

Book Review

Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*, New York, London: Routledge, 2002. Pp.xiv + 353.

The last quarter of a century has witnessed the emergence of new paradigms of economy, society and history. One of these new paradigms, which we will refer to as “Postmodern Political Economy”, distinguishes itself from other paradigms in terms of its uniquely postmodern methodology/epistemology and class theory. Its methodology sees economic, social and historical phenomena in ceaseless change produced by complexly interwoven contradictions arising from conflicting forces affecting the phenomena under consideration. All historical, social or thought-processes/phenomena exist both as effects and causes of other processes. There are no essential/foundational determinants of any social process or of truth. The rejection of fixed essences or foundations for society, history and knowledge gives rise to a postmodern reformulation of class: ‘Class’, which is defined as the processes of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor, is conceived to be neither the foundation for society nor the driving force of history. Class, in this paradigm, functions only as an organizing concept with which one could begin analyzing economy, history and society.

Employing this notion of knowledge and class, two leading figures of this paradigm, Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, present, in *Class Theory and History* (Routledge, 2002), an ambitious and thought-provoking account of the history of the Soviet Union, explaining its rise, evolution and demise. The book consists of three main parts. Part I develops a notion of communist class structure in a variety of forms and explore whether, when, where, and in what form the USSR established a communist class structure. Part II defines and examines various forms of capitalist class structures so as to distinguish between private capitalism and state capitalism. “In private capitalism, individuals with no formal position in state apparatus appropriate surplus in enterprises located outside the state, while, in state capitalism, individuals employed and selected by the state apparatus appropriate the surplus in enterprises” (p. 87). Authors attempt to answer the question of whether the USSR established a state capitalism and explore the possible consequences of such capitalism for the evolution of the Soviet system. First two parts of the book prepare the ground for the third and final part, where the authors argue and conclude that the USSR did not achieve a society-wide

communism. What the USSR managed to establish instead was a state form of capitalism. The Bolshevik Revolution, in the authors' view, replaced the private capitalism that existed before 1917 with a state capitalism. In the 1980s, however, a reverse shift was accomplished: the USSR moved from state capitalism back to private capitalism, displaying a swing or oscillation between private and state forms of capitalism throughout its history in the twentieth century.

Seeing the Soviet history as an oscillation between private capitalism and state capitalism is, however, a paradoxical feature of the book, for the particular method of economic, social and historical inquiry characteristic of the authors' overall work would not generally be compatible with such persistent long-run oscillatory patterns. In a postmodern view of historical process, which is conceived to be in a state of continuous unrest (flux) produced by the relentless play of infinite number of factors transforming the process (and hence the different forms of capitalism) in question, a long-run oscillation would be either indefinable or a probabilistically very rare, remote possibility, if not an impossibility. Paradoxically, the authors' oscillatory pattern-based explanation of the overall trajectory of the Soviet history, which is not quite compatible with their own method, is compatible with a method they are critical of, namely the neoclassical equilibrium method which allows the possibility of a dynamic equilibrium capable of generating such oscillations. In contradiction to the authors' overall method, there are, in the text, other saddle examples of equilibrium explanations (especially the ones associated with the various forms of their class-analytic equation), which would not be possible to explore within the confines of a book review. In an ironic twist, however, these thought-provoking contradictions (in addition to the rich theoretical and historical content) make the book a fascinating reading.

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