USSR for divorcing the observed behaviour of these societies from what they identify as their driving forces, they themselves fail to present a cogent argument as to what these driving forces really are.

#### A. General Method

The most striking methodological characteristic of the "degenerated workers' state" theory is that it creates a dualism between an imputedly progressive essence to Soviet society and the way that society actually behaves. Hegel, of course, had attacked just this dualism in Kant, who

had argued the existence of unknowable inherent laws (noumena, the thing in itself) which constituted a separate entity from the observable "reality" they were to explain. For Hegel a phenomenon is the phenomenon of its essence, that is, what appear to us as phenomena have the form they do precisely because of the intrinsic forces that produce them. Change the latter and the phenomena become something different.

If the workers' state theorists were to argue that they had no such dualism, they would have to be able to explain how it is that this progressive essence, state property, "planning", etc., produces the abomination of Soviet society. Of course, it is possible to imagine a hypothetical society in which the working class is responsible for its own exploitation, but even workers' state theorists would not engage in such sophistry. It remains for them to explain the mechanism by which this progressive essence gives rise to its opposite, and this they cannot do, except by going outside an analysis of production relations and dwelling on the inessentials of distributive relations.

State capitalism creates the same kind of dualism, this time introducing fundamental distortions into the classical concepts of capitalism, value, and the market. This does not a priori prove that what they ascribe as the essence of Soviet society does not exist, but it is a fact that they have never made a concrete attempt to detail the inner workings of Soviet production relations.

If we are to develop a genuinely revolutionary theory of Soviet society we must abandon the traditional dualism that has plagued marxist theory since the mid-1930's and attempt to discover the inner workings of Soviet production relations and the way in which these essential characteristics of the system manifest themselves.

#### B. Production For Production

At precisely the point where cdes. Machover, Fantham, and Campbell must set about to make this kind of analysis they shy away from a detailed discussion of Soviet production relations and resort instead to a Weberian imputation of an external goal to the system - production for production's sake - which provides the system with its rationale and its drive. To explain this goal, the state collectivism pamphlet (p. 16) resorts to the subjective apprehension by the elite of what it must do to stay in power. The pamphlet lists a number of the clinical failings of the system, and correctly locates these failures in the position of the working class, as the implementer of bureaucratic instructions, within this bureaucratic system. However, it does not actually study the contradictions themselves.

At an empirical level it is dubious that the elite in the USSR or related societies actually desires the perpetual hypertrophy of heavy industry. Except for the third five-year plan just prior to World War II and the immediate post-war period, the plans have consistently aimed at redressing the imbalance between producer and consumer goods; and just as consistently they have failed (as the quote from Kuron and Modzelewski on p. 16 points out). This fact has been pointed out to cdes. Machover and Fantham on several occasions, yet it has not caused them to nuance their argument in the slightest.

If production within heavy industry has predominated it is because of the fundamental contradictions within production, which make it impossible to redress the imbalance or even to make the outcome of the centre's instructions approximate to the instructions themselves. In defence of the state collectivism pamphlet and cde. Campbell, marxists have only just begun to address this problem of identifying these contradictions, primarily through the journal Critique. This analysis is only in its embryonic stages, and I would not venture to give a detailed exposition of it here. But I shall try to sketch the analysis in its outlines.

As Ticktin has argued, we must start by looking at the nature of the product, where the primary contradiction is not between use value and exchange value (as under capitalism) but within use value itself. The Soviet worker, politically and socially atomised, deprived either of participation in the system or of collective means of combatting it and yet at the same time relatively free of the coercion to work well imposed by the capitalist labour market, turns out a product that is defective. Its quality is bad, production is slow and irregular, deliveries are unreliable. All this the state collectivism pamphlet acknowledges. The effect of this system, however, is that it requires enormous inputs of human and physical resources to achieve even limited growth.

A machine produced badly breaks down frequently, has to leave production, requires vast quantities of spare parts, and itself turns out defective products. Repair is subject to the same social relations of production, and so it, too, is done badly and consumes vast inputs of labour and materials. Spare parts are produced defectively and are not standardized. Thus in agriculture two allegedly identical tractors turned out by two different factories will not be able to use the same spare parts. What is more, their life span is a fraction of that of a Western tractor.

In all of these societies the infrastructure is weak: roads are poor, transport is inefficient, warehousing is chaotic. As a result huge quantities of physical product simply get lost. Both in industry and in services and agriculture labour is under-mechanized, with large numbers of jobs involving unskilled manual operations (often employing relatively highly-trained youth, whose morale then falls). Similarly, managers are themselves reluctant to allow the introduction of new technology, since this introduces uncertainty into their patterns of plan fulfilment and may lead to higher targets being set in future.

Therefore the pattern of extensive growth referred to in the state collectivism has two sources: the inability of the regime to introduce new technology and raise labour productivity in existing plants (to this is related the inability of the regime successfully to develop means of giving them free mobility of labour); and the excessive waste and squandering within the system. The effects of these are not always the same. The inability to introduce new technology has meant that whenever new techniques and innovations appear the only way the regime can establish them is to build an entirely new factory or set of factories completely from scratch. This partly explains the cycle of Soviet construction, where huge numbers of new projects get initiated, fall behind schedule, thereby creating a backlog of unfinished projects, and the regime imposes a moratorium on new construction. The excessive waste requires a vast industrial apparatus because finished output requires vastly greater inputs than in modern capitalist industry. The regime is effectively a prisoner to this reality.

The effect is to create a pattern of growth that is at the same time non-growth. Here the notion of waste that appears in the state collectivism pamphlet is inadequate, since it concentrates on the physical losses due to squandering or loss of resources, idle capacity, etc. A broader concept is needed. The Soviet Union can be compared to an organism that burns up more calories consuming its nutritional inputs than those inputs actually provide. Every attempt to solve one set of problems creates a train of further problems that tax the system even further. Figures for growth in Hungary and the USSR show this very well. To achieve relatively modest percentages of growth the system consumes far greater increases in industrial inputs. Whilst Britain, for example, needed an approximately 2.9-fold increase in investment to obtain a 2.1-fold increase in national income between 1950 and 1978, Hungary needed a 7.3-fold increase in investment to achieve a 4.7-fold increase in income. In Hungarian agriculture, whose growth has been a lynch-pin of Hungarian export plans, growth has required such large

increases in industrial inputs as to throw doubt on whether this rise in agricultural output was worth it. Soviet agriculture faces the same dilemma: the system requires a 2.5-fold increase in fixed assets to achieve a meagre 30% rise in agricultural output. The system requires a greater and greater investment just to keep agricultural output from falling!

I would argue that it is this pattern that explains the regime's inability to redress the imbalance between heavy industry and consumer goods, rather than an imputed "goal of production". The quote from Kuron and Modzelewski on p. 16 of the state collectivism pamphlet, which attributes the distortions in plan instructions to the conflict between the "class goal of the ruling bureaucracy" and "the interests of the basic groups who achieve production (maximum consumption)" is simply wrong. This conflict exists, to be sure, but it is not because the producers or even managers are aware of their interests in consumption. Every Soviet worker would like to see greater output of consumer goods; yet the Soviet worker is at the same time an object of exploitation within a system of atomized production relations, and in this capacity she or he simply is not willing to perform labour of the quality and intensity that would be required to improve the supply of consumer goods. Hence the problem arises from the contradictory position of the worker who seeks to minimise her or his exploitation but at the same time is dependent on the collective labour of the working class to satisfy the collective needs of society.

### 3. The Progressive Content of State Collectivist Regimes

In initial discussions within Big Flame about the state collectivism thesis I was prepared to accept the argument that such societies - whether they represented a mode of production or not - contained certain historically progressive elements compared to their subjugation to imperialism. In particular they lay down a certain basis of modernization and give rise to an industrial proletariat which can overthrow them. However, I now am inclined to think that this division between a progressive stage and a retrogressive stage is an altogether dubious proposition, especially as summarized by Campbell in his document.

It seems to me that the only progressive content in the movements that tend to set up so-called collectivist regimes is their anti-imperialism. After the achievement of this goal, the removal of their societies from the imperialist network, it is questionable that we should view these regimes as "progressive".

First, because they do not strictly operate as an alternative to capitalism in bringing about development. Every one of these regimes, for instance, has totally failed to solve the agrarian question; agriculture remains backward and a major bottleneck for future growth.

Secondly, because, as I have already outlined, the type of growth they bring about is highly distorted and contains the seeds of the breakup of these systems. This is not something that attacks these regimes in their old age; it is inherent in the very methods of industrialization adopted from their birth. It is impossible to argue that the problems confronting the Soviet regime today are in any way different from those that faced it in the 1930's. All of the difficulties of waste, poor work and slow work by the workers, managerial distortions of instructions, chaotic supplies, etc., existed then and in fact were the natural result of the Soviet system of production relations. It is true that the regime built factories where none existed before, but it did so at such cost that only the constant use of terror and a police state has kept the regime from being overthrown.

In Campbell's formulation (the section on Permanent Revolution), which is far more static and politically ambiguous than the pamphlet, the argument that these regimes are a "third option" which is a "viable possible alternative" is politically unsound. It implies that in their "progressive" stage

we support state collectivist regimes. In fact we do not support them, except insofar as we oppose interference in their affairs by imperialism, but we call - and actively work - for their overthrow by the popular masses.

It is also wrong to ignore the origins of the social group that exercises state power in these countries. In the Soviet Union the elite emerged as a bureaucratic stratum that came to power by crushing both the private sector (the peasantry) and the working class. It could only establish itself by eliminating both capitalism and socialism as possible systems. In doing so it deprived itself of the inherent rationality (relatively speaking) that either of these systems could have provided. In short, it had to suppress both plan and market.

This has not been true just of the Stalinist elite. Although in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other such regimes the ruling elite may initially have enjoyed popular support (largely based on popular illusions in what the Communist Parties would do once in power), they rapidly set about crushing the working class as a political force (while claiming to defend it against the consumer interests of the intelligentsia; this is one aspect that distinguishes the East European regimes from the USSR). This was an essential condition of their coming to power and staying there. Are we to call this progressive? Are we to support these regimes during this phase of their history (witness Angola, where the MPLA crushed the left soon after arriving in power; I do not, by the way, consider Angola a "state collectivist" regime, but I believe supporters of that theory do)? Obviously not. We can understand the dynamic that has made this situation the universal outcome of every post-capitalist revolution without accepting it as historically preferable or even inevitable (what role, for instance, does the fact that Stalinist parties generally lead anti-imperialist movements have in causing them to evolve in a similar direction?).

The state collectivism pamphlet is more forthright on this point. We defend the working class as the only class that can initiate a genuine transition to socialism, which means we defend the working class against a state collectivist regime at any phase of that regime's history! This section of Campbell's document should be redrafted if we are to submit this as our contribution to the Coordination meeting.

A final point on this issue: If a condition of the establishment of state collectivist regimes has been their need to suppress both plan and market, and if this in turn has been a source of their enormous instability (as the state collectivism pamphlet itself says on p. 15), is it correct to view these regimes as a mode of production? The pamphlet seems to me to raise this very point when it says that after the end of the progressive stage of state collectivism "there are only two mechanisms flexible enough for running the system; either a capitalist market or a workers' democracy in which the mass of the direct producers are intimately involved in all aspects of the plan". If these are the only alternatives, where does that leave state collectivism?

#### 4. What Political Conclusions Do We Draw From This Theory?

The above quotation seems to me to raise another, more fundamental point about the state collectivism theory as presented by the pamphlet and cde. Campbell. Namely, what are the fundamental contradictions of this system and how can they be overcome? Comrades Machover and Fantham accept that state collectivism is a highly contradictory system, without really identifying the nature of these contradictions. However, because they correctly root the source of these regimes' instability in the working class's role within production, it is more or less clear in their exposition that such systems - like capitalism - pose society with the need to define radical needs that the systems themselves cannot satisfy. Here, too, there must emerge

a class capable of acting as the universal class, that is, a class which in the course of its struggles comes to pose radical solutions on behalf of society at large. In Soviet-type societies, as under capitalism, that class (at least at this point in history) can only be the proletariat.

We cannot present a theory of Soviet-type societies without defining what political stance we take towards them. The point of having such a theory is, after all, so that we can understand how to overthrow them. In the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and similar societies this is a pressing question. At least in the USSR and Eastern Europe these regimes are at a point of severe crisis where discontent is virtually universal, and the regimes are incapable of satisfying the grievances of any sector. This explains the new hardening-up within the Soviet Union since last summer (see below).

The hallmark of these regimes is that both the intelligentsia and the working class find themselves in opposition and fighting for certain limited common objectives: e.g., freedom of speech, freedom to organize and assemble. Until now the working class has generally failed to distinguish itself from the liberal intelligentsia except negatively, i.e., by distrusting them and showing contempt for their struggles. To the extent that the working class has become more political, however, it has failed to distinguish itself positively from the intelligentsia and to define the tasks that it has to accomplish in order to achieve socialism. The result has been a political confusion, where sections of the left, both in Eastern Europe and in the West (most notably the Fourth International) have failed to identify the fundamental antagonism that exists between the aspirations and necessary actions of the working class and the interests of the intelligentsia, Communist Party reformers, etc.

In presenting any document to the public we must state what we think the means of struggling against these regimes are; specifically we need to be clear (a) about the antagonistic roles of the working class and the intelligentsia, and (b) that we do not see the struggle against these regimes as in any way limited to a fight for "human rights". I suspect the syndicalism of some of the other formations in the Coordination may produce political agreement between us on this point. I doubt any of them have the two-stage theory of the Fourth International, namely that first there is a struggle for democratic rights (in which we defend all opponents of these regimes) and then follows the struggle for socialism. Critique actually has a worked-out position on this question which I think should be Big Flame's position as well. There should be a separate discussion with documentation. Comrade McKenzie was correct at the last conference that we need to have a worked-out position on the struggle within Eastern Europe, and we should set the International Commission the task of producing a position for discussion and voting at the NC.

##### 5. Some Factual Errors in Comrade Campbell's Document

Finally, on page 9 of cde. Campbell's document, in his discussion of the formation of the Soviet ruling class, there are some important errors of fact.

First, he is wrong to separate the "ruling class" (what I would call the elite) from the managers and technical intelligentsia. Despite the fluidity of the personnel in these groups during the thirties, they nevertheless provided the social base for the regime. More important, the distinction between them and the Party leadership probably no longer exists: most of the leadership are engineers, ex-factory managers, etc. The conflict that often arises between managers and the centre is real, but arises out of the structural constraints placed on each. A manager who circumvents the plan, seeks greater freedom of manoeuvre in his factory, etc., can take quite an opposite view if and when he progresses through the ranks of the Party.

Second, the reforms of the 1960's were very limited. All major criteria, e.g., prices, wages, supply, and output, continued to be designated by the centre.

Third, the reforms failed and have now been decisively abandoned in favor of a return to more rigid control from the centre. Managers ostensibly will no longer have a choice of their product mix (they used to be able to concentrate on the goods that were most "profitable" or easiest to over-fulfill) but will have specified for them their inputs and outputs. At the same time, a decree of early January has attempted to crack down on what the regime considers poor labour discipline, by tying certain financial and pension benefits to a worker's length of service at the enterprise and his or her good conduct while at work! There has not been a decree like this since 1938.

It cannot, therefore, be argued that the reforms "have tended to re-inforce state collectivism". They did not change that much; if they did, it was in the direction of reinforcing the instability and contradictions within the economy. However, the attempt to return to hyper-centralization will fail just as miserably. The alternative remains either plan or market. To the extent that the regime has decided to retrench against both, we cannot expect the system to become even more unstable.

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February 1980

#### Postscript

Following a discussion of these Notes at the International Commission I should like to make one addition and one clarification.

The addition concerns the state collectivism pamphlet's argument against the various state capitalist theories of the Soviet Union. Although their case is correct, insofar as they show that commodity production does not exist in the USSR except in the most peripheral areas of production, they need to take the analysis back one further step, to the nature of labour and the difference between abstract and concrete labour.

Commodity production presupposes a market and the existence of exchange value. Value is the social abstraction which equates the concrete labours of different, independent producers, whose products in their use form are otherwise unequatable. If exchange is to take place, their concrete labours must be reduced to some common element. This common element is value, which is totally indifferent to the concrete nature of the labour performed. To show that commodity production or even a market exist in the Soviet Union, it is therefore necessary to show that abstract labour exists. This cannot be done. In the USSR, one has only concrete labour. Everyone works at her or his own pace, at her or his own quality, turning out different quantities of product in the same time. This is true of individual workers, as it is true of individual shops within enterprises and of individual enterprises with respect to one another. The result is that all calculation and predictability is impossible. No one can know what the "average" worker or the "average" enterprise will produce because of the chaotic nature of interconnections between elements of the system and because of the extreme individualization of the work process. The introduction of conditions of production that would permit the evolution of abstract labour would require a radical change in the Soviet elite's relationship to the working class; i.e., it would have to achieve complete mobility of labour, something it has heretofore been unable to do for political reasons.

The clarification concerns my discussion on page 5 of these Notes, where I say that it is possible to support national liberation and anti-imperialist movements while they are struggling against imperialism and at the same time

lend our efforts and support to the overthrow of the regimes these movements set up after coming to power.

First, I see no contradiction in accepting that left-wing nationalists such as the Mugabe movement in Zimbabwe, can inflict a defeat on imperialism (which makes the terms of struggle easier for the left on a world scale) and yet at the same time will not create the conditions for socialism once in power. To the contrary, it seems to me that a precondition of any "state collectivist" regime is that it crushes the working class and the left who will challenge it precisely over the issue of moving towards socialism. This does not happen in stages; it is a conflict that exists before these movement even come to power. In this conflict we have no choice but to support the left.

Secondly, we have to treat the issue in its international dimension. After the overthrow of capitalism the transition to socialism must be a self-conscious act. Especially in societies still plagued by scarcity (such as post-revolutionary Russia, China, and virtually everywhere else that capitalism has fallen), it is impossible to expect that those managing the society and its economic and political development will willingly take steps to eradicate the source of their privileges. In other words, they will not allow for proletarian democracy, they will not try to undermine the division of labour, they will not make really genuine culture and education the mass property of all, because this would mean giving up their power to the working class as that class became able to manage society on its own. This will be a problem even after revolutions in advanced countries, but at least there we have reason to expect the working class to be powerful enough to defend itself and the needs of society from usurpation.

One can only argue that backward, post-capitalist countries lack the pre-conditions for socialism in a conditional sense. They are "doomed" only if their revolutions remain isolated. Hence the importance of taking an unequivocal stand on the issue of socialism in one country. Unless the Western proletariat comes to the aid of the left and the working class in "state collectivist" (or developing "state collectivist") societies there will almost certainly develop a privileged bureaucracy which will crush the left and suppress the workers. Such has been the history of post-capitalist revolutions up to now, and I see no reason to call this in any way "progressive".