The poverty of anti-Stalinism

By Robert Fine

"I am not for setting up a dogmatic standard. On the contrary, we must attempt to help the dogmatists make their dogmas clear to themselves. Especially communism is a dogmatic abstraction." (Marx)

That Left and Right should find common ground on the issue of Stalinism has been a source of discomfort for a 'negative' socialism which defines its politics in opposition to the Right rather than according.

One of the driving forces behind the history of left polemics for Stalinism has been a misplaced determination to avoid common ground with the anti-communism of the bourgeois establishment, whatever the justice of the case. This attitude of mind has been a cause of great weakness for the Left.

The Right has its own good reason for being opposed to Stalinism, since Stalinist states and parties have a long and sometimes successful history of attacking the traditional capitalist classes and extorting their property. I am thinking of the destruction of the native bourgeoisie in the Soviet Union itself after 1929, in the Baltic republics and Finland in the early 1940s, in the Soviet-dominated east and central European states after the war and in a number of Third World countries in the 1960s and 1970s — in all of which cases some form of Stalinist model was adopted on the assumption of a dependent bourgeoisie.

To the extent, the hostility of the Right to Stalinism, whatever its additional ideological justifications, has been entirely rational. Since Marxism and Stalinism have in common a seemingly 'anti-capitalist' project, that is, a record of decisive inroads against capitalist private property, from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie this identity is far more important than any distinctions between them. Marxism and Stalinism appear either as equivalent phenomena or as long-recognized independent characteristics of the 'authoritarian' appropriation of capitalist private property.

From the standpoint of the working class, however, hostility to Stalinism derives not from its anti-capitalism but from its subversion of the independent working-class life. If for the bourgeoisie the distinction between Stalinism and Marxism appears peripheral, for the working class it is everything. For Stalinism represents not only anti-capitalism but also the deprofessionalisation of the working class and the suppression of independent working-class organisations; in short, the opposition of Stalinist states and parties to private property is accompanied by the crushing of political democracy and the freedoms of civil society. Marxism aspires not merely to anti-capitalism but to a definite form of anti-capitalism which empowers the working class and democratises both the state and society in its roots.

The distinguishing feature of Stalinism lies in the reactionary form it gives to the 'anti-capitalist' struggle: it represents the abrogation of the bourgeoisie (individuality, free will, civil liberties) in the name of the battle against egoism, and of the universality of bourgeois society (equal right, political democracy, universal suffrage) in the name of the class struggle. In effect, the contrast represents the extension of bourgeois particularity and universality beyond the limits imposed by bourgeois society; to use Marx's own phrase, communism is the 'positive supression' of bourgeois property, law and state and not their 'abstract negation'. In this regard, in spite of their common commitment to 'anti-capitalism', Marxism and Stalinism are mutually and inherently antagonistic.

When I write of what Marxism is, perhaps I should say what Marxism ought to be if, firstly, it followed the spirit of Marx's own critique and, secondly, it placed itself firmly in the camp of democracy. Unfortunately, this is not what 'actually existing' Marxism — not just official communism but also many strands of independent Marxism — has often stood for. Its critical emphasis has typically been placed on the insufficiency of Stalinist 'anti-capitalism' rather than on the surfeit of Stalinist anti-Marxism.

This attitude has been most visible in the intervention of Stalinism as an essentially 'rightist' political force, which is destined to compromise with capitalism and collaborate with the bourgeoisie, akin in most respects to the extreme right wing of the labour bureaucracy. This partial analysis finds its historical foundation in those periods in which Stalinist states and parties, inside and out of Russia, have been ready to co-operate with sections of the established bourgeoisie against the more militant sections of the working class: I am thinking especially of the classic periods of 1924-28, 1936-39, and 1941-47; we could then add the years of peaceful co-existence and market reforms after 1956, the advent of Euro-Communism and historic compromise in western Communist parties in the late 1960s, the development of workers' self-management and the present readiness of sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy to embrace the accumulation of private capital as a solution to their problems.
Marxism

The existence of these ‘rightist’ periods of Stalinism has led many Marxists to misconstrue Stalinism as essentially a force for class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, so that Stalinism came to signify at best an irredeemable anti-capitalism and at worst a positive opposition to anti-capitalist politics. The Stalinist doctrine of ‘socialism in one country’ was interpreted in this light as an abandonment of anti-capitalism outside of the Soviet Union itself. The same characterisation of Stalinism as a ‘rightist’ political force was shared by many Communists and Marxists who attached a positive meaning to

“Marxism cannot be defined negatively... the slogan of anti-capitalism and anti-Stalinism may be a useful starting point, but it is no substitute for the positive reformulation of Marxism”.

The identity of argument between supporters and critics of popular frontism consists in their common appraisal of the popular front as the kernel of the Communist-Stalinist tradition. We should add that the fog is further thickened when supporters of popular front have reserved the name of ‘Stalinism’ for the left turns of the Communist Party and elevated popular fronts as the jewel of the ‘authentic Communist tradition’.

The defect of this paradigm - I use the term to denote a mode of thought which contains different and opposing political judgements - is that it projects definite and limited periods of Communist politics, its so-called ‘right turns’, as the essence of Stalinism. Consequently the ‘left turns’ of Stalinism have either been ignored, repressed or assimilated in some other way to this model, for example, by interpreting them as the result of pressures from below on a reluctant Stalinist bureaucracy or seeing them as a temporary zig-zag soon to be rectified. It is not surprising that the Right has perceived the ‘anti-capitalist’ aspect of Stalinism with much greater clarity than the left, since the traditional national bourgeoisies have been its immediate victims. In seeking out the ‘quintsessence’ of Stalinism, the left definition of its leaning on and towards capitalism is but the obverse of the traditional bourgeois definition of its unrelenting anti-capitalism. Neither addresses the phenomenon as a whole.

For socialists caught up in this way of seeing Stalinism, periodic disorientation has followed each Stalinist turn to the left. On each occasion that Stalinist states and parties have both spoken the language of anti-capitalism and translated their word into deed, these socialists have been trapped by their own imagery: they have either denied reality, asserting that the Stalinists have not in fact moved against the bourgeoisie, or have treated the left turn as an inessential passing phase. When the reality of left Stalinism breaks through the constraints of this theoretical paradigm and forces itself on consciousness, socialists have been drawn to the entirely erroneous conclusion that the Stalinists have adopted the programme and policies of revolutionary socialism; interpreted on the left as a belated seeing of the revolutionary light and on the right as an ultra-left deviation.

Consequently, Marxists - the revolutionary wing of socialism - have turned themselves either into the extreme left wing of Stalinism, pushing for a quicker and yet more radical turn to the left, or into the democratic wing of Stalinism, pushing for a more moderate version of the same. The identification of Stalinism with class collaboration has led to both an inconsistent anti-Stalinism, over-critical of its right turns and under-critical of its left turns, and to an identification of 'real' socialism with left Stalinism. By defining Stalinism as insufficiently anti-capitalist, the left presents itself as really anti-capitalist, as what we might call anti-anti-capitalism.

Such has been the source of the Stalinisation of Marxism far beyond the confines of Stalinism itself and is the central problem of defining a Marxist response to the contemporary crisis of Stalinism. Marxism cannot be defined negatively; it is neither simply the negation of bourgeois forms of social life nor is it simply the negation of Stalinism. The slogan of 'anti-capitalism, anti-Stalinism' may be a useful starting point for socialists, but is no substitute for the positive re-formulation of Marxism.

One of the stock Marxist answers to the identification of Stalinism and socialism is to say that whatever Stalinism is, it is not socialism. Stalinism is counterposed either to the idea of socialism, the definition of which is given prior to the critique of Stalinism, or to the ideal realisation of socialism, which also appeared in the Russian revolution. This line of argument inverts the procedure of investigation which is required: it sets socialism up as a dogmatic standard against which to measure Stalinism, whereas the proper method must be a criticism of Stalinism that is not afraid of its findings, even when these findings undermine our idea of socialism or our belief that we have beheld its ideal realisation. It is through the critique of Stalinism that we reconstitute the ideal of socialism; it is not by positing socialism as a dogmatic abstraction that we complete our critique of Stalinism.

3. To adapt a passage from Salim Daboo’s "State of the Worker".