

Political Study Economism: The theoretical glue of the Revisionist Deviations.

This session will explore the relation between theoretical economism and the revisionism of the second international, Stalinian deviation, and "modern revisionism".

Readings: TR 15 Leninism and the Struggle Against Economism  
Bettleheim, Class Struggles in USSR, intro to Vol 1  
Balibar- Dict. of Proletariat, 3 simple and false ideas

Economism, the main theoretical deviation in the Communist movement, is at the heart of the revisionism of the second international, the Stalinian deviation, and Modern revisionism. Economism sees the political struggle between classes as the direct result of economic contradictions. Thus it denies the decisive role of political and ideological class struggle in shaping social relations.

According to Bettleheim, economism is itself a product within Marxism of class struggle which arose in the second international, in the German SPD. Leaders of the SPD were part of a powerful political and trade union apparatus integrated with the German state machine. Heads of this powerful apparatus held to the economist conception that a steady increase in organizational activity and pressures for workers demands would eventually lead to the collapse of capitalism. This reformist conception, which rationalized the roles these leaders were playing in relation to the party and the state, had considerable influence on the German labor movement because some strata of the working class were able to secure improvements through this reformism.

Lenin waged a constant struggle against economism both inside and outside of the party from its inception. With the rise of Stalin, an economist conception of politics became dominant in the Bolshevik ideological formation. Both Bettleheim and Balibar suggest that Stalin gained widespread support for his political conception within the party, partially as a result of his struggle against Trotsky where Stalin asserted

that the building of socialism in the USSR was not dependent on a revolution in Western Europe. To a party and state faced with continual economic and political crisis during the NEP, Stalin's plan of forced collectivization and rapid industrialization held out the promise to many Bolsheviks of an eventual end to these threats to the state by a "reactionary" peasantry and an increasingly frustrated working class. A shortcut to the class struggle at a time of crisis of state power was both the attractive and opportunist aspect of Stalin's politics.

Modern revisionism, reacting to the political crisis caused by policies of the Stalin era, presented itself as an alternative to these policies. Yet, as Balibar demonstrates, the same theoretical economism of the second international and the Stalinian Deviation, form the theoretical premises of modern revisionism. Though the political opportunism of modern revisionism is distinct from the opportunism of the second international or the Stalinian Deviation since it is a response to the present state of the class struggle, its political effects are the same. As with its ancestors, the political effect of modern revisionism is the liquidation of the revolutionary class stand of the party. The Eurocommunist parties ~~and the CPUSA~~ are pursuing a reformism similar to their predecessors of the second international with the same political and trade union bureaucrats in the center, while also adopting the economist essentials of the Stalinian conception of socialism. Revisionist CP's in power are striving, as Stalin did, to rapidly develop the forces of production to solve the continuing crisis they face internally due to their inability to give leadership to the class struggle.

How does theoretical economism provide the theoretical basis for these various forms of revisionism?

TR 15 identifies four tenets of the economist problematic:

- 1) Insistence that the development of the productive forces is the decisive factor in social development
- 2) Reduction of class contradictions to the expression of contradiction between the forces and relations of production.
- 3) Insistence that under advanced capitalism production relations are an absolute block on the development of productive forces.
- 4) This situation leads to permanently favorable objective conditions for revolution.

The revisionism of the second international is characterized by theoretical economism which replaces the centrality of the class struggle at all levels of the social formation in the overthrow of capitalism with the centrality of the inevitable economic breakdown. This theory of the inevitability of socialism served as the basis for the increasing political reformism of the European parties of the second international, and for their complete blindness to the rise of fascism leading to the defeat of the working class. TR 15 points out that the politico-organizational results of this economism for social democratic parties were and are still:

- The restriction of activity to parliamentary politics and agitation
- The abandonment of economic struggles entirely to the trade unions
- The increasing abandonment of even the pretense of socialist activity.

TR 15 explains how this social democratic political practice is voluntarist because it neglects the role of class struggle and conscious leadership in the development of objective conditions. "False consciousness" rather than the dominance of bourgeois relations is the social democratic explanation for the lack of socialist consciousness

among the working class. Since they ignore the material basis for the hegemony of bourgeois ideology, they see the development of socialist consciousness coming about from their exposing of ~~the~~ bourgeois deception. While these reformist rely on the ripening of economic contradictions, uncontested bourgeois domination of the political and ideological aspects of the relations of production insures the reproduction of capitalist relations on all levels.

At the heart of the theoretical economism of this revisionism of the second international is the insistence on the primacy of productive forces in social development. Bettelheim points out that,

"Economism doesn't deny the role of class struggle...but rather relegates it to a secondary level: the class struggle intervenes to smash the production relations that hinder the development of the productive forces, engendering new production relations which conform to the needs of the development of the productive forces."

Economism denies the role of class struggle in the political and ideological realms in determining the reproduction or overthrow of capitalism. This view sees that it is the development of the productive forces which necessarily leads to an insoluble crisis. This crisis occurs when the the further development of the productive forces is blocked by existing relations of production. Such a crisis infact, can not occur until the forces of production are sufficiently developed. Only then can the class struggle intervene to smash the existing relations. This reasoning was the basis of the second international's support of the menshevik's position that a socialist revolution was not possible in the USSR.

A rejection of this economism places the class struggle, or the relations of production as primary, by asserting that it is the level of development of the class struggle and proletarian leadership which determines the solubility or insolubility of a crisis in the social formation.

The theory of the primacy of productive forces relies on other aspects of the economist problematic for coherency: the reduction of class contradictions to the expression of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production; the insistence that production relations under advanced capitalism are an absolute block to the development of productive forces; and that this leads to permanently favorable objective conditions for revolution.

The reduction of class contradictions to the expression of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production has the political effect of imposing an economist conception of relations of production at the economic level as well. This view denies the role of class struggle in shaping the relations of production. The crisis at the economic level is not determined by the class struggle at that level. Rather the class struggle is secondary and an effect of the primary aspect of the contradiction: the technical advances of the forces of production outgrowing existing relations of production. In this economist conception, relations of production are reduced to legal ownership relations. Private ownership acts as an absolute block to the development of the forces of production under advanced capitalism because of the anarchy in the production process caused by private vs. planned resource allocation.

These economist conceptions of the rhythm of social development are the theoretical roots of the model of socialism developed by the party during the Stalin era. Bettelheim describes the economist thesis of the Stalinian model in his introduction to Class Struggles in USSR. At the center of this model is the theory of the primacy of productive

forces. For Stalin, the main struggle during socialism was to lay the material basis for the advancement to communism. Scarcity rather than bourgeois relations ~~of production~~ was the main obstacle to moving toward communism. The development of the productive forces would be possible once the capitalist relations of production were smashed and replaced by socialist relations of production.

As in the previously described economist model of the revisionism of the second international as well as in Eurocommunism, the relations of production are reduced to legal forms of ownership. Once private ownership is replaced by state ownership and planning, the productive forces blocked under capitalism could again be unleashed. This mechanical identification of legal forms of ownership with class relations leads to the view that there is no class struggle within socialism once private ownership is eliminated. The elimination of private property, according to this economism, removes the only material basis for the existence of bourgeois relations. To the extent that bourgeois ideas continue to exist, they are simply remnants of the past.

This view of the reason for the continued existence of bourgeois ideology during socialism is at the root of Line of March's call for the need for ideological struggle during socialism while at the same time denying a material basis in the class struggle for the continued reproduction of that ideology. This view leads to the same voluntarist approach to developing socialist consciousness as the social democratic approach described earlier. Ideological struggle is reduced to explaining to the peasantry the benefits of collectivization or to reminding the Polish working class that they are going to have to continue to make

sacrifices for the long run goal of communism. Our approach, which recognizes the material basis for the reproduction of bourgeois relations, places the emphasis on changing the material basis of production ~~relation~~ relations as the primary means of ideological struggle. Instead of telling the peasantry that collectivization is better for them, the party needs to make collectivization a better option for the peasantry by supplying collective farms with machinery and other material incentives that improve the standard of living of peasants on collectivized farms.

Under our view which rejects an economist approach, it is not legal change in ownership relations, the forcing of peasants off of private plots and on to state owned plots, which eliminates bourgeois relations on either the economic, political, or ideological level. Our view sees the relations of production defined by the social process of appropriation rather than <sup>by simple ownership relations.</sup>

Capitalist relations continue to exist and are reproduced under a state ownership system in:

- the social division between management and the executors
- the social division between manual and mental labor
- the divisions between town and country; worker and peasant
- the existence of commodity production

Capitalist relations also have a material basis in the relations on the political level; the separation of the proletariat and its ally the peasantry from the party and state:

- A relationship of political commandism to the masses rather than political leadership.

- The growth of a state beurocracy at the expense of organs promoting the initiative of the masses in the running ~~and eventual withering away~~ of the state.

The reduction of the material basis for the existence of class relations and therefore class struggle to the existing legal forms of ownership has the political effect of liquidating the struggle for socialization of the relations of production. Socialization is ~~not~~ necessary under the view that socialism is ~~not~~ a non-contradictory mode of production characterized by state ownership and planning. The struggle for socialization of the means of production is tied to the view that socialism is a transition period containing two contradictory modes of production, the capitalist and communist modes. Socialization is a long struggle carried out under the leadership of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to destroy capitalist relations and replace them with communist relations. This struggle must continue throughout the period of socialism, and thus so must the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Both Bettelheim and Balibar describe a further political effect, tied to the liquidation of the struggle for socialization, of the material basis for class struggle: <sup>under socialism</sup> the abandonment of the M-L view of the state and the liquidation of the essential political role of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the struggle for communism. Stalin declared in 1936, with the completion of collectivization, an end to antagonistic class relations and therefore an end to the dictatorship of the proletariat. But according to M-L theory, the end of class struggle should coincide with the withering away of the state, since the state is necessarily a class dictatorship. Stalin explained the continued need for the state in order to protect the socialist mode of production from imperialist enemies. Balibar points out that another aspect of Stalin's declaration of the "state of the whole people" was the view of the



state as a neutral support apparatus to the expansion of the forces of production. These views on the role of the state correspond to the social democratic approach of the Eurocommunist who see the state not only and always an instrument of class struggle. Rather the state has another aspect, repressed under capitalism, which allows it to become an instrument for the management of public affairs in the common interest of all citizen.

Stalin's declaration of the end of antagonist class relations and the need for a repressive state, crumbles under the weight of history which recorded the ~~wholesale slaughter~~ <sup>massive purges</sup> carried out by the state two years after the declaration.

~~Similarly~~, Balibar points out how both the Stalinian and Eurocommunist conceptions of the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat reflect the same economist understanding of the transition period. *Under Stalin*, the dictatorship of the proletariat was reduced to a repressive apparatus used to not only crush the bourgeoisie but also to force collectivization and crush all opposition within the party. Its political task was to establish the relations of production necessary to the socialist mode of production.

The primary role of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the suppression of all forms of class domination through leadership of the class struggle against bourgeois relations throughout the socialist transition period, was denied.

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This economist view of socialism as a non-contradictory mode of production provided the political justification for the commandism practiced by the party during the Stalin era with the dictatorship of the proletariat as the instrument of this repression. Under this view, the key task of the transition period is the

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While Balibar does not speak<sup>explicitly</sup> of economism as the ~~underlying~~ theoretical basis for the model of socialism which puts forward this view of the state and the d of p, ~~the connection becomes~~ <sup>he does make the connection</sup> ~~obvious with this quote:~~ <sup>between this view and the theory of the primacy of productive forces.</sup>

"Given this approach (Stalinist ~~model~~ <sup>model</sup> of socialist ~~construction~~ class struggle ceased to be the master force of revolutionary transformation. Socialism

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institution of proper ownership relations for the development of the productive forces. State coercion can be an effective vehicle once the class struggle under socialism is reduced to the imposition of state ownership.

As Balibar points out, the Eurocommunists take the same narrow economist conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and reject the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat on the basis that these ownership relations can be brought about through reform rather than repression, given the overwhelming proletariat majority in the era of monopoly capitalism. The Eurocommunists, like Stalin, hold to the view that once state ownership and planning are instituted, the state becomes the instrument for carrying out policies for the good of all the people.

In our evaluation of the Polish crisis we asserted that the revisionist practices of the Polish party and state are rooted in this Stalinian model of socialist construction, a model which combines theoretical economism and political commandism. The revisionist institutions dominating this society, substitute the goal of development of the productive forces for political leadership of the class struggle against bourgeois relations. The strength of the party and state apparatus and the relative militance of the working class and peasantry, determine the particular form and policies of this revisionism. In Poland where the party came to power without a popular base of support, and where the level of working class militancy has been historically high, repression could not be used as an effective vehicle to contain the class struggle. The Polish party has had to adopt a more conciliatory approach to the crisis that continue to erupt under the weight of the Stalinian model. This has led it to

seek increasing ties with imperialism in order to generate the capital needed for the expansion of the productive forces instead of relying on force against the peasantry and working class as Stalin could ~~gøøø~~ given the base of support for the Bolshevik party after the revolution and the strength of the state apparatus.

In summation, the political effect of the theoretical economism underlying the revisionism from the second international to the present is as Bettelheim describes:

"Economism is characterized by the fact that it tend to identify productive forces with the material means of production, thus denying that the pricipal productive force consists of the producers themselves: consequently, economism ascribes the major role in the building of socialism not to the initiative of working people but to the accumulation of new means of production and technical knowledge." (p 34)

Balibar scilences any remaining questions on what is politically at stake in the struggle against theoretical economism and its connection to revisionism in this way:

" The theoretical msiunderstanding of the class struggle is not just a theoretical event: its result is that the proletariats can lose the practical initiative bought at a high price, it can become the pawn of social relations of exploitation and oppression instead of a force capable of transforming them." (p56)