CONFRONTING THE PAINFUL DILEMMAS OF THE MODERN AGE

Reviewed by Eric Aarons


This is an important but difficult book. It is important because it is a serious effort to grapple theoretically with the nature of the societies now existing in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

It is difficult because it is dense, very European in style, and assumes that the reader is familiar with European theoretical traditions and with the works of individual scholars such as Max Weber.

The emotional undertones which the book has, despite its academic style, are understandable because of the experiences of the writers in Hungary, and of the persecution they suffered as prominent members of the "Budapest School". (ALR, incidentally, spoke out against their persecution, provoking a minor but revealing discussion in its pages about the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"; see ALR, Nos. 42, 43, 44 — 1973 and 1974.)

The authors now teach at various universities in Australia.

The strength of the book is that it takes as its starting point the fact that the Soviet Union (as the "prototype" of the countries it examines) is a mature society. This means that its characteristics cannot now be explained (or downplayed) as due to its supposed "transitional" nature. It also examines and effectively demolishes other "explanations" such as that the Soviet Union is "state capitalist" or a sort of modern "Asiatic mode of Production".

What, then, are the inherent (or, at least, now irrevocably established characteristics) of Soviet-type societies, according to the authors? Let them speak in their own words:

The working majority of the population in Eastern European societies has no control over the conditions, process or results of its own labour. Not only the technical organisation of the process of production, but also all the social-economic decisions concerning what to produce and now to employ the gross product socially are actually established and made by a distinct and separate social group (the bureaucracy) whose corpus is continuously replenished through mechanisms of a selective co-optation and which is essentially self-appointed. (p. 45)

But what is the nature of this separate social group? What is its social role (if any) and its motivation?

... the actual power and social position of a member of the economic bureaucracy in Eastern Europe much more closely resembles that of a manager in the West than of a private owner-capitalist. The lack of entitlement to the surplus produced and the inability to appropriate any definite part of it ... makes it impossible to characterise the Eastern European bureaucrat as the individual proprietor or owner of those factors of production which he manages. His real social powers emanating from and realising his economic function are derivative — he acts as a trustee for somebody else. But for whom? (p. 49)

Access to, and advancement (in the bureaucratic apparatus) always ultimately depends on one principle: acceptance of the given individual by the apparatus itself (p. 113) [and consequently it is not a completely closed group.]

And the main criterion used by that apparatus in determining whether to accept an individual into itself? It is that individual’s recognition of the right of that apparatus to decide what are the general interests of the state, the enforcement of which (it) posits as the main requirement in regard to each of its members .... (P. 55)

... all officials of these regimes are in principle posited and aware of themselves only as the representatives of general interests .... this very factor gives rise to a strong and unifying consciousness, like that of a traditional conservative officialdom: ‘they’ — those who are directed, managed and controlled — are a lazy, egotistical, irrational mass who never understand the superior reasons of the state and do not appreciate ‘our’ hard and difficult labor. Naturally this ideology is most widespread and explicit where this system of power has the longest-standing tradition and has become most ossified: in the Soviet Union. (p. 114)

(This reviewer can personally testify to having repeatedly encountered this attitude among Soviet economic and Party officials.)

In short, the book says that the "public property" in these countries is a kind of "corporate property". Naturally, Eastern European bureaucracies share with all ruling strata an interest in seeing their power secured and expanded. (pp. 60-1) But: a collective interest .... is not only historically unspecific, but also economically void — it simply leaves open the question of what kind of economic policy would secure this aim. (p. 61)

And the answer to that question? It is ... the maximisation of the volume of the material means (as use values) under the global disposition of the apparatus of power, as a whole (which) constitutes the goal-function governing the economic activities of the state. (p. 65) ... the preferences of the economic policy are dictated not by considerations of profitability, but

Summer 1985
by the criterion of how far the apparatus of power retains a direct control over the means invested (for example, preferring very big cooperatives over smaller ones, even if the latter are more efficient).

The bureaucracy is not homogenous, of course:

The managerial apparatus of the enterprises stands in variously articulated relations of dependence (of various degrees) in a number of administrative hierarchies: departmental and ministerial, municipal and territorial, etc. . . . And the higher one ascends within the hierarchy, the more economic decisions will be influenced by factors and considerations of a definitely non-economic type, whether military, internal and foreign political, social and cultural . . . it is only the pinnacle that is identical for all the differently articulated functional hierarchies: the small circle of the political elite, the Party leadership, where all the basic-orientative decisions concerning the overall distribution of social surplus are made, or at least ratified. (p. 51)

(Thus) The basic principle of the Soviet type of domination and at the same time the only one which has been realised in practice consequently in all periods of Soviet history is the leading role of the Party. (p. 157)

But, the authors perceptively note, however hateful domination of the population by the apparatus may be, the fact that its domination rests upon the absence of any right or avenue for any other social group to attempt to realise its own particular interests makes the existence and functioning of such a separated organisation of power, uncontrolled by the population, within the given conditions, a social necessity as well.

As long as the various and partially clashing group interests, structurally determined by the existing system of division of labor, are suppressed and unarticulated, there is no other way to achieve the necessary balancing and reconciliation between them except through the self-imposed representative and mediative function of the apparatus itself. (p. 131)

This "necessity", the authors affirm, means that, after initial outbreaks of the oppressed in which they are suddenly united by enthusiasm, but without any vision of an alternative future and autonomous organisations, re-establishing the domination of the apparatus in an unchanged form is a relatively easy task: This is, in our opinion, the key to both the specific vulnerability and the enormous resilience of that type of social domination which Eastern European societies exemplify. (p. 132)

I believe that there is essential truth in the above account, and I agree with the authors that western socialists—and especially those seeking a socialist renewal—must face up to these issues more than they have (though I could pick a small bone with them in not even mentioning the Communist Party of Australia when they make their strictures).

I also think that there is a sound characterisation of Solzhenitsyn-type dissidents and good theoretical discussion of 'economic relations of property' (pp. 46-47), of "class" in relation to the bureaucracy (pp. 114-125), and particularly of the inadequacies of the project of socialism as a marketless economy (pp. 90-95).

But the book has considerable defects. The authors' ultimate condensation of their views is embodied in the title, which is more than the usual journalistic catchphrase (it's hardly catchy anyway).

They are saying that the deepest essence of the system is that the bureaucracy dictates to the working population what needs they are allowed to have, or, rather, which of those needs they will permit to be satisfied, and to what extent. At one stage they justify this summing up by correctly pointing out that consumer feedback is lacking in the absence of a market, or where chronic shortages force people to take whatever they can get.

But when the living standard is rising and people have money, which they may retain till what they want turns up in the shops, this is far from an absolute "dictatorship over needs". Material shortages may certainly "dictate" what needs are to be satisfied at a given time. But so do high prices in a market economy.

It is stated in one quotation above that the bureaucracy is interested only in the sum of use values under its command — that is, that it is indifferent to exchange value. But warehouses full of products which the population will not buy hardly benefit the bureaucracy or enhance their power (the only "benefit" is to the particular enterprise which has fulfilled its plan by producing useless goods).

Khrushchev's attack on the production of 'tasteless traditional lampshades' is taken as proof that the bureaucracy wants to dictate even the details of everyday life (p. 268), whereas the remark was an attack on precisely those enterprises.

Elsewhere, it is acknowledged that the bureaucracy often, sectionally, reflects to some degree the needs of the people in that sector.

In another place, it is acknowledged that the post-Stalin compromise included recognition that the living standards of the people should be continuously raised. (This has happened, though it is now rather threatened by the economic slowdown and the leadership is worried because people's expectations may not be met).

Yet, we are then told that the true aim of the bureaucracy is to stem the tide, to defer the satisfaction of the population's needs. (p. 178)

This sort of exaggeration lends no credence to a thesis which otherwise deserves close study. In similar throwaway lines to the Khrushchev one above, we are told that:

We have no doubt that Cuba . . . has become a particularly nasty police state which, in addition, turns its younger generation into kind of Foreign Legion in the service of Soviet superpower politics and that Vietnam is full of 'reeducation camps'. (p. x)

Are the authors equating the Castro and Batista regimes? Do they doubt that the Angolan government asked for and appreciates Soviet aid and the services of Cuban troops,
without which the forces supported by the South African apartheid regime and the US could well prevail? Do they accept that Cuba itself could hardly have survived against massive Soviet aid? Even if this aid is not entirely disinterested or without internal consequences for Cuba, surely the fact that it is available is a welcome element in a world which might otherwise see Reagan rampaging throughout the world (a prospect they say they specifically reject - p. 298).

There are re-education camps in Viet Nam, but the country is not "full" of them. And it is not whitewashing a vicious violence of a section of anti-Communist Vietnamese.

However that may be, we proceed to this: Soviet-type societies (are) well able to reproduce (themselves) in all (their) contradictions and (demonstrate) a rare power of resurrection after apparent collapse and thus represent a specific social-economic formation. (p. 105)

But are they socialists?

The new society, the 'dictatorship over needs', is neither a novel, modified form of (state) capitalism, nor is it socialism - it is 'something else'. It is a social formation completely different from any that has existed in European or world history to date and it is equally different from any relevant conception in terms of which socialism, either 'scientifically' or in a utopian manner, has ever been conceived. (p. 221)

I agree with this .... but, I would like to agree without the 'but'. I would like to give the unequivocal answer 'they are nothing to do with socialism', and to be relieved of the problem. (And I wonder whether, in the authors' view, Yugoslavia and China represent yet another one or two "specific social-economic formations").

But the connection of these countries with socialism won't go away. They pose the challenge to socialists today to avoid a path of development which, from a socialist starting point, produce something we reject. And, in fact, the authors themselves modify their categorical "no" by a good account of the strands in socialist thought which have helped to bring into existence what now exists.

These are:

- The "Jacobin legacy" - public optimism but private pessimism about humanity, leading to the use of terror to effect "moral improvement".
- Setting the goal of the abolition of the state, on the one hand, and accepting (even pursuing) the idea of dictatorship, in the other.
- Promotion of the technocratic-statist spirit, deriving especially from Saint-Simon. This absorbs other socialist values in the growth of social material wealth and sets a technologically trained elite against the alleged incompetence of civil society.
- Egalitarianism of the Babuvian kind - a violent homogenisation of human needs.
- Backwardness as something superior, as against the 'embourgeoisment' of the developed countries.

Marx warned against 'crude communism', but Marxism (and socialist theories in general) were too self-indulgently 'value-free'; in the positivistic sense typical of nineteenth century theories, to make unambiguously clear the conditions, the fulfilment of which would constitute socialism. (p. 229)

Such issues, and the lessons of the experiences of the Soviet Union and other countries must figure prominently in the renewal of socialism which, hopefully, is now gathering some momentum. It requires still more hope to expect that this renewal may also impact the countries under discussion, but even the authors' extremely pessimistic account does not completely exclude the possibility.

In this project of renewal of the vision and practice of socialism I, for one, fully agree with the authors when they say:

Firstly, we cannot accept any value-free definition of socialism. Without the valid existence of certain fundamental socialist values, socialism, however it is interpreted, is inconceivable as a social state of affairs.

Secondly, .... we do not conceive of socialism ... as the 'resolved riddle of all history': but rather, and more modestly, as a response, an ideology and a movement confronting the painful dilemmas of the modern age. (p. 223)

Eric Aarons has been secretary of the Communist Party of Australia and spends his spare time sculpting.