

SOCIOLOGY AND THE SOVIET UNION: A LIBERTARIAN CRITIQUE

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British sociology, like most of its Western partners, is renowned for being saturated with Marxism and for existing within a distorted twilight zone of, at best, bias and, at worst, total drivel.¹ Sociology's poor reputation is not, as the majority of its practitioners familiarly claim, the result of government underfunding, but instead, is the result of thinking people knowing that sociology attracts, and is staffed by, people who are dogmatically concerned with perpetuating high levels of state intervention and a regime of centralised bureaucratic control.

As a young practitioner of, and a recent graduate in, sociology I have been continually struck by the discipline's inability to free itself and come to terms with reality: namely the power of the markets to liberate humanity. Markets enrich and liberate, most sociologists refuse to admit this, and hence sociology is held in low esteem.² Sociology's ludicrous conservatism - its unwillingness to discuss markets - is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the area of developing and industrialised societies, especially the specific topic of State Socialism in the USSR. The many course reading lists I have seen regarding sociological critiques of State Socialist societies omit any discussion of markets as important information transference mechanisms. The widespread corruption and nepotism rampant within Soviet power structures is rarely referenced, and if it is, it is grossly understated, but is never explained as being the inevitable result of these societies' criminalisation of markets.³ British sociology students are never exposed to the possibility that for State Socialist systems to organise the supply and

demand of goods and services they have to rely upon the highly personalised channels of favour, nepotism and blackmail. In short, the popular sociologised literature never enables students to understand that State Socialism automatically causes underground free markets. This paper suggests areas of analysis and important ideas which should be discussed, debated and, at the very least, perceived.

THE MARXIST RESPONSE TO MARXISM

Under a system based on State Socialist principles, where the ownership of the means of production is collectivised, labour is just as necessary for the creation of the economic surplus as under capitalism. However, whilst under capitalism this surplus is at the disposal of individuals and corporate shareholders, in State Socialist societies the surplus is available for the central planners to meet 'societal needs' - as defined by the party. Davis and Scase hence assert that under Soviet Socialism: "The role of state planning is ... fundamental; it determines the processes whereby the economic surplus is subject to claims by all sectors of society and is, accordingly, a deliberately political process."⁴ They go on: "... ministries themselves are coordinated by state committees which are responsible for such matters as economic planning, science and technology, and investment. In the Soviet Union, these include Gosplan (in charge of economic planning as a whole), Gosten (responsible for prices) and Stroibank (the investment credit bank)."⁵

Under such a system, labour is allegedly less vulnerable to market fluctuations and more systematically integrated into the productive system than under capitalism. Social class relations in the Soviet Union are sometimes officially described as 'non-antagonistic'. The Kremlin's line is that: "The socialisation of the productive process [has removed] the objective basis of ... antagonism by transposing the economic conflict over the surplus into the political sphere."⁶ Nevertheless, these 'transposed' differences are in practice the basis for inequalities in power, prestige and fringe benefits. Unfortunately, David Lane, the doyen of British-Soviet sociology, argues, in typically loaded sociological code, that these benefits rarely amount to taking the form of 'private property'⁷ - as if that excused everything.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



The basic differences in income and status are permeated with overtly political significance in all Socialist societies. For here, the summit of the occupational and social hierarchy is a small political elite, usually only amounting to some two or three per cent of the total population; an elite which is completely identified with the upper ranks of the Communist Party or its equivalent. Whilst there can be no doubt that in the USSR incomes have been - 'forceably' - redistributed to a far greater degree than in any capitalist society, the fact still remains that incomes and goods continue to be unevenly distributed, along the lines which pertain to 'state economic function', power and prestige.⁸ As McAuley has pointed out, those in the upper echelons of the Party and state apparatus (the apparatchiks) tend to earn on average at least three times as much as those who are ordinary, skilled, manual workers.⁹ Again, the average earnings for women in the USSR are rarely more than two-thirds of the average for men and they are very much concentrated in the low-wage, unskilled occupations, such as clothing manufacture.¹⁰ Overall, the evidence suggests a division according to educational qualifications and levels of responsibility; that is, between those who decide the plans and those who carry them out, the planners and the planned.

Widely read Marxian perspectives regarding the USSR, and what may be politely termed its 'Socialist anomalies', come in two major forms and both draw heavily upon Weber's critique of bureaucracy.¹¹

The 'Degenerate Worker's State' model - associated with Trotsky - asserts that the USSR is a 'dialectic of Capitalism and Socialism'. Trotsky pointed out that while nationalised property is a step towards socialism, the low level of inherited technology was inadequate to give the USSR a 'truly' socialist character. The central assertion of this school is that the Soviet system, having abolished the class relations of Capitalism, degenerated into a new form of elite rule. The Party betrayed the revolution, by ensconcing itself in a 'bureaucratically privileged position'. The Party has simply (ab)used legitimating notions of 'centralised welfarism' and 'Socialist progress' for its own sake in the quest for power. Trotsky, arguing that the soviet system is hierarchically imposed from the top downwards, concludes that the Soviet Union is not a 'worker's democracy' but instead a state protecting 'nationalised property'.¹²

'State Capitalist' theorists, on the other hand, such as Milovan Djilas, Bruno Rizzi and Tony Cliff, argue that the October revolution did not carry out a proper or classical Socialist Revolution. Due, they said, to the 'inadequate development of the Russian mode of capitalist production' the Communist Party once in power had paradoxically to carry out the Capitalist project.¹³ The revolution simply occurred too early, being the product of an intellectual movement rather than the inevitable 'historically given' consequence of contra-

dictory Capitalism (as viewed from Marx's prognosis). Cliff has hence argued that: "The state bureaucracy ... possesses the state as private property [... it] has forms of passing on privileges."¹⁴ What 'State Capitalist' critics of the USSR seize upon is the form of distribution of commodities. It is argued that because of the 'transitory nature' of the USSR, the domination by socialist relations of the means of production coexist with bourgeois forms of distribution of commodities and traditional pre-capitalist patterns of social relationships.

Djilas¹⁵ - the main exponent of the 'State Capitalist' model - accounts for the omnipresent power of the C.P.S.U., by arguing that a 'New Class' commands the Soviet Union which has at its core the Party 'activ' and revolves around the system's bureaucrats.

In attempting to assess this last model, the widely read British sociologist David Lane makes a great deal out of the complaint that the term 'ruling class' is not applicable to the Soviet Union because 'class' by definition depends upon a system which operates on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production. Indeed, it is remarkable to find that in such biased and distorted works, which purport to provide a balanced account of the USSR, the term 'State Capitalist' is not itself brought into serious definitional question. It is my concern that the implicit Statism, and authoritarian oppression, inherent within the logic of Marxian thought is never fully referenced, outlined or discussed in such studies.

Indeed, as if to exonerate the Soviet system, both the 'Degenerate Worker's State' and 'Capitalist State' models are argued by Lane to ignore the extent to which the public "participate" in the Soviet system.¹⁶ Following this absurd line of thought, Gordon Skilling argues that the model of Communist politics implicit within 'most Western analyses' has seemed to be exclusively concerned with systemic 'out-puts'. He suggests that work by authors like Conquest, Odom, and Friedrich and Brezenski, are far too concerned with the imposition of 'binding decisions'.

In British academic circles past sociological analyses are not criticised, as one might hope and expect, for being fundamentally flawed in terms of economic and historical analysis, but because they of all things ignore the extent to which the public participate in the Soviet System.¹⁷ The central complaint from most sociology is that the emphasis upon 'degenerate leaders', for example, fails to explain how so many policies have been so "enthusiastically implemented, by their supporters, especially the diffuse mass of rank-and-file Party members".¹⁸

TOTALITARIANISM

In sociology-speak the theory goes that unless social systems articulate the various interests of large groups, society will 'suffer an overt manifestation of dysfunc-

tions' and will miraculously collapse. The logic assumed is that: as the USSR has not collapsed and is still an active player on the world scene, it must be in some way responsive to its peoples' needs and demands; and therefore it can't be as bad as the wicked capitalist media say. However, the very meaning of 'totalitarianism' is that this is not true: a system can work and still be unresponsive to the majority which it victimises.

The Sociology of the USSR tends to neglect the 'dimension of power' in Soviet society, which is after all what sociologists invariably concentrate on when they analyse Western capitalist societies. One of the tragedies of my discipline is that, in following the logic of most British sociology, Ceausescu's Romania was not - definitionally - totalitarian in nature, because it articulated various interest groups. Instead, Romania was simply termed authoritarian: a term which is also frequently used for such countries as Britain, the United States of America. The resultant relativism and the ability to produce students who cannot differentiate between such societies is one of the most remarkable, and distasteful features of British sociology.

While Communist theorists like Professor Djordjevic have suggested that all modern societies are dynamic bodies, complicated and diversified in their structure and full of conflicting and even antagonistic interests,¹⁹ the Slovak writer Michael Lakatos has gone so far as to claim that: "Interest groups [are] the real basis of structure of the social and political system [in the USSR and Eastern block]."²⁰ Under such 'academic tuition' British Sociology students studying State Socialism become engulfed in false-consciousness. For as Alexander Shtromas has demonstrated, so-called 'mass associations', 'interest groups' or social 'transmission belts' were used back in the days of Stalin.²¹ But contrary to the Sociologist's desire to glimpse some evidence of worker 'in-put's' - on the Road to Socialism - these institutions were then, and to all intents and purposes remain, simply a means of transmitting policy to groups. They should not be blindly assumed to be, or over stated as, sources of ideational supply: and hence as evidence of 'democratisation', or 'convergence' along the lines of the West.

Traditionally the critics of State Socialism in the USSR have concentrated on the badness of its out-puts (queues, inequality, corruption etc.) The defenders of State Socialism have excused these bad out-puts by asserting that they are caused by good in-puts (Socialism, interest groups and representative institutions). But the badness of the out-puts means that the in-puts must also be bad; the out-puts are automatically indicative of the in-puts.

Following, what may be loosely termed a Weberian perspective, Buynce and Echols argue that as a consequence of a process of growing rationality in the

USSR's policy and planning methods, the system has had increasingly to take account of outside 'specialists'.²² While these theorists suggest a trend towards State Socialist 'corporatism', Donald R. Kelly's frequently used study of the role of interest groups in Soviet affairs is designed to provide empirical evidence of the system's willingness to listen to and take heed of a multiplicity of social groups.²³ His study of environmental policy making at Lake Baikal, is supposed to demonstrate the importance and utilisation of diffuse in-puts. Although his research outlined the involvement of two state-related environmental protection agencies, three semi-official public conservation organisations, and a multiplicity of *ad hoc* coalitions and 'opinion groups', nowhere is the sad reality of State Socialist ecology mentioned. Such selective works undermine sociology's claim to be an established science for they distort the reality of a bureaucratically inefficient state apparatus which controls, and at the end of the day decides, the fate not only of Lake Baikal but of all projects on its territory.

Sociologists, in their literature on the Soviet Union, tend to play down the sheer unresponsive bureaucratic weight of the system and its socio-economic consequences. In choosing to ignore altogether the relevance of the market's 'language of price', as a vital critical academic tool, sociologists enter the world badly equipped for the task which they call social science. The problem is that when they do encounter examples massive state bureaucracy, sociological minds are abysmally placed to conceptualise a solution: i.e. markets.

In outlining Soviet 'interest constellations', as sociologists like to call them, it is interesting to note, as Hough does, that although the Politburo officially has the final say in determining wages and social policy, Gosplan has the responsibility in balancing the system's various demands with the available resources. As such, the sheer volume of information which threatens to inundate both the Politburo and Gosplan means that the latter is not, at the end of the day, the main state agency dealing with wages and social policy. In reality the process of policy formation devolves in large measure onto organisations like the State Committee for Labour and Social Questions, which must in turn co-ordinate its decisions with the non-state agency, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, as well as other various state and party agencies.²⁴

Although it is my personal view that central planning, whether legitimated by a relatively autonomous 'commanding central committee' or at the 'spontaneous' behest of 'worker's committees' as Trotsky desired, involves an inherently inefficient and unresponsive structure, it is my concern that the vast majority of British sociology graduates find it difficult if not impossible to 'perceive' libertarian arguments and critiques because they are never exposed to them

through seminars, lectures and reading lists. Ask a sociologist to provide a libertarian, or anarcho-capitalist, critique of the USSR with reference to the works of the great German sociologist Franz Oppenheimer²⁵ - and you will wait for ever.

For me, and other libertarians, the objective inadequacies of State Socialist systems come down to two fundamental - yet interrelated - factors.

Firstly, as Gary Littlejohn has argued,²⁶ Soviet administrative and civil law is often applied in an arbitrary manner, which undermines both the economic and social spheres. Soviet legal norms often appear, and indeed are, mutually inconsistent. Littlejohn says: "Even within the relatively narrow sphere [...] of administrative and civil law concerned with the regulation of the economy, there is a substantial diversity of legal relations. This diversity, and the legal inconsistency which often accompanies it, should lead to caution in analysing the effectivity of the law in social relations. It is partly for this reason that the Soviet state cannot be treated as emanating from law."²⁷

Although Littlejohn is correct in arguing that the Soviet State does not emanate from law, and that this perspective does much to explain the arbitrary and unconstitutional antics of both the K.G.B., and the C.P.S.U., in no sociology text is the critical view found that such a system is the logical outcome of State Socialism (if not statism itself). Indeed, I know of no other sociologist who perceives the meaning, and possible operation, of a system based on private markets in law, let alone be able to provide students with the ability to articulate a 'libertarian' critique of the State Socialist legal framework.

Finally, as Professor Pete Saunders has argued elsewhere,²⁸ 'centrally imposed' planning is an unavoidably bureaucratic and inefficient process, because unlike liberal-democratic societies, state socialist societies lack the highly responsive information mechanism of the language of price; or as Ludwig Von Mises put it, the language of the extended order of successful modern societies.²⁹ For Conservatives one of the specific characteristics of the USSR in particular, and State Socialist societies in general, is that they have a system where there is not, as in the United States, a multitude of points of access for pressure groups to the points of decision. On the contrary, the main point of access is at the topmost level of the party, in its apparatus, Secretariat and Presidium. To libertarians, any statist, political, system is itself brought into question for being opposed to the market and an unnecessary burden on individuals.

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2. See: Marsland, D., (1988) *Seeds of Bankruptcy*, London, Claridge Press.
3. For a good discussion on the cultural effects of the criminalisation of markets in the USSR and hence Soviet day to day life see: Zinoviev, A., (1985) *The Reality of Communism*, London, Paladin, pp. 77-103.
4. Davis, H., and Scase, R., (1985) *Western Capitalism and State Socialism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 91.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
7. Lane, D., (1978) *Politics and Society in the USSR*, London, Martin Robertson and Co. Ltd, pp. 176-177.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 100. It is interesting to note that socialists and sociologists demonstrate an unhealthy over concern with redistribution. The mechanisms of, and importance of, the creation of wealth itself is never discussed. As Ayn Rand argues, all too often such thinkers blindly assume that wealth simply appears, from nowhere, as if grown on trees. Therefore, in much sociology, the redistribution of wealth is discussed as a virtue at the expense of students conceptualising the importance of the creation of wealth. Sociologists do not mention that as in State Socialist societies redistribution is the central economic aim, not wealth creation, poverty inevitably increases over time, because less is available for redistribution. See: Rand, A., (1966) *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, New York, Signet Books, First Essay. See also: Marsland, D., op cit.
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25. "There are two fundamentally opposed means whereby man, requiring sustenance, is impelled to obtain the necessary means for satisfying his desires. These are work and robbery, one's own labor and the forcible appropriation of the labour of others. ... I propose in the following discussion to call one's own labor and the equivalent exchange of one's own labor for the labor of others, the 'economic means' for the satisfaction of needs, while the unrequited appropriation of the labor of others will be called the 'political means' ... The state is an organization of the political means. No State, therefore, can come into being until the economic means has created a definite number of objects for the satisfaction of needs, which objects may be taken away or appropriated by warlike robbery." Oppenheimer, F., (1926) *The State*, New York, Vanguard Press, pp. 24-27.
26. Littlejohn, G., op cit., pp. 141-176.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
28. Saunders, P., 'The New Right is Half Right' in Seldon, A., (ed.) *The New Right Enlightenment*, Sevenoaks, Economic & Literary Books Ltd, p.164.
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