



## Was the USSR state-capitalist?

MARTIN Thomas (WZ34) misunderstands Shachtman's argument against the notion that the USSR was "state-capitalist." Shachtman describes the USSR as a society with "No capitalist class, no capitalist private property, no capitalist profit, no production of commodities for the market, no working class more or less free to sell its labour power on the open market." For a Marxist, such a society cannot be capitalist. If this society is described as state-capitalist, then "state-capitalism" is being used as a meaningless and self-contradictory label.

Shachtman's argument would have been clearer if he had left out "no production of commodities for the market." While it is perfectly true that a society without commodity production cannot be capitalist, there was always some production of commodities in the USSR. There were "shops, money, wages", as Martin points out. Does the existence of these things indicate the existence of capitalism? Not necessarily, according to Marx. Commodities, money and wages [paid to the soldiers] all existed in Ancient Rome, yet capital did not. "It [capital] can spring to life, only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour power." This suggests an empirical question: In the USSR in the Stalinist period, to what extent was production based on free labour hired by the state?

Instead of attempting any such empirical analysis, Martin demands that the goalposts be moved: he replaces Engels' concept of state capitalism with an "integral state capitalism" where "... the workers would be to a considerable extent state slaves as well as wage slaves." This is to redefine "state-capitalism" to be a society like the USSR, which naturally makes it a simple matter to show that the USSR was "state-capitalist."

"The USSR was a statified economy based on wage labour" says Martin. Unfortunately, by "wage labour" he means labourers who are formally paid a wage, regardless of the actual social relation between "employers" and "wage labour." There is no doubt that industrial workers in the USSR were paid wages and piece rates. But the convict labourers who worked to build a grandiose canal system were also paid wages and piece rates! Thus Martin's claim that "the compounding of wage labour with state-slavery in the USSR did not so transform it so as to make it not wage labour at all" translates to the observation that paying workers by the hour, or by the piece, was standard practice in the USSR.

This observation tells us nothing about how the status of the industrial "wage workers" compared with the status of the convict "wage workers." Under the NEP the difference was quite clear, but in the period 1929-1940 there was a qualitative change in the status of the industrial workers. By introducing an internal passport system in December 1932, the rulers were able to significantly limit a worker's right to leave one job and seek another. The legal status of workers reached its nadir in 1940, with the enactment of a statute making it a criminal offence to be absent from work. Yet in 1940 it was still (relatively!) better to be outside the gulag than within. Even in 1940 the industrial workers in the USSR were not slaves or convicts — but neither were they the free wage labourers of capitalism. The closest analogy, I think, is between the status of industrial workers in the USSR, and that of rank and file soldiers in a conscript army.

Finally, Martin claims "the Stalinist USSR was an aberrant episode within the capitalist era". Yes of course! The world economy was unquestionably a capitalist economy throughout the entire lifespan of the USSR. So what was the nature of the Stalinist aberration? Its distinctive features were the militarisation of industrial labour and the forced collectivisation of the peasantry, which created a peculiar combination of pre-capitalist economic relationships with the technology of capitalism. A regime resembling "Asiatic" despotism set itself the target of developing modern technology, and at a breakneck pace!

In the 1930's the USSR was almost an autarky, but the rulers could not completely seal off their society from the capitalist world. Nor could they indefinitely resist the internal and external pressures for change that were created by coexistence with western capitalism. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 is therefore no great mystery. Nor, since 1991, should it cause much heartache among Marxists if the Stalinist USSR is described as "pre-capitalist."

Roger Clarke

## Where does culture come from?

THE ongoing debates about football and *The X-Files* raise basic questions about how socialists deal with the question of cultural

and ideological phenomena in society. These questions revolve around the basic question: are socialists going to accept bourgeois explanations for the existence and functions of cultural phenomena? Or are we going to offer an alternative — and if so what?

Fundamentally, on a social level, there is a similarity between all socio-cultural phenomena, from rap to opera, from classical novels to thrillers, from sci-fi to soap operas and "real-life" drama. I believe this goes beyond questions of the artistic merit, realism and believability of individual styles or pieces of work. This is that culture is a part of the ideological superstructure of capitalist society, and as such serves vital ideological functions for capitalism. This view is widely accepted among sociologists who study cultural and media issues — including both Marxists and many non-Marxists.

Of course, cultural phenomena can originate as a form of expression within the working class, more or less independent from the ruling class and in some sense progressive, even revolutionary. But the ruling class will not tolerate working class cultural phenomena on a large scale for long — it will either take over and incorporate them, or (less frequently) suppress them. Take the example of rap — initially a form of cultural rebellion by oppressed blacks in America's ghettos, now big business for record companies. Or the Japanese adult-cartoon genre, manga — initially a rare source of cultural rebellion within an otherwise largely straitjacketed society, now hijacked and used to spread reactionary, militarist messages. Or the phenomenon of the "rave" — either controlled within nightclubs owned by bourgeois business people, or suppressed under licensing laws or (more recently) by the Criminal Justice Act.

More frequently, however, cultural phenomena are a creation of the ruling class and their media. For instance, contemporary films are dependent on business support to cover the massive budgets now needed to acquire box-office prominence. So why does the ruling class create or take over cultural phenomena at all? Partly, to prevent workers from creating their own cultural phenomena. Partly, to provide a means of escapism for workers, to alleviate the alienation caused by capitalism and dissipate revolutionary urges. Partly, to ensure proletarians have something to do with their time other than political activity.

Primarily, however, cultural phenomena are used by the ruling class because they can and do serve ideological functions. For instance, war films and novels often glorify militarism. Police dramas encourage a "law-and-order" perspective, where the police are ultimately the good guys against the evil and incessant tide of crime and the vicious criminal villains, and where the occasional "bad egg" cop can be put

down to individual characteristics and not the nature and structure of the police force. Even fantasy, adventure, horror and sci-fi often revolve around pro-capitalist ideological concepts such as the individual (usually male, white) hero, the evil villain, and militarism. During BBC2's recent *Star Trek* season, a number of commentators pointed out the extent to which this programme could be identified as the "Cold War" transposed into space. This is demonstrated by facets of the series ranging from the naval-style discipline of the Federation to the heroic "rugged individualism" of the characters, and the way in which the villains so often conform to stereotypical images of Russian Stalinists.

This viewpoint is not mere postulation. It is backed by a good deal of systematic research. Take for instance Jerry Palmer's work on thrillers. Palmer studied a range of thrillers and concluded that they conformed to a standard format which revolved around the lone hero surviving and succeeding in an unpredictable, individualistic, Hobbesian world. He likened this to the role of the "risk-taking" individual in the ideology of capitalism. Take also the work of feminist authors such as Fowler and Ferguson, on women's magazines. These were found to support consistently pro-capitalist and patriarchal ideology, and perhaps most significantly, their content and popularity varied with the needs of capitalism. Women's magazines initially grew out of the desperation of the Depression, providing an escape and an ideological alternative to working-class women in the form of the ideology of romance. Since the 1960s, with the increasing need for women in the workforce, the magazines have increasingly adapted, being more sympathetic towards female labour than their earlier counterparts.

So how do the listed topics fit into this critique? *The X-Files*, irrespective of whether it is "good" or "bad" dramatically and "accurate" or "inaccurate" in its portrayals, is successful because it serves a function for the capitalists — and does so in a way acceptable to workers. It reinforces the view of the "uncertain world." It promotes fear of the power of "big government", which in America can be used to justify welfare cuts and lax laws in areas such as firearms and environmental protection. At the same time, it contains a semi-revolutionary cynicism about politicians, the military, the police and business. This is, however, portrayed in such a way as to deny real outlets and present flawed ones. We should seek to change society by exposing the truth, implies the series — not through working-class struggle.

Football almost certainly began as a proletarian social phenomenon, but has been steadily taken over by the bourgeoisie. This can be

shown not only in rising ticket prices, the erosion of the terrace culture, and the rivalry encouraged between different nations and regions. It can also be shown by the rise of cynical professionalism within the game, the massive wages offered to players (which gives the message that individual proletarians can rise to positions of wealth and therefore promotes individual, rather than collective, action against poverty), the rigid and often unfair disciplinary system, the intolerance of free speech by managers and referees, the pay-to-view systems now being used by the satellite companies, and so on. To describe the take-over of football as only an attack on the terrace culture, or as only a means of extracting cash from fans, is to miss the point that football has survived partly because of the ideological functions it performs.

Finally, if culture is primarily an ideological construct, can it be used for progressive ends? What about supposedly left-wing films, books, and so on? The answer is that, very often, these offer a fairly accurate view of society (e.g. the portrayal of the plight of French working-class youths in *La Haine*) but fail to suggest an effective means of changing it — or, alternatively, portray rebellion and revolution, but in an historical or fantastic setting.

Fantastic books, programmes and so on usually offer a vision of change through magical, supernatural or super-technological sources, or individual heroism, so that even when rebellions occur, they cannot be copied by ordinary people. "Realistic" works often offer no solution at all, presenting merely a depressing picture of human suffering, or stressing escape through individual achievement.

Material of a genuinely revolutionary nature, or dangerous to ruling class power, is suppressed — either directly (for instance, through censorship and bans) or through a blank-out by publishers or distributors (as *Workers' Liberty* should be well aware). If it surfaces at all, it is usually only because it has been salvaged by some section of the left, to be used for specifically radical purposes. Of course, there are fairly progressive authors, film makers and so on, but the ruling class will retain hegemony over culture for as long as it retains dominance in society. We learn from Marx that culture cannot ultimately change society. Changing the material base of society is a prerequisite to changing its ideological superstructure. Only through revolutionary social change can the problems in contemporary culture — profit motivation, ideological bias, racism, sexism and so on — be genuinely resolved.

Andy Robinson

# Moralism or Morale?

**T**HE Tories have used recent disputes regarding discipline in schools, and pupil exclusions to yet again attack teachers and schools but also to attack society in general and blame a lack of morality and the breakdown of the family unit. So what are the answers to this?

They call for a moral code to be drawn up with more emphasis on family values and, just to be clear about what they are saying here, they were none too happy that the draft moral code did not clearly state heterosexual married couples only, more power for schools to discipline students and finally the return of corporal punishment.

The debate over behaviour in schools and pupil exclusions will continue but alongside this we need to be looking for solutions to the current problems in our education system. Schools have faced more and more cuts over the past few years and have been bombarded with countless pieces of mindless Tory legislation.

There is not a problem with morality in our society but a problem with morale. The constant attacks from this government have left many in society demoralised and unable to see a clear future.

The call for the return of corporal punishment is something which we should clearly fight against. It is totally unacceptable and open to abuse. Violence does not solve the problems. In fact violence breeds violence. In my experience the most violent students in schools come from extremely violent and abusive backgrounds.

The situation cannot be resolved with bland statements and reactionary accusations. We need to look at the lack of resources and funding in our schools but also look at examples of good practice and training for demoralised staff in schools. We need to build up links between home and school but not in a threatening way. We should also look at the legislation which has been imposed on schools and the total inappropriateness of the curriculum for many students. It is these sorts of issues that we should be addressing and fighting for before the Tories totally destroy the comprehensive system.

Louise Neil

● We have had to hold over to the next issue long Forum pieces from Jim Higgins, Barry Finger and Harry Holland. But keep it coming!

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