

# H-Net Reviews

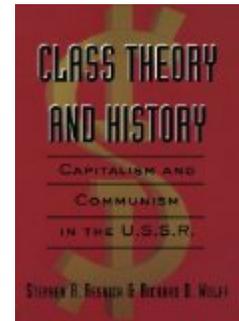
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Mike Haynes.** *Russia: Class and Power, 1917-2000.* London and Sydney: Bookmarks, 2002. v + 251 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-898876-87-8.

**Richard D. Wolff.** *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR.* New York: Routledge, 2002. xiv + 353 pp. \$135.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-93317-9; \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-93318-6.

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## Marxism and Soviet History

To many observers the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a collapse as well of the Marxist vision of an ideal society. The disastrous outcome of the events set in motion by the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 seemed to suggest that any attempt to build a society based on the destruction of “bourgeois” property rights and the replacement of the free market by social planning would be doomed from the start. At the least, the failure of the “Soviet experiment” poses a major challenge to Marxists and to all those whose vision of a better world was linked to the communist utopia of proletarian revolution and classless society. Could this failure be explained without abandoning the essential elements of the Marxist vision? What lessons might Marxists learn from the Soviet experience? As Mike Haynes pointedly puts it, “Standing stark in the middle of any discussion of a possible better world is the history of the USSR” (p. 2).

The two works under consideration here offer explicitly Marxist analytic surveys of Soviet history. Both conclude that the Soviet Union never succeeded in building a genuinely communist or socialist society. The system that collapsed in the Soviet Union in 1991, they argue, was “state capitalist,” and its failure cannot therefore be taken as indicative of the failure of Marxist socialism and communism. The potential for a truly communist society and a genuinely Marxist movement remains, they suggest, but those who seek to build such a society and

movement must learn the harsh lessons of the Soviet experience.

If these books have this much in common, however, they employ quite different methodological approaches and reach significantly different historical conclusions. Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, both economics professors, approach Soviet history on a highly theoretical level, analyzing the productive relations in Soviet society with sometimes mathematical (or, perhaps, pseudomathematical) precision. Their strikingly original argument, which they acknowledge is “not, in the main, a work of empirical history” (p. xiii), “foregrounds the social organization of surplus” (p. xii) and concludes that “the USSR represented, across its entire history, chiefly a state form of capitalism” (p. x). Their book is aimed toward a more specialized readership of political economists and theoretically inclined historians. It is densely argued, sometimes difficult to read, and, in Goethe’s famous formulation, colored in the drab gray of theory.

Mike Haynes, on the other hand, offers a lively series of connected historical essays aimed explicitly at young activists who know little about Soviet history. Enlivened by anecdote, driven by narrative, and informed by facts and insights drawn from a wide, if somewhat selective, reading in secondary and some primary sources, its argument is not especially novel. Standing in the Trotskyist

tradition and, more specifically, popularizing the views of the British theorist Tony Cliff, Haynes contends that Soviet history is marked first and foremost by the great discontinuity between its early heroic period under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky and its later degeneration under Stalin and his successors. But unlike Trotsky, Haynes, following Cliff, argues that the regime established under Stalin was not simply a degenerate form of proletarian rule but a full-fledged state-capitalist economy.

Turning first to Resnick and Wolff, their rather complex argument “develops two especially controversial points: (1) that a particular kind of capitalist class structure comprised the actual class content of Soviet socialism, and (2) that communism occurred only in very limited, subordinated realms of the Soviet economy.” (p. ix). The book begins with a class analysis of what a communist system and a “communist class structure” might be. The argument here is rather subtle, allowing most notably for the coexistence of varied class relations—ancient, feudal, capitalist, and communist—in the same society, but the authors ultimately define a communist class structure as one where “the people who collectively produce a surplus are likewise and identically the people who collectively receive and distribute it” (p. 9). This sounds like formulaic Marxism, but Resnick and Wolff take pains to make clear that the standard Marxist concern with the market and sale of labor power is not theirs: “Communist class structures,” they write, “can coexist with or without markets, including a market in which labor power is exchanged for a wage payment” (p. 59). This analysis of communism is followed by a parallel analysis of capitalist society and its forms, especially state capitalism, which is said to exist where “capitalist processes of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus coexist and interact with processes that place state officials (rather than private individuals) in the class position of appropriators and distributors of the surplus” (p. 85).

The longest and most substantive part of the book then argues “that the USSR never attempted, let alone achieved, communism (not as a class structure and still less as classlessness) on a society-wide basis” (p. x). The authors believe that “the overwhelming majority of societies hitherto labeled socialist have been forms of capitalism. That is, they, have been societies in which capitalist class structures prevail inside productive enterprises and few if any communist class structures exist anywhere” (p. 76). “While the USSR in particular did take certain initial steps after 1917 in the direction of some utopian aspects of communism—radically diminishing in-

equalities of wealth, power, and cultural freedom—it did not, with rare exception, take steps in creating communist class structures....[T]he failure to create communist class structures and the resultant lapse into state capitalist structures instead contributed to the reversal of even those steps toward utopia that were taken initially. The absence of communist class structures helped to undermine, in the Soviet case, the utopian dimensions of the Bolshevik movement and revolution and many of the utopian impulses beneath them” (p. 13).

How precisely is one to determine the extent to which the surplus is distributed on a communist or capitalist basis in a specific and complex modern economy like that of the Soviet Union? Here Resnick and Wolff offer some historical analysis based largely on reading in English-language sources. In particular, they utilize studies of the peasant household economy to document the continuation of exploitative relations down to the domestic level. But they also develop more intricate economic equations that can be applied (with the appropriate data) to the economy as a whole. So, for example, in attempting to determine the impact of NEP on agricultural and industrial terms of trade and the distribution of surplus, they develop an intimidating four-line mathematical formula so complicated that it cannot be reproduced in the typeface used by H-Net (p. 218). While the authors do explain in detail the terms and development of their equations, the ultimate utility of these to both the argument of the book and a deeper understanding of Soviet history, remains questionable. This reviewer is admittedly not the most literate in mathematical economics, but I have read and mostly understood Marx’s *Capital*. Suffice it say, it was easier going than parts of Resnick and Wolff.

By focusing on the relations and forms of surplus production and distribution, Resnick and Wolff ground their analysis in economic and social forms rather than their political representations. As a result, they highlight the limitations of the Soviet experiment from the very beginning. For example, unlike previous left-wing critics of Soviet industrial relations they do not idealize the forms of workers self-management that emerged in the first years of Soviet power. Indeed, they contend “there is no necessary contradiction between workers’ self-management and a capitalist class structure, private or state” (p. 97). This enables them to better understand both the transition to “one-man management” and the emergence of NEP-style market relations. But in the main the argument’s application to historical experience sorely lacks human flesh and blood, leading to conclusions that are either overly broad and hence not very useful or down-

right idiosyncratic.

For Resnick and Wolff the key moment in Soviet history was not Kronstadt, the adoption of NEP, the rise of Stalin, collectivization, or any of the other putative turning points highlighted by previous left-wing writers. It was, instead, 1917 itself. “The 1917 crisis and its aftermath amounted to a revolutionary response to and partial resolution of the cumulative aggregation of Russia’s unresolved contradictions,” the authors acknowledge. But the changes actually achieved by the 1917 revolution “did not constitute a class revolution. Instead a state capitalism with strong welfare and workers’ rights commitments replaced a private capitalism with the opposite commitments. In class terms, this was reform, not revolution” (pp. 151-152). Hence, “the 1917 revolution displaced private capitalism in industry but established an enduring state capitalism there instead. In agriculture, the 1917 revolution virtually eliminated private capitalism and established instead a vast number of relatively small ancient farmers” (p.157). It is true, of course, that when the Soviet state nationalized private enterprises “it did not transform the way those enterprises organized the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor” (p. 162). But it must be stressed that the changes made were not insignificant and are, indeed, critical to an understanding of what came after. Moreover, that political power lay in the hands of a party committed to some version of communism, however inarticulate and inadequate, was hardly of little consequence. If October 1917 is an example of “reform, not revolution” then one is left to wonder about what could possibly be revolutionary by such a demanding standard.

Resnick and Wolff are understandably unwilling to see Stalin, Brezhnev, and the ultimate Soviet collapse as simply immanent in 1917 as so many conservative historians do. But their focus on the inadequacies of the 1917 transformation leads precisely to this facile conclusion. Moreover, they do not explain these inadequacies on the basis of material factors such as Russian backwardness or the international isolation of the revolution, to cite the standard explanations offered from the left. Instead, they focus on the lack of ideological vision—the “theoretical underdevelopment”—of the Soviet leadership: “Unable to conceptualize, let alone disseminate, the class (qua surplus labor) issue, Soviet political, economic, and cultural leaders were unable to take advantage of the truly revolutionary change they had actually created in their own society. On the class issue, they were as theoretically underdeveloped as the supposedly backward farmers they sought to manage” (p. 247). Now, it is perfectly per-

missible for the authors to critique the political ideas of the Bolshevik leaders from the left. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a meaningful Marxist interpretation of Soviet history that did not offer such retrospective criticism. But to explain the entire history of the Soviet Union in such narrowly ideological terms seems of limited utility at best and certainly non-Marxist (or nonmaterialist). Moreover, if the success of communism is dependent on its leaders’ command of the kind of theoretical sophistication evidenced by Resnick and Wolff, then communism will only succeed under a system even more elitist than Lenin’s: Those who “understand theory” would be like Plato’s philosopher-kings.

Particularly idiosyncratic is Resnick and Wolff’s discussion of the Stalin revolution. Stalinism, they write, was “neither a counterrevolution to socialism nor a continuation of it. Rather it represented a particular phase in the development of the USSR’s peculiar mix of class processes and nonclass processes. Above all, Stalinism refers to the nonclass processes that Stalin’s group thought necessary to secure that mix (which it defined as socialism)” (p. 273). Fair enough. However, Stalinism, they continue, does have a connection to communism. According to Resnick and Wolff, the one moment in which the Soviet Union did construct “communist class structures” in which the surplus was controlled by its producers came during collectivization! “In Marx’s sense of communism as a particular social organization of surplus labor,” they write, “Stalinism’s only connection to communism lay in its collectivization of agriculture.” To be sure, the authors recognize that collectivization was hardly a utopian moment. “Stalinism,” they add, “also undermined the communist class structures on collective farms after it had established them” (p. 273). Virtually unmentioned is how the mode of their establishment was a big—a very big—part of the problem. If collectivization is the most “communist” moment in Soviet history, most readers will likely conclude: “who then would ever desire communism?”

Ultimately Resnick and Wolff’s analysis is not satisfying and offers relatively little in the way of historical understanding, even if some of its theoretical explorations may stimulate new ways of thinking about the Soviet past. But the focus on the concept of “state capitalism” does bear some fruit in explaining the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet society and indeed may also shed some broader light on the overall development of capitalism in the last century. Situating the Soviet experience in a broader context, the authors write: “Soviet history starkly exemplifies a global pattern of the twen-

tieth century. The century's first half displays tendencies of transition from private to state capitalisms. The second half moves in the reverse direction. The specific problems of the private capitalisms inherited from the nineteenth century included their growing difficulties in appropriating enough surplus to secure their nonclass conditions of existence. These problems eventuated in crises that were resolved by solutions that ranged from state-regulated to state-managed to state-owned- and-operated capitalisms.... [T]he post-1917 USSR was the longest sustained and most globally influential of these statist solutions. In the reverse movements provoked by the 1970s crises of state-regulated, state-managed and state-run capitalisms, the solutions entailed returns to various forms of more private capitalism. The post-Soviet return to private capitalism has been the starkest example" (p. 310). This is insightful.

If Resnick and Wolff's theoretical interpretation is situated almost exclusively in the economic sphere, Mike Haynes's more historical argument is explicitly political. "[T]heory, even in more elegant forms than is usually found in debates on the Russian question, is only a means to understand the real pattern of events," he declares in terms which could be directed at Resnick and Wolff. "It only begins to live when it helps unravel the real history that is the concern of this book" (p. 12).

Central to that real history is Stalinism. Haynes's argument has four main components. First, he argues, "Soviet history is not about continuity but discontinuity." October 1917 was a "genuine workers' revolution" but it "degenerated into something else.... Since the Stalin regime emerged out of the degeneration of the revolution, elements of it obviously link back. The point is that these were not predetermined. There was no logic intrinsic to the revolution that explains why Stalinism developed as it did" (pp. 6-7). Second, Haynes argues that "the Stalinist regime developed not as any form of socialism, degenerate or otherwise" but "as a variant of twentieth-century capitalism, a form of bureaucratic state capitalism" (p. 7) In addition, "it was the competition which existed between Soviet Russia and the other capitalist powers, partly economic but crucially also military, that provides the core explanation for the pattern of Soviet development." Third, Haynes suggests "that much of what is deemed to be unique to the Soviet system turns out on investigation to be an extension, a more intensive form, of elements present in modern capitalism as a whole." In particular, the military segments of other capitalist societies exhibit features "mistakenly believed to be both unique to the Soviet Union and incompatible with capi-

talism" (p. 10). Finally, Haynes concludes that the Soviet collapse of 1991 "did not involve as radical a change as many accounts suggest." Instead, 1991 "represents a combination of political revolution with a change in the form of capitalism—a shift away from the state towards more market forms" (p. 10). These main arguments are presented in a lively narrative composed of eight topical but chronologically ordered chapters (plus introduction and conclusion). Scattered throughout the text are a number of tables and "fact boxes" of supplemental information, which illustrate or supplement the major points of the main text.

The first of Haynes's four arguments is hardly novel and, indeed, he acknowledges his debt to earlier anti-Stalinist leftists, including Victor Serge and Ante Ciliga as well as Trotsky. His discussion of 1917 offers a useful, if somewhat romantic, introduction that sensibly avoids ahistorically taking the actors of the time to task for their failures to comprehend the future. The contradictions of the civil war period are presented reasonably well, although the isolation of the Bolsheviks from their mass base and the sheer ruthlessness of their drive to power are underestimated. Haynes is probably correct to conclude that the draconian policies of those years were less problematic for their "sacrifice of principles to realism than later attempts to elevate the realism of the moment to a principle, to legitimise or delegitimise alternatives for all time" (p. 41).

The degeneration of the Soviet system into a form of "bureaucratic state capitalism" is, of course, the crux of the book's argument. Haynes insists that this degeneration "was not inevitable" (p. 43). Instead, he argues, the degeneration—concentrated in Stalin's rise to power—was a result of objective conditions, especially the revolution's international isolation and the sheer novelty of the knotty problems and harsh choices the situation presented to the Bolsheviks. "Hindsight enables us to pose these issues of the external and internal contradictions of NEP more clearly than was done at the time, but it also disables us if we become blase in the face of the originality of these dilemmas" (p. 63), he sensibly reminds us. The key for Haynes was the development of a bureaucracy. He identifies several key "moments" in this process, focusing on the absorption of active workers into administrative positions and the weakening of democracy within the party, although he downplays the impact of prerevolutionary practices—both within the state and among the Bolsheviks—in this process. This is a standard Trotskyist argument, and it is ultimately unsatisfying. Haynes never really defines what he means by bureau-

cracy nor does he explain how the revolution might have proceeded without one. Moreover, the abandonment of Leninism—“Lenin’s ideas became as much a corpse as the body in the tomb” (p. 72), he writes—is presented too simply. To be sure, under Stalin ideology was dogmatized and distorted, but what remained was not disconnected entirely from Lenin’s legacy. Moreover, Haynes does not adequately explain what Lenin’s ideas were. Of course, this is difficult because Lenin (and Marx, for that matter) did not have fixed ideas that could readily be applied to the concerns of the 1920s and 1930s. Had he, the results might have been considerably different, Stalin or no.

That “Stalin did use the situation, but he was also a product of it” is undoubtedly true, but not entirely helpful (p. 78). I agree that it is wrong to view Soviet development under Stalin as somehow an inevitable product of 1917 or even of the difficult conjuncture that the infant Soviet state faced at the end of the Civil War. But Haynes does not really outline a meaningful alternative, nor does he succeed in distinguishing those elements that were contingent from those that were not. Similarly, the argument that the Stalin regime was ultimately state capitalist is presented with less rigor but more passion than in Resnick and Wolff. Haynes does a good job of debunking notions of a planned economy, but he does not fully succeed in showing what was specifically capitalist—and not just bad—about the Stalin system. Here too the modifier “bureaucratic” is ill-defined, functioning mainly as a counter to equally ill-defined notions of democracy and popular control of administration.

Finally, notably absent from Haynes’s analysis is a consideration of the impact of nationalism. To be sure, the multinational character of the Soviet Union is mentioned periodically, but the effects of both national diversity and the development of Russian “red patriotism” are downplayed. Haynes treats the revival of Russian nationalism in the context of the competition with rival states leading up to and during World War II, but he fails to probe deeply the impact of national feeling on the Bolshevik party, even in the context of the revolutionary period. It is, I would argue, quite impossible to understand Stalinism’s rise without recognizing the ultimately nationalist appeal of the doctrine of “socialism in one country.”

As for Haynes’s discussion of the Soviet system post-Stalin and of its ultimate collapse, he does a good job of showing how a new ruling class (whether capitalist or not is another matter) emerged and developed, and an even better job of documenting the travails of the work-

ing classes. These help explain the relative powerlessness of the popular opposition to both the Soviet and post-Soviet regimes. As Haynes writes (and he is speaking here not only of Russia), “[i]deologically what Stalinism did was to break any connection between the kind of activities that workers engage in on a day-to-day basis, and the arguments of the socialist and revolutionary tradition about an alternative” (p. 219). His discussion of the “transition” after 1991 is suitably downbeat.

In sum, there is not much that the specialist readership of this review will find novel or even very informative in this book. Its arguments can, in various ways, be found more fully developed elsewhere, and many of them are at the least arguable and simplistic. However, one should not so quickly dismiss Haynes’s effort. One-sided the presentation may at times be, but Haynes has succeeded in crafting an effective introduction to the issues and concerns of Soviet history from a leftist perspective.

While reading this book I thought frequently of my nineteen-year-old son, a college sophomore. Radicalized by current events, like many idealistic youth, he is seeking a meaningful alternative and has several times questioned me—a radical in my own youth—about the Soviet experience. Could Communism work? Was the Soviet Union really Communist? I have usually avoided engaging these questions because my own answers are far too complex and tentative to satisfy him. I may now well give him Haynes’s book to read, not because I agree with its approach—I do not—nor because I find it the best and most thorough single-volume survey of Soviet history available; I would give that honor to Ron Suny’s *Soviet Experiment*. But Haynes has managed, in a relatively brief work, simultaneously to capture the passion for change that motivated the original Bolshevik revolution with a coherent (if ultimately unsatisfactory) explanation of its long-term failure. There is an almost quaint anachronism to the book’s Trotskyism, but it has its definite appeal, especially when contrasted with the many condescending works that portray the entirety of Soviet history as a simple failure of utopian ideology. In this respect, Haynes is also preferable to the more novel and sophisticated approach of Resnick and Wolff, who in the end also end up blaming ideology (or lack thereof!) for the Soviet tragedy.

If these two books fail to provide a satisfactory Marxist interpretation of the Soviet failure, their publication is still welcome. Without necessarily agreeing with these authors’ conclusions, one may still find their justifications compelling. According to Resnick and Wolff, “it

may now be possible to reopen and renew the communist alternative—after the many socialisms that have been tried across the globe and especially after the demise of the longest, boldest, and in many ways most successful socialist experiment that was the USSR. The latest oscillation back to private capitalism will yield again—as it always has—too many crises, victims, and opponents. This time, however, historical memory of the insufficiency and unacceptability of past shifts to state capitalism (or socialism) may provoke different outcomes” (pp. 99-100).

Or, as Haynes writes: “How we make sense of the fail-

ure of Russia is therefore important for the politics of the future as well as our understanding of the past. Clearing away illusions helps us not only to move forward, but it helps to see how we should move forward.... There is a difference between amnesia and memory. Amnesia is about forgetting, and some of the left would prefer to forget Russia. Memory is about retaining and analysing the past so that it can help inform our present and our future” (p. 3). These two books help, in different ways, encourage that process of memory and analysis. But, for those on the left, there is still much to be done.

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