

Has Socialism been discredited by the downfall of the Soviet Union?

This essay is about the counter-revolution in the Soviet Union and the ideological outcomes it produced. I will argue that from a practical and short-term perspective socialism was discredited, but the damage done was largely superficial. First I will discuss the ways in which the loss of the Soviet Union damaged the socialist cause, then I will show how and in what forms it has endured.

The first and most immediate loss in the downfall of the Soviet Union was the loss of real or 'actually existing' socialism (Marshall *et al*, 2009¹)(Žižek, 2001²). Without a working alternative society in place which other socialists could use as a model the contributions to socialist thought became grounded only in books and historical analysis, rather than an analysis of real material conditions as they are (or were) in the Soviet Union. This historical analysis however leaves the field free for revision of history to fit the prevailing liberal values. The best example of this historical revision is the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism³ which believes that “millions of victims of Communism and their families are entitled to enjoy justice, sympathy, understanding and recognition for their sufferings in the same way as the victims of Nazism have been morally and politically recognized”. It takes a view that both fascism and communism are both totalitarian ideologies and should be treated equally as 'two sides of the same coin'⁴. Unfortunately it also ignores the antifascist character of the communist movement. Communists retain their historical antifascist position by commemorating their role in events like the Battle of Cable Street (Smith, 2005⁵)(Piratin, 1948:23⁶), Spanish Civil War (Baxell, 2004:15⁷) and the partisan resistance in the Second World War (Armstrong, 1964:117⁸) but it's not enough to overturn the view that socialism is morally equivalent to fascism.

Another example, not related to the USSR but in keeping with the same theme of antifascism is the way the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) was also portrayed as a continuation of fascism. The book *Building the East German Myth* (Northgale, 1999⁹) frequently uses 'national socialism' as a description of Nazi fascism. From the liberal perspective it treats East Germany as a continuation of Nazi Germany. There's a certain irony in this as East German propaganda used the same argument to portray the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) as a continuation of fascism¹⁰, besides the fact that the GDR's 1949 constitution explicitly mentions the state should “overcome Nazism... and redress the wrongs inflicted by it”¹¹.

The second way the downfall of the Soviet Union discredited socialism was by cutting off the socialist strands of other ideologies, particularly nationalism. Throughout the period of anti-colonial national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Arabia, the pan-African and pan-Arab nationalist ideologies has strong socialist currents running within them, and this was actively encouraged by the Soviet Union through initiatives like the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee¹². The role of the Soviet Union as a bastion of nationalism against the imperialism and colonialism of the west is evident in George Galloway's assertion that “if there was a Soviet Union today... the US would not be rampaging around the globe”¹³. Though, as I hinted at earlier, it's dangerous to rely on alternate history and what would have happened in a parallel universe in which Soviet Union was still around today.

We can however look to the historical circumstances in which the Soviet Union backed anti-imperialist national liberation struggles and propped up national-democratic revolutions. This stance can be attributed to Nikita Khrushchev whose to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the 6th January 1961 affirmed his support for “wars of national liberation”. Khrushchev had made his position clear earlier in an address in 1960 to the World Conference of Communist Parties¹⁴, and he also sponsored a UN declaration on the “granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples”¹⁵. It's in the addition of 'peoples' that we see the influence of Marxist definition of nations not as states but as class entities made up of people united across geographical boundaries. The last ideology to lose out from the loss of the Soviet Union was social democracy. Social democrats were forced to build strong welfare states because they had to live up to the impressive living standards in the USSR and other socialist countries. This in turn was a move towards socialism as the welfare state forms part of the material base from which socialism develops. At the turn of the century there was a brief revival of social democracy, at least in Europe, as according to Ignacio Ramonet “in 2002 the social democrats were in power in 15 EU member states”¹⁶, yet by 2008 there were only 4 (Taylor, 2008:5-11¹⁷). The only country which reverses

this trend has been Cyprus, who in 2008 elected the communist Progressive Party of Working People. The other social democratic governments failed to create socialist-oriented market economies which would have weathered them through the capitalist crisis of 2008. Without the moderating force of the socialist countries they pursued a path of capitalist development and so when the crisis came they had to fall in line with the standard operations of finance capital. Even social democratic governments are forced to carry out deregulation, privatisation and austerity measures because that is what is required of finance capital. We can see this in Greece where PASOK were elected under a left-wing programme but were forced to implement right-wing measures to appease the capitalist system. Had they followed a socialist road of development I believe this would not have happened.

Now I will talk about the ways in which socialism, and not social democracy, has seen a real revival. If we broaden our horizons out from the 'official' communist movement, embodied by the Communist Party, we see there were significant ideological triumphs for the trotskyist end of the spectrum. The Trotskyist parties cannot necessarily be called socialist as they often take a left-communist stance. In this instance I will look only at Trotskyist theory in order to explain their position.

In Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* he asks "will the bureaucrat devour the workers' state, or will the working class clean up the bureaucrat?" (Trotsky, 1936¹⁸), which shows two avenues to development: either "forward or into the ditch of capitalism"¹⁹. In the case of the USSR it fell into the ditch of capitalism, and so Trotsky's theory is proven correct.

Justin Schwartz, whose tendencies on the labour left don't endear him to Trotskyism comes up with much the same analysis. "Gorbachev's [reform] was doomed to frustration because it embodied contradictory goals. The basic problem is that reform in either a capitalist or a socialist direction would require dismantling the domination of the Party apparatus over Soviet society, but Gorbachev wanted to retain a cleaned-up version of bureaucratic rule. In the end he could not have it both ways" (Schwartz, 1991²⁰).

However, Trotsky also writes that "without a planned economy the Soviet Union would be thrown back for decades." Yuri Yemelianov²¹ confirms this when he states that between 1956 and 1991 the Soviet Union provided on average 20% of world industrial production. Before 1917 it produced only 4% and after 1994 it was back down to 4% as a result of the privatisation programmes.

Despite the massive loss to the Soviet people it is claimed as an ideological victory by Trotskyism. Trotskyists also define their politics in relation to liberal notions of totalitarianism, so the most ultra-left among them tend to reject today's really existing socialist countries on the grounds that they're 'totalitarian'. If capitalism was restored in Cuba, Vietnam, or any other of today's socialist countries the 'third camp' Trotskyists would welcome it as a victory for the working class. This is why they stand to gain from capitalist restoration in socialist countries and in the former USSR.

On the opposite end of the spectrum the Stalinists in the Hoxhaist/Bainsite tendencies showed an equal distaste for the Soviet Union after the process of de-stalinization. Enver Hoxha's essay 'Eurocommunism is anticommunism' makes reference to 'Khrushchevite revisionism' (and, by implication the process of de-stalinisation) as "not only the ideology of the restoration of capitalism and sabotage of the revolution and the peoples' liberation struggle, but also the ideology of socialimperialist aggression" (Hoxha, 1980²²). So the Stalinists celebrated the fall of the USSR as the end of revisionism, however it was still a loss for them as Albania fell along with the USSR.

I won't dwell on the Maoist perspective as it has either been absorbed into the official communist movement or fallen in line with Stalinism, either way it has already been covered. The Eurocommunist perspective, while featuring a less revolutionary course of socialist development than the Trotskyist position, still shares the liberal view of totalitarianism. As suggested by its name, the Eurocommunist trend represents a break away from soviet and 'muscovite' politics. Despite this it didn't see a revival after the fall of the soviet union, and in the UK the eurocommunist movement became absorbed into mainstream politics through a series of pressure groups and think tanks.

The only 'real existing socialism' we are left with are the surviving socialist countries of China, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba. Following this Latin America is undergoing a socialist revival. Free from the soviet-oriented socialist politics of the 20th Century, governments in Bolivia, Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Brazil have

formed a 'pink tide' of left-leaning governments with a commitment to socialist-oriented economies as a means of defending themselves from US neocolonialism. These governments draw an anti-imperialist position from independence struggles symbolised by figures such as Augusto César Sandino and Simón Bolívar. They also draw their political orientation from Cuba as the most advanced socialist country in the region. It shows that, despite the loss of the Soviet Union, socialism has endured in the 21st Century.

Lastly the global recession of 2008-2009 proves Marx's theory that capitalism is in a constant period of deflected crisis. After the fall of the Soviet Union the neoliberal view that prevailed took the position that market instability is not part of the nature of the free market, but is in fact due to regulation of the market by the state. After 30 years of market deregulation in various forms since the neoliberal project took off in the 1980s we've gone through 4 periods of global recession: 1990-1993, 1998, 2001-2002, and the latest one between 2008 and 2009. The severity and sustained damage of this latest recession has brought Marx's critique of capitalism back to the fore and in the process discredited neoliberalism. Neoliberal think-tanks like the Centre For Global Prosperity still push the line that the solution to the crisis is yet more deregulation, privatisation and austerity²³, but now a space has opened up outside that dominant paradigm to argue for a complete reorganisation of the forces of production, ie: Socialism. Not to mention that during the crisis China's growth rate only dropped to 9.2% while the US economy shrank by 2.7%²⁴ and had to bail out 5 failing banks²⁵ and rescue 2 failing car manufacturers²⁶. One outcome of this was that the Chinese state now owns 24% of US public debt²⁷, and as such the Chinese Communist Party has an unprecedented influence on the world economic system.

To conclude I think from a liberal perspective the downfall of the Soviet Union discredited socialism and damned it as totalitarian, but despite that socialism has survived into the 21st Century through the global recession and will continue to do so until the historical conditions are right for it to flourish again.

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