

## Marxist Analyses of Stalinism

DANIEL GAIDO

Marcel van der Linden's recent book, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*, deals mostly with what is usually referred to as Stalinism, *i.e.*, the regime that developed in Russia in the aftermath of the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. The word "Stalinism" does not appear in the title, however, because the first chapter analyzes the early criticisms of the Soviet experiment, while it was still led by Lenin and Trotsky, such as Rosa Luxemburg's essay "The Russian Revolution," Karl Kautsky's polemics with the Bolshevik leaders, and the council Communist critiques of Leninism by Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, Otto Rühle and, later, Karl Korsch.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of the work, however, deals with the nature of the Soviet Union after the consolidation of Stalin's regime, and it is this aspect of van der Linden's book that I feel has not been adequately addressed by David Laibman in his review in this journal. But first, some words about the book itself.

### *Marcel van der Linden's Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*

The first positive thing that must be said about van der Linden's book is that the writers surveyed include both political activists and academics, with an emphasis on the former. In a review published in EH.NET, van der Linden was blamed for not having included economists and historians such as Alec Nove and Donald Filtzer, but though I have my own wish list of scholarly works I would like to have seen reviewed (*e.g.*, Lewin, 2005), I think that for a subject as politically charged as the nature and ultimate fate of the Soviet Union — and by extension of the Communist Parties — it was a wise choice to give priority to ideologists of left-wing political currents that attempted to provide an alternative to Stalinism. If anything, it would have been good to see included even more works by political leaders ignored by academia, such as Ted Grant's *Russia, from Revolution to Counter-Revolution*, which was favorably reviewed by the late Trotskyist historian Al Richardson

1 Readers wishing to acquaint themselves with van der Linden's capacity to provide a brief and fair overview of a vast mass of information can consult his article on Council Communism (van der Linden, 2004).

in the journal *Revolutionary History* (Grant, 1997, Richardson, 1998). Perhaps more significant is the exclusion of the Menshevik émigrés in the West, who were influential in Marxist circles. For instance, it appears that theories of state capitalism in British Trotskyism first originated in Menshevik circles and were then transmitted, via the Socialist Party of Great Britain, to Jock Haston and ultimately to Tony Cliff (Bornstein and Richardson, 1986, 182–5).

Inclusiveness, however, comes at a price. One piece of information that van der Linden does not provide, but this reviewer would very much have liked to have, is how many of the authors surveyed actually knew Russian and went over the original sources. One of the main rules of Umberto Eco's manual on how to write a degree thesis reads: "I must choose a thesis that does not involve knowledge of languages I do not know or I am unwilling to learn" (Eco, 2001, 33). In that sense, many of the interpretations of the Soviet Union discussed by van der Linden cannot quite measure up to, for instance, Hillel Ticktin's work, based on an actual experience of the Soviet system and the analysis of Russian sources.

Van der Linden argues that during the years 1917–29 "the Marxist debate [on the Soviet Union] remained locked in the unilinear schema" (*i.e.*, an inexorable historical sequence of modes of production leading from slavery through feudalism to capitalism and ultimately to socialism), and that "oppositionist critiques of developments in the Soviet Union focused mainly on whether the October Revolution had been either bourgeois or socialist, or whether a potentially proletarian revolution was degenerating into a bourgeois one, due to various possible factors (such as the absence of a West-European revolution, and political mistakes by the Bolshevik leaders)" (11–12). He includes both Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky among the representatives of "the traditional Marxist unilinearism" (12–36). My joint work with Richard B. Day on the history of the Russian Revolution — which admittedly focuses on an earlier period — does not support the contention that those two writers applied a unilinear schema to the analysis of social change (Day and Gaido, 2009). Far from it, they explained the Russian revolution in terms of the country's *combined* historical development, contemplating the possibility of backward countries skipping developmental stages under the influence of advanced ones, as well as the risk of historical retrogression.<sup>2</sup>

But this is a marginal issue relating to the prehistory of the debates on the Soviet Union. Van der Linden identifies as the most significant years

2 Van der Linden claims that "Kautsky interpreted this sequence [of modes of production] only within a national framework (in each individual country, each stage had to 'ripen,' before it could be replaced by the next stage)" (43). But, for instance, Kautsky wrote in 1908: "backward nations have since time immemorial learned from the more advanced, and they have often therefore been capable of leaping with one bound over several stages of development which had been climbed wearily by their predecessors" (Kautsky, 1907, 58).

covered in his study “1938 (the debate over Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*), 1941 (the Shachtman–Burnham–Trotsky debate), 1947–8 (the debate around the European editions of Burnham’s *Managerial Revolution*), 1951–3 (the Yugoslav controversy), 1958 (the debate over Djilas’s *The New Class*), 1974–80 (when many writings on the topic were constantly being published), and 1990 (the collapse)” (306).

The debates on the nature of Stalinism were influenced by three main factors:

the perception of the West, the perception of the Soviet Union and the interpretation of the Marxist analysis of society. . . . each of these three influences went through several phases. Both Western capitalism and the Soviet Union were, for some time, experienced as unstable, then as stable and dynamic, and then again as increasingly unstable — until the breakdown of the USSR. (307.)

Such perceptions, however, were not synchronic. “In the Marxist camp, the period from the October Revolution until about 1952 was dominated by thinking in terms of the ‘death agony’ and ‘collapse’ of capitalism” (6–7).<sup>3</sup> This contrast between a decaying capitalist and a “developing Communist” society — an impression created by the devastating impact of the Great Depression — led some former critics of the Soviet Union like Otto Bauer to re-adjust their views of the USSR in an apologetic direction during the 1930s (47). Post–World War II economic development in the advanced capitalist world, by contrast, led to a temporary abandonment of the notion of capitalist decay in the 1950s and 1960s. Those themes were resurrected in the 1970s under the impact of a new world economic crisis, but by then the Soviet economy was exhibiting clear signs of stagnation and actually falling behind that of the developed capitalist countries.

Van der Linden identifies three “classical” Western-Marxist theories about the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union: Trotsky’s theory of the USSR as a degenerated workers’ state (most fully developed in his 1936 book *The Revolution Betrayed*), the theory of bureaucratic collectivism put forward by people such as Bruno Rizzi, James Burnham and Max Schachtman, and the theory of state capitalism, best known in Great Britain after the work of Tony Cliff, the historic leader of the International Socialists, and in the United States after C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya. To those three main interpretative currents Van der Linden adds a fourth, more heterogeneous group of writers who developed theories of a “new mode of production,”

3 Typical of the interwar period was Trotsky’s analysis, particularly his 1938 “transitional program for socialist revolution” (actually called *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*), where he argued that “mankind’s productive forces stagnate” and that “nothing short of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie can open a road out” (Trotsky, 1938).

usually including analogies with the Asiatic mode of production (“Eastern despotism”).<sup>4</sup>

Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism was characterized by his stress on the need to defend the conquests of the October revolution, such as the nationalization of the means of production, from imperialist aggression. As far back as 1933, Trotsky warned that the “further unhindered development of bureaucratism must lead inevitably to the cessation of economic and cultural growth, to a terrible social crisis and to the downward plunge of the entire society” (Trotsky, 1933, 115; cf. van der Linden, 2007, 280). However, he believed that the bureaucratic stranglehold on Soviet society was a “temporary degeneration” which would not survive a second world war. Van der Linden argues that “the unforeseen stability of the Soviet Union and structural assimilation of the buffer states [in Eastern Europe] forced a difficult choice on the supporters of the theory of the degenerated workers’ state: either they had to revise Trotsky’s standpoint, or they continued to uphold it, while abandoning the temporal factor” (158). Trotsky’s best-known Western disciple, the Belgian Ernest Mandel, revised his analysis of Stalinism, arguing that “the planned Soviet economy was superior to capitalist economy” and that “the Soviet Union would, due to collectively owned means of production, central planning and the state monopoly of foreign trade, be able to develop to ever-higher economic levels” (van der Linden, 280–81).

Van der Linden believes that none of the classical analyses of the Soviet Union can be sustained without doing considerable violence to Marxist theory or to empirical data — or both. Theories of bureaucratic collectivism (a new type of society with a ruling class) are most easily disposed of, since the idea that after capitalism there can be a historical stage different from socialism is basically alien to Marxism. Similarly, “not a single theory of state capitalism succeeded in being both orthodox-Marxist as well as consistent with the facts,” because the supporters of the state capitalism thesis “fail to prove the existence of business competition in the Soviet Union in the Marxian sense, *i.e.*, arising in some or other way out of the immanent logic of the system” (313).

According to van der Linden, Trotsky’s theory of the degenerated workers’ state also did not quite stand the test of history, because his insistence

4 The first to argue that traditional Russian society was based on the Asiatic mode of production was the “father of Russian Marxism,” Georgii Plekhanov (Plekhanov, 1926). Van der Linden points out that Alexandr Zimin, “an old-guard Bolshevik who, in the 1920s, had belonged to the United Opposition, and later spent many years in Stalin’s concentration camps, published a number of samizdat-style essays during the 1970s in which he tried to define the nature of the Soviet society” using “the category of the Asiatic mode of production only as a heuristic instrument” (van der Linden, 2007, 221). Zimin saw Stalinism as a “deviating mode of production,” a historical blind alley which, however, “could definitely be influenced in a socialist direction from within, specifically by the revolutionary consciousness of the working class” (224).

on the temporary nature of the bureaucratic phenomenon clashed with the long-lasting character of the Stalinist system. Theoretically, Trotsky's distinction between the sphere of production (where socialist norms prevailed in the Soviet Union, albeit in a deformed way) and the sphere of distribution (where bourgeois norms prevailed) "conflicts with Marx, who always emphasized that both should be considered as part of a cohesive totality" (314). Besides,

Trotsky only ascribed a distributive and parasitic function to the bureaucracy, and thereby denied that it could have roots in the productive sphere. From an orthodox standpoint, this idea is impossible to sustain. The Soviet bureaucracy, after all, led the enterprises, and hence also the production processes. [Soviet enterprise management] on the one side, tried to organize production, and, on the other side, simultaneously embodied the oppression of the workers. Clearly, the corollary must be that at least an important part of the Soviet bureaucracy was not exclusively parasitic, but also performed productive labor in the Marxian sense.

Finally, Trotsky's postulation of the need for a political revolution in the Soviet Union — as distinct from the social as well as political revolutions required in the capitalist countries — was artificial because "precisely in a planned economy, political and economic power *cannot* be so separated. Whoever formulated and supervised the implementation of the plan, and thus possessed political power, obviously also ruled the economy" (315).

Towards the end of the book, van der Linden lists a series of recurrent themes in the analysis of Stalinism, such as the view of the Soviet regime as a modernization dictatorship; the notion that the Soviet Union represented something intrinsically different from "the West"; the view of Soviet society as a "bastard" formation, an "illegitimate" phenomenon, a *cul-de-sac* along the high road of human history; the perception of Bolshevism and/or Stalinism as historically limited, temporary phenomena; the notion that Stalinism and fascism or national socialism were two variants of the same society (theories of totalitarianism); and the idea that the dynamic of the Soviet Union was shaped by its competition with the West.

### *David Laibman's review of Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*

In his review of van der Linden's book, David Laibman bemoans "the exclusion of the *major alternative pole* in the Soviet Union debate" and the concentration on writers who adopted a stance of "political opposition to the Soviet Union, and to the Communist Parties allied with it." He believes that Soviet workers were not "oppressed *as a class*" and that "the Soviet Union *was* socialist — in a highly historical and developmental sense of that word" because "the Soviet bureaucracy . . . was constituted almost entirely from the

ranks of workers and working intelligentsia . . . even as late as the 1970s and 1980s” and therefore “the basis of ruling-class internal identification, separation and cohesion in a *social upper class* [was] absent in the Soviet Union.” He attributes the “belief in the class oppressiveness of the Soviet Union” to “the absence of contested elections” and the single-party system. Though he does concede that “repressive . . . control over political, cultural and intellectual life in the Soviet Union is indeed a matter of historical record” and that there was an “authoritarian deformation of Soviet socialism,” he argues that these phenomena cannot be attributed to “the evils of Lenin and the Bolsheviks” or to those “of Stalin and the CPSU.”

Laibman makes one important point, namely that “the anti-Soviet ticket-of-entry to membership in the ‘respectable’ left may have been a form of ideological capitalist class domination within our ranks.” That was indeed the case of an entire generation of Marxist intellectuals in the United States, analyzed by Alan Wald in his book *The New York Intellectuals*, who began by criticizing Stalinism from a Marxist point of view and then used Trotsky’s analysis of the Soviet Union to distance themselves from Communism altogether — none other than the recently deceased Irving Kristol, the “God-father” of Neo-Conservatism, was a Trotskyist in the 1930s. As Wald argued:

Divorced from the context of a general anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist outlook, anti-Stalinism can lead one to oppose something as basic as struggles by workers for higher wages if those struggles happen to be led by Communist-influenced unions. . . . the logic of pure and simple anti-Stalinism is to move its adherents towards an anticommunism that views the imperialist practices of the United States as a lesser evil in a world conflict of two “camps.” (Wald, 1987, 367.)

By the time a resurgence of social and political struggle occurred in the 1960s, many of the former Trotskyist intellectuals had become hardened apologists for American imperialism, and for that reason “it became popular in the 1960s for those in the New Left to vilify the former radical New York intellectuals as sellouts, opportunists, and phonies” (*ibid.*, 367).<sup>5</sup>

5 Wald himself adds to the confusion, however, when he argues that his book describes the switch of former Trotskyist intellectuals “from Marxist anti-Communism (authentic anti-Stalinism) to liberal anticommunism (bogus anti-Stalinism)” (Wald, 1987, 366). Trotsky would have felt insulted had he been called a “Marxist anti-Communist.” It is also incorrect to argue that “Trotsky provided an authentic revolutionary voice that argued for the compatibility of socialism and democracy and offered a critique of Stalinism from a Bolshevik point of view” (*ibid.*, 367–68). Lenin and Trotsky did not argue for the compatibility of socialism and democracy — on the contrary, they denounced parliamentary democracy as a tool of the bourgeoisie, theorized the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat, dissolved the Constituent Assembly when it clashed with the needs of the Soviets, and engaged in furious polemics with Kautsky as a supporter of the democratic counterrevolution in Russia and Germany (Day and Gaido, 2009, 54–58).

But though those and similar instances of throwing out the Communist baby together with the Stalinist bathwater may have given a bad name to Trotskyism in certain quarters, I would suggest that a more critical stance than Laibman's is nevertheless required in order to understand the collapse of the Soviet Union. That includes paying proper attention to anarchist and Council Communist critiques of Lenin and Trotsky's policies (*e.g.*, Avrich, 1967, 1970; Daniels, 1960) and to Trotsky's analysis of Soviet Thermidor and Bonapartism (Trotsky, 1935, 1937). Any examination should address the fact that Stalin ordered the physical liquidation of the Bolshevik old guard during the Great Purges. The human cost of Stalin's bureaucratic policies was frightful. The famine caused by the forced collectivization of agriculture resulted in three to four million deaths in 1933, while

the number of convicts in Gulag labor camps rose by half a million in the two years beginning 1 January 1937, reaching 1.3 million on 1 January 1939. . . . But many Purge victims were executed in prison, never reaching Gulag. The NKVD [secret police] recorded 681,692 such executions in 1937–8. (Fitzpatrick, 2001, 139, 166.)

As for the effects of Stalin's policies on the intellectual development of the Soviet Union, it is enough to point out that he was responsible for the elimination of the foremost historian of Marxism in the Soviet Union, the old revolutionary David Riazanov, along with his protégé, Isaak Ilych Rubin, who had also taken part in the revolutionary movement since 1905 and later wrote the best Marxist history of political economy (Rubin, 1929).<sup>6</sup> Finally, any assessment of the Soviet experience requires an analysis of the effects of Moscow's influence on the policies of the Communist parties — suffice to recall the role of the Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War and that of the Italian Communist Party in post-war Italy (on the latter, see Behan, 1997). Those facts are stubborn things requiring deeper probing than vague references to Mohun's theory of the "built-in authoritarian character" of the forces of production inherited from capitalism.

I do agree with Laibman, however, that van der Linden's conclusion, according to which "Soviet society can hardly be explained in orthodox-Marxian terms at all" is mystifying (317). What exactly does that mean: that Soviet society can only be explained in heterodox/bourgeois terms, or that it cannot be explained at all? And if the former is the case, where are those alternative interpretations to be found? On the whole, however, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* is a very valuable and useful encyclopedic survey of Marxist interpretations of Stalinism in Western Europe and the United

6 See "B. I. Rubina Memoir," concerning her brother, who was a participant in the trial of the "Union Bureau," in Medvedev, 1971, 132–35.

States. It should be required reading for those wishing to orient themselves in the maze of debates surrounding this fascinating subject, which still has a political as well as a strictly academic significance.

*Independencia 868 – 6°A*  
5000 – Córdoba  
Argentina  
danielgaid@gmail.com

#### REFERENCES

- Avrich, Paul. 1967. *The Russian Anarchists*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- . 1970. *Kronstadt, 1921*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Behan, Tom. 1997. *The Long Awaited Moment: The Working Class and the Italian Communist Party in Milan, 1943–1948*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bornstein, Sam, and Al Richardson. 1986. *The War and the International: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937–1949*. London: Socialist Platform.
- Daniels, Robert V. 1960. *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Day, Richard B. 1973. *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, Richard B., and Daniel Gaido, eds. 2009. *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*. Leiden, Amsterdam: Brill.
- Eco, Umberto. 2001. *Come si fa una tesi di laurea*. Milano, Italy: Tascabili Bompiani.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2001. *The Russian Revolution*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Grant, Ted. 1997. *Russia, from Revolution to Counter-Revolution*. London: Wellred Publications.
- Kautsky, Karl. 1907. *Sozialismus und Kolonialpolitik. Eine Auseinandersetzung*. Berlin, Germany: Vorwärts.
- Lewin, Moshe. 2005. *The Soviet Century*. London: Verso.
- Medvedev, Roy A. 1971. *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Plekhanov, Georgii. 1926. *Introduction a l'histoire sociale de la Russie*. Paris: Bossard.
- Richardson, Al. 1998. Review of *Russia, from Revolution to Counter-Revolution*, by Ted Grant. *Revolutionary History*, 7:1.
- Rubin, Isaak Ilych. 1975 (1929). *A History of Economic Thought*. Translated and edited by Donald Filtzer from 2nd Revised Russian ed. London: Ink Links.
- Trotsky, Leon. 1937. *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Trotsky, Leon. 1971. “The Workers’ State, Thermidor and Bonapartism” [1935]. Pp. 166–84 in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934–35*. New York: Pathfinder.
- . 1975. “The Class Nature of the Soviet State” [1933]. In *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933–34*. New York: Pathfinder.



- . 1977. “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International” [1938]. In Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*. New York: Pathfinder.
- van der Linden, Marcel. 2004. “On Council Communism.” *Historical Materialism*, 12:4, 27–50.
- . 2007. *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917*. Leiden, Amsterdam: Brill.
- Wald, Alan M. 1987. *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

*Science & Society*, Vol. 75, No. 1, January 2011, 107–114

## On the Question of Soviet Socialism\*

PARESH CHATTOPADHYAY

The following lines constitute my comments on Laibman’s review of van der Linden’s book, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (this journal, Vol. 73, No. 4, 2009). Not having had the privilege of reading the book itself and given the space constraint, I will focus on only one issue: Laibman’s position on Soviet socialism, specifically, his contention that Soviet socialist development is compatible with Marx’s Gotha critique (Marx, 1964), more particularly in the sense of the lower phase of communism, the “protracted period of evolutionary transition” based on “successful proletarian revolution and establishment of workers’ power” while retaining “the crucial features of the forces and relations” of capitalism such as “wage-labor” and “money and prices . . .” The following development is exclusively based on Marx’s own categories.

Before we treat the issue let me say a word on the terminological confusion around the term “socialism.” For Marx, socialism is neither the transition to communism, nor is it the lower phase of communism. It *is* communism *tout court*. In fact, Marx calls capitalism itself the “transitional point” or “transitional phase” to communism (1953, 438; 1962, 425–26; 1989, 783). The famous “political transition period” under proletarian rule is still within the “old organization of society,” as Marx reminded Bakunin (1873, 630). For Marx there is only one society after capital which he calls, in different texts,

\* I am grateful to David Laibman for his generous encouragement.