

INDOCHINA

("Alan" = Martin Thomas. "O'Keefe" = Sean Maganra. "Macaulay" = John Blouman.
"Ransey" = Stephen Corbittley. "Foster" = Bruce Robinson. "Landis" = Rachel Levor.
"Keith" = Andrew Hornung).

ALAN: There are two questions - (a) of the invasions and (b) of the social nature of Cambodia.

We condemned the Chinese invasion of Vietnam because it was an example of great power chauvinism, aimed at keeping Vietnam weak and prevent it developing with an independent policy which would upset Chinese foreign policy. On the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the nuances in our position are important. We neither condemned it nor endorsed it a priori, and said an evaluation depended on the attitude of the Cambodian people. We said that there was no reason for confidence in the motives of the Vietnamese bureaucracy. This was premised on the invasion being neither counter revolutionary (unlike the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia) nor in the spirit of great power chauvinism. The immediate circumstances of the invasion were the border war, in which Cambodia probably took the initiative and acted as the stalking horse of China. The evidence since is that the Vietnamese invasion was supported by the Cambodian people.

Within the USFI, the SWP's position is based on the role of US imperialism. It starts from it giving a green light to the Chinese invasion and concludes that China and Cambodia are in 'proxy wars' against Vietnam. They see Cambodia as capitalist, but their basic attitude to the invasions is not determined by that. Their position is backed up by rhetoric about imperialism being the only cause of war and thin arguments about the links of Cambodia and China to imperialism (they don't try to show the contact by the US with the Cambodian government, or why the US would choose it as an instrument. It is difficult to see where their position comes from. It leans on the need to place the blame on US imperialism.

For the majority, Mandel is convincing against the SWP's position, but their own position is one of outraged illusions, in which war between workers' states is shocking. But there is no problem - if deformed workers' states (DWS) can carry out internal repression, why not external war. The only explanation of their position is the USFI's serious illusions in the regimes. This produces contradictions. Mandel refers to the Cambodian leadership as both "communists" and "terrorists"; although there is still no call for a political revolution, Vietnam is referred to as a hardened bureaucracy as in the USSR - a reversal of their previous position.

On the social nature of Cambodia, the SWP argues that this and the issue of the invasions is separable. This is true. Even if Cambodia was a DWS, particularly grotesque deformations could justify an invasion. If Cambodia was capitalist, it wouldn't necessarily justify it. For the SWP, a workers' state is characterised by (a) expropriation and (b) smashing the state, achieved through the mobilisation of the working class. They have invented imaginary mobilisations elsewhere, eg in 1978 in Vietnam, when

traders were expropriated. There was no such mobilisation then and no evidence is given. Also, China in the early 50s.

There is a twist to their previous position, where they argued that Stalinist parties take power/smash the bourgeoisie under exceptional circumstances, but that what is important is mass pressure - against the subjective drive of Stalinists to maintain capitalism. That pressure was seen in a very diffuse and intangible way, extending over a period, and not (as now) tied down to specific mobilisations and dates.

They see the setting up of a DWS involving a transition period of workers' and peasants' government, which coexists with bourgeois structures. The workers' state is only set up when such structures are removed under mass pressure. For Cambodia, they just don't invent mass workers' mobilisations, and also say that nationalisation is not incompatible with capitalism. Their position follows from their arbitrary definition of not inventing mobilisations. They say that because Cambodia is not a workers' state, it must be capitalist, independent of whether the laws of capitalism operate.

Mandel's position rests on the argument of the 'excluded middle' - as capitalist property, state, etc. overthrown, no matter what else happens it is not capitalist and therefore it must be a workers' state. He says that mobilisations are not essential - eg. they didn't occur in Eastern Europe.

My own position is as follows. By 1975 Cambodian society was pulverised to an extent hardly paralleled. Industry had ceased to operate, as had agriculture. The population was fed by the US. The majority of the population were refugees. 90% were unemployed in the area controlled by Lon Nol government.

It was a backward society. There was little contact with the outside world until the late 19th century. The old Asiatic forms existed until the French invasion, eg. there was no private property on the land. In practice there was little sale of land until the late French period. The majority of the population lived on a subsistence basis. There was very limited urban development. Industry was based on external capital.

It is the view of the Trotskyist movement that such pulverisation can lay the basis for the creation of DWS, in that with the old bourgeois order destroyed, the working class pulverised, it is easy for the bureaucracy to establish itself. But Trotskyists have never argued that a DWS is an automatic process in this situation. We have opposed the Grantite position that it is automatic given mass pressure. There is a subjective factor involved, eg. in Eastern Europe it needed the Russian bureaucracy, under the pressure of the Cold War, to destroy the old bourgeois order and consciously organise a new form of economy. Yet the final test is still the objective one of what basic structure results. A society is a DWS because of the identity of its structure with the USSR, and because the USSR has to be considered a degenerated workers' state. If that objective social structure was established in Cambodia either it is a DWS or we have to reexamine the whole theory.

In Mandel's view, the establishment of a DWS can happen in any way - there are no rules about what subjective factors are involved. (Little weight should be given to the isolated statement of the KCP leaders as "communists of a Stalinist persuasion").

It is far from proven that a relatively stable social and economic structure existed in Cambodia. Much of the economic structure could only be temporary given the abolition of money, all private property and the clearing out of the towns. This couldn't possibly persist. Given the pulverisation, we cannot take a snapshot of the economic structure and make a definition.

Before 1975, Cambodia bore little relation to what Marx defined in Capital, but it was defined as capitalist because of its role in the world system and the existence of a capitalist class. In the 2½ years of the revolutionary Cambodian regime, it would not only be difficult but also premature to reach definite conclusions about the structure.

On the political level, after 1975, there was a radical smashing of the old bourgeois state machine and a smashing of the complete social structure, especially the working class. The (very small) bureaucracy of the KCP was able to dominate society to an exceptional extent. On the subjective level, the KCP was a petit-bourgeois, Stalinist party, but with peculiar features. In the form it took power, it only dated back to 1960. Its leaders entered politics via the PCF in the 1950s, which meant they had a tenuous relation to socialist thought. From the Geneva Conference of 1954, there was bitter resentment against the USSR, Chinese and Vietnamese. They followed a line of self-reliance and lack of contact with other DWSs and Stalinists in general. They don't see Russia or China as a 'model'. They cut off communications with China in 1975 and expelled Russian diplomats. Their policy is one of extreme autarky.

What are they out to do? There is evidence in the political histories of the leaders and their writings, eg. thesis of Khieu Sampon, an ideologist of a return to the Angkor era. The general ideas are to free Cambodia from French and US imperialism, kick foreigners out and return to the glories of ancient Cambodia. Their policies bore a close relation to these. They could do it in the short-term, as society was pulverised. In the longer term the project was obviously impossible - an ancient society based on the absence of modern technology, the world economy and the market. Any economic development would have involved the development of industry, working class, etc., and a breakdown of the Asiatic mode.

We can't give a cut and dried characterisation. On the basis of the pulverisation a petit-bourgeois grouping took power with a programme of returning to the ancient Asiatic mode, and remodelled Cambodia via terror. But not even this could bring the project to fruition. The only possible developments were either for the regime to collapse or to revert to another form of economy (most probably state capitalism, via growth of commodity relations: industry at first nationalised, but orientation to accumulation of capital ending with segments of the bureaucracy taking bits of industry).

O'KEEFE: Why should they be more vulnerable than other bureaucracies?

ALAN: There would be no structure they would be locked into. Only subjective motives would stop them.

MACAULAY: How does collectivisation of agriculture and abolition of private property relate to the programme of a return to the Asiatic mode? Was the population pulverised in areas of Khmer Rouge domination?

- ALAN: The Khmer Rouge controlled large areas, but with only a small population based on subsistence agriculture.
- O'KEEFE: Asiatic society characterised by collective ownership??
- ALAN: There was no private property in Cambodia until the late 19th century. In theory, it was owned by the King.
- O'KEEFE: But it was privately tilled. This is not what they tried to restore.
- ALAN: I am not saying that they introduced an approximation to Asiatic society, but that the society was in transition, probably developing to state capitalism if there was no external intervention.
- O'KEEFE: In relation to dykes, etc, aren't you confusing technology and relations to the environment with social relations? Any regime would have to maintain dykes, etc.
- FOSTER: Alan's position depends on Cambodia's isolation from the world economy. But Mandel states that, from 1976, there was trade and contacts.
- ALAN: On a very small scale.
- O'KEEFE: Then you are talking about something unique in modern history - that they were trying to cut out modern technology.
- LEJEUNE: Is there not a parallel with the establishment of Soviet areas in Kiangsi in the 30s, based on a primitive peasant economy. They were coming near to stagnation, and would have if Japan hadn't invaded.
- ALAN: The Maoist held areas were organised on self-sufficient subsistence villages with few relations with the outside. They were therefore not a state. You can't gradually extend them to the level of the whole state because of the existence of towns, etc. Also, the Maoist areas were based on land reform, and this was not an issue in Cambodia as there were no landlords/rich peasants.
- O'KEEFE: What Trotsky wrote about the peasant army, etc, in 1932 was right, but he didn't expect it to lead to a DWS and what happened after 1949.
- LEJEUNE: There are parallels to the development of the Chinese Communist Party.
- O'KEEFE: Alan is taking Cambodia as unique - it is not.
- ALAN: There is no parallel with what happened in China after 1949.

EEFE:

The 'Great Leap Forward' in China was also an attempt at primitive communism, although it was done much more slowly.

In the previous discussion in 1978 I argued that the Asiatic Despotism model was wrong because it was based on the stagnation of productive technique and therefore was incompatible with, and would have to exclude, modern technology. The model couldn't have been introduced without either disrupting society or completely failing. I also argued that Cambodia was dominated by an extreme Jacobin political formation. This did not exclude development to a DWS. In retrospect, we would have had to say that it was a DWS.

On the war question, I agree with the positions we've taken. On the other positions - the SWP's is based on a horror of the terroristic character of the Cambodian regime and an idealisation of Vietnam (and Cuba). This produces massive exaggerations, the idea of Cambodia being the 'cat's paw of the US', and imaginary workers' mobilisations. On Mandel's horror of war between two DWSs - this is amazing given the nationalism that exists (of Czechoslovakia in 1956). Given the historical experience of the degenerated and DWS, we need to qualify the conception of Russia not being imperialist - not economically but historically some aspects continue of imperialism of a pre-capitalist type. However, the USFI people have developed enormous illusions.

On the invasions, the SWP's position of Cambodia and Vietnam having different class characters effects the assessment of the war because it takes on a different aspect if Cambodia is not a workers' state. Mandel's position is one of pacifistic and moralistic condemnation. We can't exclude Cambodia from the DWS schema - it has a similar class character. But we still did not condemn the Vietnamese invasion - in fact, it is possible to welcome it if it has popular support because of the terroristic regime. Does this position set a precedent for invasions like Hungary? No, because it is a different political situation.

In relation to the class character, Trotsky's analysis of the USSR rested on the idea that the gains of the revolution remained despite the vicious and peculiar social formation. In fact, the latter actually extended the gains. Trotsky did not consider it stable, but was wrong. With the stability, there was a problem of definition. The discussions on DWS after the war were right in that they focussed not just on the regime but on what was achieved. With China, Mandel, Pablo, etc, said that everything was solved when the Maoists came to power in 1949; the SWP said that it was not a DWS until 1954/55, when they began to transform industry - this was the correct method using Trotsky's position of what achieved.

Approaching it from the point of view of what achieved, how then is it possible to distinguish state capitalism from a DWS - eg Chiang had nationalised industry and the Maoists, resting on the 'Bloc of 4 classes', said they would denationalise. The what achieved approach gets away from the problem of ascribing revolutionary aspirations to the Stalinists, or of debating how much they are revolutionary - but the central problem is defining the what. Mandel seems to exclude State Capitalism theoretically, as does Grant.

In this context, the historical experience of Egypt, Burma, etc, is important. Grant says that classless Bonapartism

can evolve in any direction - ie to a workers' state. Historically this is nonsense. Yet the reality of all workers' states where the Red Army was not involved was, with the exception of Cuba, of a Bonapartist formation leading to a society identical to the USSR. The key difference between these and Egypt was the destruction of the old class state, and not the subjective ideas involved. With the partial exception of Cuba, these ideas were reactionary.

A Bonapartist formation that smashes the state can evolve under pressure to the same structure as the USSR's. These pressures are backwardness, where the state is forced to play a role, and the alternative model is the USSR. (To many of the people involved in these formations, the bureaucratic deformations in Russia are also an attraction.) The crucial difference with State Capitalism is the relation of the Bonapartists to the old state, ruling class and ruling structures. Where they don't break seriously you get the state linked to the private capitalists. Where there is a fundamental break you don't get those ties and a roll-back is excluded, unlike in eg Egypt.

China provided a hybrid situation. There was a complete break on the level of the state, yet there was a serious concern by the Maoists for the old capitalists (they were only bought out at the end of the 50s, and then received 7% interest until the end of the 60s, and then were cut off).

For Cambodia, you can't exclude the characterisation as a DWS. There was a complete destruction of the old state formation. Much of this had arisen out of the war (though also cf. Czechoslovakia), but the Khmer Rouge also operated in a much more radical version of the Chinese model. There was a transformation of the economy, not towards an Asiatic model but towards extreme collectivisation - an extreme form of primitive, peasant communism. The latter is not historically unique - eg examples of extreme egalitarianism and asceticism in some monastic movements. In Cambodia the attempt to create an egalitarian, communist society occurred amidst terrible backwardness and poverty, and it was telescoped into a very short period. There are strong parallels with what happened in China in the late 50s: an extreme, voluntarist attempt to create primitive communism at a forced march pace by kicking over modern technology, and involving the forced collectivisation of the farms and barrack regimentation of the peasants. It involved coercion, although it was without the terror that was in Cambodia.

ALAN: I'm saying that it is characterised by the ideas of the Khmer Rouge.

O'KEEFE: Alan says that, if Cambodia is a DWS, then you would have to say that almost any political development could lead to a DWS. This is a central question, in which the experience of the Cuban revolution has played an important part. All previous revolutions had been led by Stalinists - does that mean they are the only revolutionaries? Pablo hints at this. The SWP and Wohlforth, in looking for other forces, try to hedge around it to deny any revolutionary role to the Stalinists - which is impossible if you look at the facts. Alan says that the problem is of 'any force being revolutionary'. But in Cuba it was a group of petit-bourgeois democrats. Under the dynamic of the objective pressures from imperialism, they fought sincerely for their ideas even when the agents of US imperialism blocked their programme of limited action. They broke with the Liberals in 1957, took state power and then evolved. They smashed the state. The Healyites argued that petit-bourgeois democrats

couldn't do it.

This answers Alan's problem. The material forces (eg the pressures of backwardness, imperialism, the local ruling class, and the model of Russia) are the driving forces. Whether the developments occur is not unrelated to eg the ideological reservoir of the Stalinists in China - though this is not essential, eg Cuba. In Cambodia the KCP had sufficient connections to the Stalinist movement to make developments no mystery. Given the tremendous pressure from imperialism, there was nothing qualitatively different from Cuba.

Alan is making the central criterion whether the regime is consolidated/stable or not. This is not the point - we need to look at what happened.

There were elements of instability in Cambodia - eg the abolition of money. There inevitable would have been shifts. Yet if we say that is to State Capitalism, it begs a number of questions. The KCP bureaucracy was no less stable than others. Why would the leadership not, like the other Stalinists, guard the collectivised economy? The objective economic motivation for the state to intervene was the inadequacy of private production. If there was a move back to private production, the length of time necessary for reconstruction would lead, under pressure, to the consolidation of the bureaucracy in a DWS.

FOSTER: How would you characterise the Bonapartism in the analysis of China?

O'KEEFE: It was a Bonapartism between the classes in Chinese society, based on an army outside the old society. They smashed the old army and state apparatus. It has many of the attributes of typical Bonapartism - ie arising above society by conquering it from an outside base. Is this formation then a ruling class? No, because until the transformation of the economy the bourgeoisie ruled. The other alternative is to say that it was a DWS when the Stalinists took power. During the period the capitalist state was dominated by a petit-bourgeois army and party. The army was comparable with Cromwell's army. They conquered the old state and installed their own personnel - before destroying, under various pressures, capitalist relations.

FOSTER: How does this relate to the SWP's idea of a 'Workers' and Peasants' Government'?

O'KEEFE: That idea is just part of decadent theorising.

LEJEUNE: How then to characterise South Vietnam in the period up to 78?

O'KEEFE: If North Vietnam was a workers' state, then South Vietnam was assimilated in the same way as the Baltic states.

LEJEUNE: On the question of the SWP and mass pressure. In China and South Vietnam, the Stalinist regimes couldn't just dismantle the local bourgeoisie without orchestrating some form of mass campaign. Mass pressure wasn't, therefore, completely absent.

In Cambodia, much of what was carried out was not completely necessary from the pressures.

O'KEEFE: Maoists ideas also disrupted reality. They did have their own ideas about primitive communism, etc.

KEITH: In Cuba, for example, Guevara etc admitted that they had had wrong ideas, and had made errors, in the economic field.

LEJEUNE: What is common to the State Capitalist and Asiatic Mode of Production positions is that Cambodia is not the same as the USSR, China, etc.

O'KEEFE: There are differences but they are similar.

KEITH: I agree with O'Keefe's basic position, and Mandel's view of Cambodia as an extreme form of DWS.

On the question of the impossibility of State Capitalism, I don't understand O'Keefe's justification. Is it logically impossible? Take the example of Syria and a DWS. Much property was nationalised and a large section of the bourgeoisie expropriated - but the bourgeoisie remains. A section of the old state was smashed, but the state survived. We have to take into account how the state came about and the present arrangements. On the possibility of Cambodia leading to or being State Capitalist, I'm not sure that it's excluded except possibly by the level of terror involved.

If the drive is to primitive communism, what interests are directing the Pol Pot group towards it? One possibility is to say that they are trying to establish a DWS - ie create a massively bureaucratised state by first using those opposed to Lon Nol, and then smashing them as a potential opposition. They are therefore not necessarily trying to create primitive communism. If we don't take the Vern-Ryan position, we have to take the state and the economy together and look at the social dynamic - not just take a snap-shot.

On Oriental Despotism, I can't understand what Marx considers the class structure to be, and what is the nature of the ruling class.

FOSTER: How can one have a petit-bourgeois social grouping which rests on no classes and is suspended in mid-air?

ALAN: The big problem with O'Keefe's analysis is that it fundamentally rests on the argument of the 'excluded middle'. A DWS cannot just be defined as O'Keefe did - nationalisation of the means of production achieved through the smashing of the old state. If it is left at that, you have an inversion of the LO position - nationalisation and working class revolution.

You can't draw a distinction on the basis of greater or lesser violence, but only on the basis of objectively different results. The key result is the destruction of the power of the capitalist class, and thus of the accumulation of capital. The violence of the destruction of the old forms is only relevant in its relationship to that result. In fact, the transformation

in Eastern Europe was not violent because the bourgeoisie was pulverised.

You can't say that subjective ideas are irrelevant - there is a stage where society is consciously transformed and commodity relations consciously suppressed (where commodity relations continue to exist a capitalist class can grow up spontaneously). There is a conscious will which, and I agree with O'Keefe, developed under pressure. But in Cuba, it is not just the case that petit-bourgeois democrats developed under pressure. Before 1959 many in the 26th July movement regarded themselves as socialists. Some had links with Trotskyists. The later shift was partly because the socialist ideas came to the fore.

In Cambodia, the objective achievement was the destruction of the old capitalist class (and all the other old social classes) It cannot be the criterion any more than just nationalisation can be. It is insufficient unless the situation where capitalism could spontaneously regenerate is also destroyed. You do have to show that the situation is stabilised, or else it is the 'excluded middle' argument. On the subjective side - this has enormous importance in Cambodia because of the pulverised nature of the society. But I don't see the pressures existing as they did in other DWSs. The possibility of capitalist development was not excluded, and this would need state intervention, which existed under Sihanouk (together with the monopoly of foreign trade). The pressure from the Stalinist states did not exist - they had bad relations with the USSR and only loose connections with China. The interaction with the pressures was very different from the situation in China in the late 50s. There, the pressures developed within a given social structure - this is not really the case in Cambodia. They might have felt militarily threatened, but their policy did not point in that direction or to industrial development. Primitive communism often exists within the Asiatic mode - eg village communes. In their model of the ancient glories of Cambodia, they didn't understand the contradiction with modern technology. They saw village communes, with no private property on the land, and a strong central state organising irrigation, with industry as an appendix.

KEITH: In the Asiatic Mode of Production there is no private property in the land but there are traditional rights; there is also collectivised (if not slave) labour similar to corvee labour. That didn't exist in Cambodia unless you see it as a slave society.

O'KEEFE: Or 'bureaucratic collectivism'.

ALAN: In Cambodia there was no private property in the land until the late 19th century.

In relation to China, if you say it was a capitalist state until 55 or a workers' state in 49, you end up with absurd results. In fact, there was a process of transition. The power of the old state was smashed, although it was not completely dismantled. A petit-bourgeois formation, with links with the USSR and in power based on a massive peasant mobilisation, transformed the social relations under pressure from imperialism until a workers' state was consolidated in the mid-50s. This is against a more cut and dried approach. Also, it's vulgar Marxism to look for the particular class base of the petit-bourgeois formation outside the premise of such a base - stabilised social formations, with a bourgeoisie and working class. The latter did not exist in Cambodia.

O'KEEFE: Then Pol Pot etc were a ruling class.

ALAN: They were one in the process of formation. After 75 there was a situation of flux, in which new social forces began to form, including a ruling group based on the Khmer Rouge. To the extent that it was stabilised it tended to become a ruling class. To demand a bourgeois class etc is vulgar Marxism.

To sum up my main points. To define Cambodia as a DWS would need a result similar to known DWSs, and therefore relatively stabilised, social achievements. As this cannot be done, the subjective desires of the ruling group become very important. They had control of the situation. But the external pressures and subjective links and demands towards a DWS were not there. The direction of their drive was not towards a DWS. That does not mean that their project was realisable.

O'KEEFE: It is not a question of the 'excluded middle'. I argued specifically that the what included the smashing of the state and a clear break with the old ruling class, and that this was a precondition for the possibility of autonomous development away from capitalist development. A DWS involves a fundamental break with the ruling class.

Alan is trying to avoid the choice - capitalism or a DWS. It leads to a fantastic suggestion based on certain possible ideas that the leaders had. An Asiatic Despotism that is static. It does not contain elements of primitive communism. In fact, the description that Alan gave is of an agrarian society, like China in the 60s. The whole drift is towards a 'bureaucratic collectivist' position (ie an unknown type of society).

Only through the smashing of the state and a clear break with the old ruling class is there likely to be stable nationalisation and the development of a dynamic of its own. If the state is not smashed, then there is no development of its own dynamic, eg Egypt. State capitalist societies do not correspond to the model of the USSR because of the different relation of the state to the ruling class. This is not the same as LO's position. If the structure of Egypt is the same as a DWS's then Grant's theory is correct. The degree of violence in Eastern Europe is not the point - they key thing is the destruction of the bourgeois monopoly of violence.

In relation to the Cuban leadership. Their personal qualities and the socialist ideas were important. But, whatever their ideas, they set out to achieve limited bourgeois goals and then, under pressure, they were pushed to the point where the socialism was activated. Previously it was passive.

No mechanism to choke off the spontaneous development of capitalism in Cambodia? Yet they had physically destroyed the bourgeoisie - and also sections of the working class. Not possible to judge how it would develop outside the subjective views of Pol Pot? Alan makes the same mistake here as he does in relation to Guevara - the question of pressure and what pressure and what happened when they developed in the objective situation. That situation made it impossible to retreat to private industry - only to state industry. The process of creating that industry would have involved the development of a bureaucracy as tied to the state economy as the Chinese bureaucracy. That whole situation was dependent on the destruction of the bourgeois state.

On China, Alan harks back to Peng/Wohlforth. It is an attempt to avoid the fact that the Maoists did lead a revolution by calling it structural assimilation as in Eastern Europe.

To describe Pol Pot etc as a "ruling class in formation", you have to argue that they were already one.