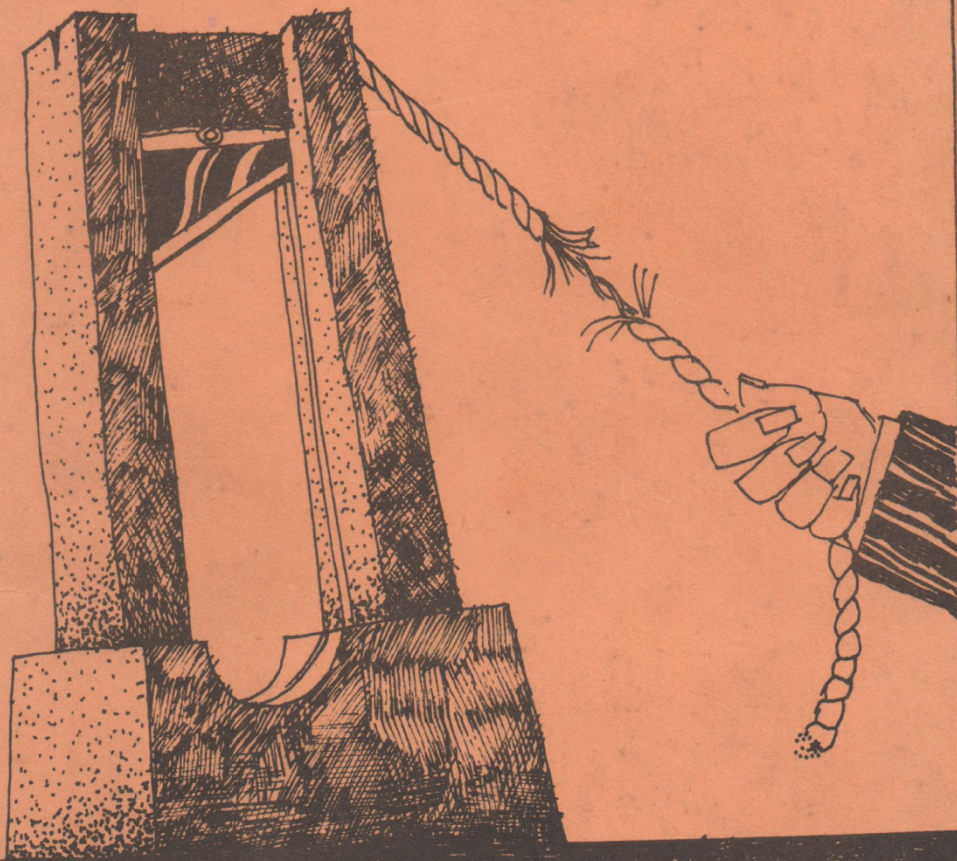


scottish marxist

SUMMER · 1980 · 40 P. · NO 20



THE CUTS

TECHNOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION

by Tim Cloudsley

Discussion Article

This article sets out to achieve two main aims. Firstly, it attempts to outline briefly a Marxist critique of the forms of socialism which already exist in the world, based upon the recognition that socialist constructions have until now been historical experiments confined to technologically “backward” societies. Secondly, it examines some of the implications for Marxism in the advanced capitalist societies — and in particular for the Communist Parties — of the fact that revolutions succeeded first not at the centres of industrial capitalism, but at the peripheries. It is argued that distortions of Marxism have followed from the way socialism has developed this century — which has not been the way the founders of Marxism expected — but that reactions against these distortions, in particular those forms of Marxism that are hostile to the western Communist Parties, have generally failed to produce adequate theoretical analysis simultaneously to viable political strategy.

The First Socialist Experiment

The first place in the world in which the working class, guided by Marxist ideas, gained state power and managed to hold onto it, was of course Tzarist Russia in 1917. Russia was a country in which feudal institutions and social relations were far from having fully disintegrated, and in which industrial capitalism had developed to a relatively small extent. The urban proletariat constituted therefore only a small proportion of the population, the vast majority being peasants — some landless and some small landholders. After the ravages of the civil war, the Bolsheviks undertook to construct socialism in a backward, isolated country. A more unpropitious set of conditions for the first socialist society to develop from could scarcely be imagined: a technically primitive and inefficient agricultural system carried on by a peasantry for the mass of whom the conscious wish was to distribute the land into equal, privately owned plots; an urban industrial base whose anyway partial growth had retrogressed due to war. The Bolsheviks had not expected to find themselves in power in Russia without the support of at least one successful revolution in an industrially advanced capitalist country; many years of argument and analysis had led them to

believe it was possible to build socialism from an essentially peasant society, provided it could count on co-operation with a proletariat in power in an advanced country. When revolution in the West failed to materialize, the Bolsheviks had no choice but to industrialize "from scratch", unless they were to abandon the revolution altogether.

What this meant in practise was that the new state had to direct an industrialization programme "from above". The New Economic Policy of 1921 recognized that the peasantry was under the sway of populist, not socialist, ideas. Private agricultural production was maintained, from which the state appropriated a portion of the surplus in various forms, in order to build state-owned heavy industry in the towns. The desperate need for rapid industrial development — in order to provide for the military defence of a "besieged fortress" and to mechanize agriculture in a situation where millions could die if there was a bad harvest — did not appear to allow of experiments in direct workers' control of industry. In effect, a small "historically conscious" elite held socialism in trust, meanwhile allowing a capitalist agriculture to modernize with machinery produced by an autocratically-run urban industry.

Industrialization Using Capitalist Means

The new socialist state saw no alternative but to develop the "productive forces" through capitalist means. In practice this meant that it harboured contradictions within itself that have remained inherent in the Soviet form of socialism right up to the present day. It meant that the "Kulak" class of small capitalist farmers flourished, becoming more and more powerful, until Stalin disposed of it as a class under the "forced collectivization" of 1929; apart from the moral loss which socialism suffered through this action, it reinforced the development of a repressive state apparatus. It meant also that urban industry continued to be organized on the basis of a capitalist division of labour: production under the control of a centrally-appointed management at plant level, the maintenance of Taylorist-type specialization of tasks on the factory floor, the restriction of grass-roots engagement either in the immediate running of factories or in the working out of the national economic plan.

Marxism underwent a development that mirrored this situation. Instead of socialist development being conceived of as an active process of collective self-transformation, Stalinist ideology came to reify the Marxist categories of economic base and superstructure, conceiving socialist construction as the laying down of a socialist base from which a socialist superstructure would automatically appear. This determinist, mechanistic degeneration of Marxism complemented exactly a situation in which not the active initiative of the masses transformed society, but a state apparatus under the direction of a ruling elite. Instead of historical development being interpreted as an infinitely complex dialectical interaction between forces of production, social relations of production, and ideological structures of consciousness, a crude causal relationship was seen as acting from the "base" towards the "superstructure".

Because technological innovation was not under the control of conscious, reflective direct producers, production of machinery was organised on a basis of alienated labour in a way analogous to that under capitalism. In capitalism, new technology is introduced as and when it will

increase the profits of the capitalists. Implementation of technological innovations is not governed by society's self-conscious decisions, but by the drive for capital accumulation (expressed through the blind forces of the market). Labour is split up into into component parts in such ways as increase output per unit of wages paid. The entire process is conceived through capitalist ideology as being neutral, i.e. in the interest of efficiency per se, not capitalist efficiency. Technology in itself is seen as necessitating a particular form of labour process, not **capitalist** technology harnessed to **capitalist** production. Whereas in reality, the very structure and type of technology, and indeed of science, under capitalism is a function of that system of production, "scientific" ideologies make a specifically capitalist science and technical practice into an "objective" knowledge — the pursuit of absolute truths (whether of nature or society) which are not related to the socio-historical context in which they emerge. "Technological progress" in general is made to seem synonymous with the actual progress of particular forms of technology within the capitalist system — which is thereby rendered inevitable, untranscendable.

Something all too similar happened within Soviet Marxism. Technology came to be conceived of as "neutral", i.e. not a function of the sociopolitical organization of the society in which it developed. The "productive forces" came to appear as mere things to be developed through decisions taken by the state, not as a human process which involves not just machines but the social relations within which they are used and developed. Economic decisions came to be seen as based upon considerations of "efficiency" in its own right. Just as "productive forces" were not conceived as entailing real human beings relating to technology with particular motivations and ideas, so the state apparatus was viewed as if it were external to society, not existing in dialectical relationship to, and reflecting, all dimensions of the social totality. Marxism talked of "objective laws" of socialist development, which merely mirrored and justified the particular historical developments of the Soviet Union.

The Maoist Attempt To Industrialize Through Socialist Means

The Chinese revolution once again brought a new socialist state to face the problem of industrialization and socialist construction from an essentially feudal society partially penetrated by industrial capital and capitalist relations of production. Mao-tse-Tung was able to learn from the industrialization of the U.S.S.R. and was determined to avoid the problems which have come to be associated with the term "Stalinism". The essence of Maoism is that industrialization under socialism must entail the masses of direct producers themselves making progressively more and more the decisions involved in "modernization". Thus, instead of the surplus produced by a peasantry being simply appropriated by the state in order to develop urban heavy industry, which then produces agricultural machinery under managerial control to send to the peasantry, which has nothing to do with its construction, Mao envisaged a locally-controlled self-mechanization of the peasantry. Rural co-operatives would use their agricultural surplus to develop their own workshops, in which the peasants themselves would build simple machinery at first, which they themselves perceived as being needed. The improvement brought to subsequent harvests through the use of such machinery would then allow a greater surplus to be utilized in the construction of new, more complex machinery. In this way, a state which extracts the surplus produced from an

unwilling peasantry is replaced by voluntary self-development. Technological innovation is appropriated by the producers themselves, in which process the alienating divisions between management and physical production, the "economic plan" and the direct producers, and between town and country, can be gradually overcome. Technology that is developed and implemented collectively by the direct producers is shaped in accordance with the conscious will to emancipate ever further the political organization of labour; it will not develop in such forms as appear to necessitate permanent control over production by technical experts nor a cog-like organization of specialized productive tasks. Maoism returned to the Marxist recognition that a specific technology determines particular forms of organization only within a given set of social relations; different social relations will give rise to a different type of technology which in turn entails an appropriate, complementary pattern of labour organization.

Similarly, Maoist policy advocated the formation of rural co-operatives in which tool-sharing was encouraged. In the Great Leap Forward it was the peasants themselves who chose to form communes and go beyond individual ownership. Collectivization was not only in conformity with socialist aims and principles but also of immediately perceived material benefit to the peasantry. And in the urban factories, the Maoist line has continuously pushed for the overcoming of the division between mental and manual labour, of the division between administration and production, simultaneously to the technical improvement of industry. As against the "capitalist road" which emphasizes exclusively the training of specialized cadres to organize industry, Maoism sees socialist development as both technical improvement and ever-increasing grassroots control and initiative in production.

This discussion should not be taken for a claim that the results of Maoist strategy have been free of serious problems. These cannot be discussed here, nor the contradictions between Maoist and non-Maoist political lines, nor the developments in China since the death of Mao. The present interpretation is concerned only to delineate the fundamental differences in the patterns of industrialization in the two major forms of socialist modernization.

Tragedy Of The Split In The Communist Movement

It is a tragedy that the Maoist experiment, which entails nothing less than the gradual abolition of capitalistic division of labour and social alienation, has brought about a rupture within the world socialist movement. For the Maoist development was possible only because of the October Revolution. China was not faced with the grave threat of imperialist intervention to the degree that the U.S.S.R. was in its early years. It could experiment in a higher form - and surely each and every socialist revolution ought to be able to bring previous historical experience to bear upon its own reality - partly because of the pre-existence of the Soviet Union which could give technological aid and military protection, but also because the Chinese Communist Party had been for decades rooted in the rural peasantry - unlike the Bolsheviks whose strongest support came from the urban proletariat and whose leadership was largely in exile before the revolution.

The nature of and reasons for the Sino-Soviet split and its ramifications in the world cannot be gone into here. It should be said, however, that western Communist Parties need to understand

and recognise the enormous advance in marxist practice which has been attempted in Chinese Socialism. This does not entail agreement with Chinese international policies and perspectives, which appear to be conditioned ideologically by the decision to break completely from the forces for Socialism wherever they maintain links of any kind with the Soviet Union. As internationalists the western Communist Parties should seek to bring about a reconciliation between the Socialist camps, based on the principles of equality of Communist Parties, peaceful co-existence, and national sovereignty (which entails respect for and non-interference with, though certainly mutual criticism of, the different patterns of development in different countries).

The Stalinist Degeneration Of Marxism

The situation of the Soviet Union as the only country in the world in which socialism existed for nearly three decades, meant that the other Communist Parties had to choose between domination by the Comintern because this was the only basis on which any link with the Soviet Union could continue — or complete breakaway. On choosing the first alternative it was inevitable that Marxism would be adversely affected by Stalinist dogma. Western Marxism in the 1930s was to a large extent a mechanistic determinism, not a critical, creative theory. With the defeat of Fascism, the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe were obliged to follow the Soviet degeneration of Marxism. Now that the western parties develop national strategies entirely autonomously, many of the stalinist mental ruts have been sloughed off — but the process of regeneration is not yet complete.

On the level of theory, there are residues of positivist determinism in the thinking of western parties, evidenced in statements, publications, etc. The dynamic conceptual categories of Marxism are frequently reified into objects, and the simplistic empiricist dichotomy of “objective” and “subjective” is still often adhered to. Thus the thinking mind (subject) is conceived as perceiving an objective “environment” of nature or society.

The complexity of Marxian dialectics is travestied in such formulations. Dialectical thought looks at reality as process and change through infinite interaction in an infinitely complex totality. Scientific concepts are historically developed means of appropriating changing realities, and do not relate rigidly to static “facts” or “things”. The concepts used in dialectical thought are those analytical abstractions which at a given place and time are most adequate to understanding the processes of reality. But through understanding, action within and upon reality is changed, thereby transforming both the reality and the consciousness that seeks to comprehend it. Knowledge is an active moving process inseparable from social practice, not a passive contemplation of “given” objects.

The international perspective of the western Communist Parties is also problematic. Although they have adopted a genuinely critical view of the Soviet Union, a sufficiently fundamental analysis of the reality of that society is lacking. Particular policies of the Soviet leadership are criticized, whilst the basic socialist structure is taken as unproblematical. The fundamental contradictions between socialist tendencies (such as effective economic planning) in the U.S.S.R. and the non-socialist legacies of its peculiar development are insufficiently recognized. The hypertrophied bureaucratic

managerial system, the control of public information from above, the maintenance of alienated labour organization are features of the Soviet Union which point to the need for very fundamental structural changes, not mere changes of emphasis in the leadership. Indeed, it is the recognition of a continued, active transformation of society — which is history — that is needed; contradictions in the Soviet Union require a mass mobilization to disalienate production and change the direction of development.

Related to this — and the unfortunate tendency to ignore China - is an impoverishment of the vision of Socialism. Marx's communism, towards which socialism would consciously develop, was the collective ownership of the means of production, the collective self-regulation of society going beyond the bourgeois separations of "politics" from "economics", and the development of all-rounded polytechnic human beings to supercede alienating forms of both the social and technical division of labour. One of the major criticisms to be made of the current "British Road to Socialism" is its failure to develop a theoretical distinction between bourgeois and socialist democracy. How does the extension of bourgeois forms of democracy and civil rights articulate with and develop into collective self-transformation, direct democracy, and overcoming_of the bourgeois fragmentation of existence into political, economic, and cultural dimensions? Socialism in the "British Road" appears in places to be a planned economy plus more and more **bourgeois** democracy. The notion of a **total** transformation of society, into an unalienated, classless society with the qualitatively new, integrated individual is sadly truncated.

This impoverished conception of socialism is related to the lack of clarity in our view of the Soviet Union. If the latter holds within itself structural distortions, continuously reproduced and not merely lingering on unnecessarily, it is excessively simplistic to call for "more democracy", merely echoing bourgeois criticism. It is this lack of a clear critique of technocratic state socialism which is hinged to a lack of clarity about socialism in general — as being more than the readjustment of capitalist society in order to overcome crises, unemployment, extremes in material inequality, etc.

Confusions In Marxist Criticisms Of Communist Parties

Having said this, it is necessary to stress that most of the forms of western Marxism which are critical of the theory and practice of the Communist Parties fall into far greater confusions. The "state capitalist" theories of the existing socialist societies fail to comprehend history — as occurring in the 20th century. This concrete process, through which the abolition of capitalism and the advance to socially planned economies has begun in countries whose economic and cultural levels are "behind" the advanced capitalist societies, is miscomprehended, leading to a sterile kind of convergence theory according to which socialist revolution has not yet started anywhere. Similarly, the neo-Marxism of Marcuse and Habermas represents a disillusionment springing from the immediate context of metropolitan existence in a specific period of advanced capitalism. For such thinkers the existence of a technocratic practice and ideology in both the Soviet bloc and the West - within which science is conceived as neutral, whilst in fact justifying and maintaining a system of domination - testifies to a complete integration of industrial societies from which it is difficult to see a way out. They fail to recognize ongoing class struggle in the West (albeit muted

during capitalist expansion), or the trajectory of the Soviet bloc which, because of the starting point and subsequent context of its socialist development, has gone through and is still in a period which superficially resembles Monopoly Capitalism in certain respects.

This rather anarchistic tendency, like "ultra-leftist" Marxism, believes that there is in the Soviet Union a new ruling class whose policies are orientated to the mere maintenance of power, as in capitalist societies. It cannot explain the even regional development of the U.S.S.R., the intergrated use of national resources, the full employment and full housing, the economic stability and steadily rising standards of living, the universal literacy and highly developed educational and medical systems, the considerable achievements in women's emancipation, or the high levels of mass participation in art and culture — which are profoundly different from the forms that capitalism does, or can, evolve. However, it is true that surplus labour is directed and deployed by minorities, and that a logic of technology experienced as an alien personified force continues largely to determine Soviet social development. Yet within the constraints imposed by world capitalism, and by the particular circumstances of its socialist industrialization from a backward, isolated country, a degree of unalienated development, qualitatively different from that which occurs under capitalism, is evidenced in the Soviet Union. It is not a form of capitalism, for the bureaucracy is not a ruling class in the sense of bearing a fully antagonistic relationship to labour, with historically structured interests which entail its exploitation of labour.(2) The bureaucracy does not own the means of production (and nor are its material privileges over the labouring population at all comparable with the inequalities which capitalism makes inevitable), and therefore can be responsive to the needs of the masses in evolving policy — although these "needs" are still largely shaped through alienated social forms — are not full, authentically expressed human choices.

The western revolutionary movement must therefore maintain solidarity with the Soviet bloc, in so far as socialism(3) exists within it, and inasmuch as it actively supports revolutionary movements in the Third World. This should be simultaneous to the criticism of alienative and repressive characteristics in those societies which are unjustified in relation to the historical potential existing at this stage of their development. Their ruling parties should be conceived as representing the furthering of socialism simultaneously to acting as checks on mass participatory transformation.(4) The focus of solidarity with the Soviet Union for Communists should therefore be a **process**, not the status quo. The Soviet state is a contradictory form in which socialist and technocratic reformist tendencies interlock in an historical process which allows of further socialist advance as the world revolution progresses. This is not the same as a struggle for complete transfer of political power from one class to another, as in the capitalist world.

Elsewhere, attacks are made upon the perceived reformism of the Communist Parties, which is supposed to be due to domination from Moscow. The "ultra-leftist" criticism of Communist strategy in the West is based essentially on the failure to recognize the complex stages through which western societies must pass before arriving at socialism. Thus, the insistence of the Communist Parties that the working class in advanced capitalist societies must intervene ever more effectively in the operations of capitalism, in counteracting and oppositional forms, before it will be finally able to secure political power for itself and fundamentally transform the social relations of production, is judged as evidence that the Communist Parties are no longer committed to social revolution. "Ultra-leftism" contents itself with a definition and analysis of presently-

existing capitalism, and an abstract, ideal description of socialism which lies beyond the horizon. How we may move from "here" to "there" is left to the myth of revolutionary insurrection.

"Ultra-leftist" critiques therefore accuse the Communist Parties' strategies of conservatism. For example Andre Gorz(5) argues that the defence of technicians' interests in Monopoly Capitalism is counter-revolutionary, because this stratum performs tasks that are specific to the maintenance of capitalism, and would be superfluous in communism. This view fails to recognize that **all** existing occupations are related to the ongoing reproduction of capitalism, but that simultaneously, in furthering immediate perceived interests most sections of the population in advanced capitalist societies will come into contradiction with capitalism itself. The contradictions of capitalism are expressed in all dimensions of its existence; the potential force for change and progressive tendencies in all aspects of the present, actual reality must be optimally orientated to the eventual overcoming of capitalism — it is from within a real, concrete social formation that its transformation comes. In a similar way, Lefebvre(6) argues that Communist Parties wish only a reorganization of capitalism to produce a new, technocratic state-planned economy. The market and its consequences (economic crises, unemployment, etc.) will be overcome, but no fundamental change in the form of human existence will result. The sections of western capitalist society who want to fundamentally "change life" are the anarchic marginal groups — youth, bohemia, etc. Communists merely want gigantesque planned factory production: alienation without capitalism's economic irrationality.

As the earlier discussion indicated, a grain of truth may be accorded this view, but its conclusion displays only historical naivety. No matter how advanced certain groups may be judged to be, and no matter how important a role they may have in social transformation through their influence upon society, it is the working class as a whole that must ultimately impose its vision on reality. And to transform anything entails starting from what exists. Certainly Socialism will inherit the polluted megalopolis, the bureaucratic, inhuman institutions, and everything else from capitalism. And the working class, nurtured within capitalism's institutions, ideologies, and forms of sensibility, will only gradually transform itself into the new human being. The process begins before it is in power, and continues infinitely after it is in power; if that process is unjustifiably delayed, then the most progressive sections of the people have to urge for further mass struggle, towards the unalienated self-regulation of production, the fully human, collective control over technology, the full, free development of the imagination.

Notes and References:

1. Technocratic capitalist ideology rests upon a positivist epistemology in which scientific knowledge is conceived to be ahistorical and neutral with regard to social interests. Information about society, made to appear value-free, is selected and presented in such ways as are useful to the organizing powers whose concern is to control the people, maintain forms of behaviour and consciousness that are adapted to the reproduction of capitalist society, and to manipulate the changes in behaviour made necessary by continuous structural adjustment in the mode of

capitalist domination. According to Marcuse, Soviet Marxism and natural science are framed in comparable terms in relation to the Soviet system.

2. In fact, if such a social form as State Capitalism did exist — in which the state controlled the economy directly, in the interests of a bourgeoisie that no longer owned private capital — it would be unstable and necessarily transitory. It would tend either towards the full resurgence of capitalism with private capital operating in a market — or towards socialism, i.e. with the working class predominantly in control of the state.

3. Socialism is the period of transition from the capitalist to the communist mode of production. Whether it is called the "dictatorship of the proletariat" or not, it is a transitional form in which the working class exercises dominant political power. It is not yet a classless society; different classes still exist, and therefore antagonisms between classes remain. It is a period of continued class struggle (though in forms different from those engaged in before the transfer of state power), of the struggle between capitalism (which is gradually abolished) and communism (which gradually develops).

The difference between the Soviet form of socialism and the Chinese form, is that in the former the process of abolishing capitalist division of labour has been relegated essentially to some future stage, whereas in China it is seen, by supporters of the ideas behind the Cultural Revolution at least, as inseparable from the development of a planned economy. Stalinist and post-stalinist Marxism in the Soviet Union have avoided recognition that class struggle persists during socialism, and that it must continue to exist until society is classless — by which stage alienating forms of division of labour will have also been transcended. Maoism does not deny that the abolition of classes and the capitalist division of labour is a long, gradual process, but insists that during socialism — the transition from capitalism to communism — the proletariat is engaged in a never-ending struggle to appropriate collective, unalienated control over technology.

It has already been stated that the view here taken of Soviet (and Eastern European) socialism is to be distinguished absolutely from a variety of "ultra-leftist" critiques of "state capitalism". Many of these interpretations are unclear about the need for a transitional form between capitalism and communism. Their quarrel comes almost to be against the fact that communism has not immediately emerged from proletarian revolution, and this is why for many of them China is no less "state capitalist" than the Soviet Union. The conceptual distinction between transitional socialism, and classless communism, is blurred.

A further clarification is required here. The nature of Soviet socialism is to be understood as the outcome of the context within which the October Revolution and Soviet industrialization took place. It is false to conclude, as some have, that such an outcome is made inevitable by revolution in a "backward" society **per se**. A backward level of the productive forces certainly throws up particular problems, but it does not necessarily make socialism — the active process of transformation to communism impossible. To argue that it does, entails a commitment to economic or technological determinism: the assertion that only after a certain level of development of capitalist productive forces can the transition to communism **even begin** — a view that says to the vast majority of the world's people that they must wait, that it is too early to establish socialism.

4. Thus for example, in so far as the state restricts the areas in which a free market operates, it acts in the interests of the working class and socialism. However, since economic planning is so largely a matter of central determination it tends to stifle autonomy and initiative in production ~ hence the need to allow market forces to operate to some degree as the dynamic of economic development. This contradiction pertains to the specific distortions peculiar to the Soviet form. It is not of the same order as those that inevitably persist under socialism, and which are finally resolved in the process of abolishing capitalism.

5. Andre Gorz: "Technology, Technicians and Class Struggle" in "**The Division of Labour: The Labour Process and Class Struggle in Modern Capitalism**", ed. A. Gorz, The Harvester Press, 1976.

6. Henri Lefebvre: "**The Survival of Capitalism**", Allison & Busby, 1976.