
Stalinism just does not go away. Fifty years after the Great Purges, 34 years since Stalin's death, the system that bears his name continues to haunt the political and academic Left in the West. As "real socialism," it continues to oppress the peoples of the East. Years ago, we could console ourselves by "explaining" Stalinism as a "deviation" or "degeneration" from a once purer socialism. Yet this historical accident seems to possess an extraordinary viability. Stalinism has confronted threats to its hegemony by sending in tanks in Budapest, Prague and Kabul. It has withstood the revelations of the Gulag, the debacle in Kampuchea, the military coup in Poland, and twenty-six years of Fidel. For anyone who still takes socialism seriously, Stalinism remains a
political and theoretical millstone. This burden is especially heavy for those East European Marxists who have been members of Communist Parties, and who have watched an apparently “transitional” social order consolidate itself into a system of oppression and stagnation.

The Romanian Marxist Pavel Campeanu is one of these people. Campeanu joined the minuscule Romanian Communist Party in 1940 and like most Romanian communists, spent the War years in prison for anti-fascist activity. Campeanu remains an avowed and very traditional Marxist, despite his having seen Romania evolve into the epitome of Stalinism — with all its arbitrariness, inefficiency, cultural sterility and personality cult. Trained as a sociologist, Campeanu headed the Opinion Polling Department of Romanian television until 1980. Having been awarded prizes by the Romanian Academy in 1964 and 1977, Campeanu does not number among Romania’s few dissidents. Judging by the conspicuous absence of any reference to Romania in this book (with one minor exception), he seems to have no plans to engage the Romanian party-state in any test of wills.

In 1980, under the pseudonym of Felipe Garcia Casals, Campeanu published The Syncretic Society,1 a short book describing the nature of what he called “premature socialism” and its relation to Stalinism. The Origins of Stalinism extends this project backwards to look at the preconditions for Stalinism’s emergence. He locates these preconditions in the nature of the Russian revolution and the immediate post-revolutionary period.2

The syncretic society which is Stalinism is not a society of contradictions. Rather, it is a society of perpetual incompatibilities of “antinomies,” to use Campeanu’s terminology. Whereas contradictory forces eventually lead to some kind of resolution, the antinomic forces of Stalinism contain plurivocal tendencies which lead it in two opposite directions. Stalinism is a self-reproducing dead-end, a social order which leads only to perpetual stagnation.

One feature of Stalinism’s uniqueness is the ruling party. Never has a social order been ruled by a party which monopolized both economic and political power. This party is not a ruling class, since there is no concept of proprietorship. And without a concept of proprietorship there can be no real classes, and hence, no class conflict.

It is not repression which defines Stalinism. Repression is just a result of the social forces which maintain it. Stalinism is a society “without theory,” “without strategy.” It is a society ruled solely by improvisation, by arbitrariness. The “leading role of the party,” valid during the revolution, has under Stalinism become party rule over society, a rule grounded in both economic and political control. Yet the party has itself become a bureaucratic servent of the “infallible leader.” Infallibility is an inherent feature of all Stalinist social orders. Stalinism is not the first social order that had providential leaders, but it is the first — says Campeanu — that cannot exist without them. Criticizing the former leader’s personality cult is but a method whereby the current leader establishes his own infallibility.

But how did all this get to be? Telos readers need not be bored with a recapitulation of theories of Stalinism’s origins. Basically, there are theories which see Stalinism as a degeneration of pure socialism, theories that emphasize traditions of Russian despotism, those that see Stalinism as growing out of Lenin, those who see Stalinism in the works of Marx, and those that reduce Stalinism to Stalin’s pathological personality, his seminary upbringing, etc.

For Campeanu, Stalinism is not to be considered an intrinsically Russian phenomenon. There are countries where Stalinism has evolved without Stalin, without the autocratic traditions of Russian history, even without the aid of a Marxist or Communist Party-led revolution. Some of the most vehement enemies of Stalinist societies are other Stalinist societies (Kampuchea-Vietnam, Albania-USSR, Romania-USSR). The Stalinisms of China, Hungary, Ethiopia and Cuba [to use Campeanu’s examples] have evolved with quite different personalities and circumstances. What all these Stalinisms have in common, however, is that they are born out of revolutions which were both anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. Hence, Marx cannot be at fault, since he only foresaw revolution taking place in the developed capitalist states which had already industrialized.

A second feature that these Stalinist societies have in common is that their historically significant classes — the bourgeoisie and proletariat — were both “immature.” Imperialism had prevented the bourgeoisie from fulfilling its role as industrializer, while their largely peasant population made the proletariat too weak to replace the bourgeoisie. Yet industrialization was necessary both to develop the country internally and to break the chain of imperialism. In the absence of a strong bourgeoisie and politically mature proletariat, the task of anti-capitalist industrialization fell to the revolutionary political party. The origins of Stalinism lay largely in this fortuitous event.

It was fortuitous because these revolutionary parties had never developed a strategy for industrialization. In Leninist strategy, the party was but a temporary compromise meant to lead the proletariat to take over the means of production from the bourgeoisie. Now burdened with an unexpected mission of anti-capitalist industrialization, the party took over the economic management of society, recast the system of property, and using political control, juridical and extra-legal measure, embarked on its new mission. In doing so, the party became the central institution of the Stalinist social order. Industrialization was indeed achieved, but the antinomies generated prevented the society from moving onward towards a genuine socialism. Stalinism was born.

Of crucial importance for Campeanu is the contrast between the objective,

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1. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1980).
2. A forthcoming volume, provisionally titled The Genes of Stalinism continues the study and focuses on the late 1920s and early 1930s.
historical necessities of Marxism versus the subjective, antinomic necessities of Leninist post-revolutionary strategy. Imperialism had created the first antinomic necessity; Russia was at once an object of imperialism and an imperialist country in its own right. Since the bourgeoisie had never developed the productive forces, it was left to the party to “anticipate history.” “Capitalist relations of production were abolished not because the forces of production had reached a particular level but in spite of the level they had reached” (p. 17). Foreshortening the presumed natural sequence of social evolution — speeding things up — gave the Russian revolution its anticipatory character. Yet this shift from the historically necessary to the politically possible had its price. The price was syncretism, stagnation and eventually the consolidation of the monolithic Stalinist social order. Lacking a coherent theory, the party could only resort to the leader’s infallibility. Revelations by the providential leader replaced proletarian democracy and party debates. Stalinism arose, then, out of the antinomic “nature” of the revolution which proceeded it. Under the influence of imperialism, the Russian revolution was anti-feudal, anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist. The triumph of subjectivism, of anticipating history without strategy, laid the groundwork for Stalinism.

As a “mode of production,” Stalinism has nothing inherently to do with Soviet Russia, Russian despotism, Stalin’s personality, Lenin or Marx. Not even Communist Parties are necessary, says Campeau. Cuba’s party emerged only after the revolution, when a party was needed to lead its ill-fated anti-capitalist development. Rather, Stalinism is a product of anticipatory revolutions which take place in societies where the party substitutes itself for the historically immature proletariat in achieving industrialization, i.e., in breaking the bonds of underdevelopment.

Campeau thus uses the Russian revolution to prove a more general point. In this effort he relies on certain classics of Russian revolutionary history — Lenin, Trotzky, the History of the CPSU, Bettelheim, Schapiro, Carr and Mandel. His principal source, he admits, is Trotzky. Yet Campeau is not writing a new history. His purpose in this long, extremely repetitious work is simply to decipher the various “characters” of the revolution as it took form and to show the antinomies (i.e., nondialectical) incompatibilities in each. Due to the nature of imperialism, the Russian revolution had three characteristics: it was anti-feudal, anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist. A discussion of each of these characters form the three chapters of Campeau’s book.

The anti-feudal character of the revolution manifested itself in the peasants’ efforts to take over the landed estates. A “mature” bourgeoisie would have allied itself with the peasants against the estate owners, but the Russian bourgeoisie — stilted by imperialism — defended the landlords. Hence, the anti-feudal peasant war inevitably took an anti-bourgeois form as peasant boys in uniform — the defeated Russian army — lay siege to the Provisional Government. For the Bolsheviks, the peasant land expropriations created obvious antinomies, since they were initially forced to support the creation of a class of small landholding peasants. As the Bolsheviks took power they would later expropriate the expropriators, using land decrees to deprive peasants of property ownership forcing them to render surpluses and quotas, and in the end making war on the peasantry during collectivization. The legacy of this antagonism between the party and the peasantry continues today in the chronic problems of Soviet agriculture, the food shortages, black market, cult of the private plot, etc.

The anti-bourgeois character of the revolution was evident in the October insurrection. Yet the antinomies generated here were more serious. The bourgeoisie was a defender of feudal privileges. It had not, and would never play its role in fostering a developed capitalist society. Now the tasks of development would ordinarily have fallen to the proletariat, represented by the Soviets. Yet the proletariat was demographically and organizationally weak. As Campeau stresses time and again, it was “immature,” being small in numbers, having ties with the (backward) peasant mentality, lacking revolutionary spirit. The Soviets sought an accommodation with the bourgeoisie rather than seeking to overthrow them as a class. It was left to the Bolshevik party — a political organ — to “substitute” itself for the proletariat in pursuing anti-capitalist (not socialist) industrialization. The economic mechanisms of capitalist society were replaced by decrees and coercion. With its economic dominance defined by its political power, the party began to isolate itself from society. From its initial position as “leading force” of the Russian proletariat, the party began to elevate itself above the proletariat, subverting the Soviets (and those political groups which supported them) and placing them under party control.

The emergence of monolithic party control over the Soviets now compelled the party to take all measures to keep the proletariat politically “immature.” The most militant or most opportunistic members of the proletariat could be coopted into the apparatus. The remainder could be bought off, threatened into submission, channeled into safer ideological pursuits like Great Russian chauvinism, or, if need be, jailed and executed. Since the Kronstadt rebellion, the supreme virtue of the Soviet proletariat has no longer been considered its militancy but its passivity and obedience.

The post-revolutionary party now assumed the task of non-capitalist industrialization. Yet since the proletariat was never a genuine participant in this effort, industrialization was only partially successful. Considered to be a momentary necessity — an anticipation of history — industrialization was pursued with coercion, violence, diktat, expropriation and a “generalized primitive accumulation.” The structures created during this period of momentary necessity and the means of accumulation used have now been perpetuated beyond their historic need. The inherent incompatibilities in these...
structures are now reproduced. They must be reproduced in order for Stalinism to reproduce itself. This is the syncretic society, the antinomic necessity, of which Campeanu speaks.

The monolothism of the party — relying on its myth of infallible leadership during the revolution — inevitably gave way to the rise of the infallible leader within the party. Since the party was now anticipating history instead of acting under historical necessity, there was no coherent theory or strategy for use as a guide in pursuing anti-capitalist industrialization. Revelations of the infallible leader began to replace discussions of strategic possibilities. Hence, the once revolutionary party had to change its character: any group or competing leaders who could pose a challenge to the providential leader’s infallibility had to be removed. Now some of these providential leaders may be more eloquent than others, some may be more crafty, but the cult of the infallible leader remains. In this sense, the “populist” leaders like Kadar or Gorbatchev are no different than the “royalist” Ceausescu or Kim Il-Sung. One does not require Russian autarchic traditions or Soviet tanks to explain this; rather, it is the immaturity of the historically necessary classes, the exigencies of non-capitalist industrialization and the inability of post-revolutionary parties to formulate a suitable theory or strategy which are sufficient causes of Stalinist personality cults. Subjectivity is objectively conditioned.

In the ideological sphere “Leninism,” which was a coherent strategy for achieving revolution, became “Marxism-Leninism,” a degenerated ideology/mythology used solely to legitimate the “new” party and the leader’s periodic revelations of policy.

The third characteristic of the October insurrection was its anti-imperialism. Anti-imperialism was manifested in the actions of the army, which returned from the front and refused to fight against peasants and workers. Following the revolution, the USSR was forced to come to terms with imperialism, which not only meant giving up a sizable portion of its western territories (later to be recovered by Stalin), but also giving up its long-term goal of socialism. With the failure of the international proletariat to come to its aid, “the energy generated by revolutionary militance was rechanneled into Soviet patriotism... casting present day Russians in the role of the chosen people” (p. 162). From this accommodation with imperialism arose Stalinist neo-imperialism.

Since then the Soviet Union’s relations with its allies have been much more volatile than with its enemies. Harsh polemics, periods of tension, invasions and wars have been part of the normal course of relations among countries which seem to be near mirror images of each other; this is true in Eastern Europe and in Asia. Campeanu mentions that the USSR has in fact had diplomatic military or near-military confrontations with two-thirds of its closest allies. It is worth remarking here that Europe’s two most Stalinist states — Albania and Romania — have been among those who have had the most tense relations with the Soviet Union (while Yugoslav-Soviet relations were most hostile when Yugoslavia was in its highest form of Stalinism).

Does Campeanu have any solution to the Stalinist dead-end which he presents? In a half-hearted way, yes. He wants a better theory for achieving anticapitalist industrialization, restrictions on the party’s monopoly over both property and political power, or at least a means of preventing this control from “ossification.” Yet Campeanu cannot specify how his antinomic Stalinism could generate the kind of objective conditions so that such reforms could become a reality. Efforts toward reform in Central Europe have always floundered on the Soviet Union’s defense of its strategic interests. Within the Soviet Union itself, more than a half-century of Stalinism has apparently succeeded in keeping the Soviet working class sufficiently “immature,” preoccupied, apathetic or suppressed so that any challenge to the apparatus is out of the question. Even a party-led reform movement could never do anything to harm the bedrock of Stalinism — “the leading role of the party.”

Looking beyond the USSR’s immediate geopolitical orbit, we see no prospects for transforming the antinomy of Stalinism into any dynamic evolution toward genuine socialism. From Albania to Mozambique, from Ethiopia to China, from Cuba to South Yemen, efforts toward anti-capitalist industrialization have led only to classical Stalinism (Albania), developmental dead-ends (Cuba), pleas for re-integration into the world market (Mozambique) or capitalist rebirth (China). If we read Campeanu correctly, the socialist project has failed because no society has ever traversed the boundary between anticapitalism and socialism.

Yet here Campeanu reveals the limitations of his Marxist analysis, as well as the frustrations of the original Trotskyist critique. Like Trotsky, Campeanu has managed to salvage “Socialism” and his beloved proletariat. For in order to save socialism from being contaminated by History, Campeanu must term it Stalinist all those societies whose socialism he does not like. If Stalinism has nothing to do with Russia, nor with Stalin, nor the Bolsheviks, nor with Lenin, nor with Marx, if Stalinism is the only kind of society in which party-led industrialization falters, then the category becomes too general to be of any importance. Moreover, Campeanu’s emphasis on antinomic necessity certainly fails to account for the major changes which took place in Yugoslavia or the present party-led reversion to capitalism now taking place in China.

Although Campeanu ties Stalinism to the problem of achieving industrialization in the world of imperialism, he pointedly avoids two important test cases where industrialization has preceded Stalinism; namely, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. The East German case is termed too “special” to discuss due to its complex geopolitical situation. Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, meanwhile, was the result of “external pressures” and “an inclination toward blind imitation” (p. 178) which forced pre-industrial political-economic structures on an industrial society. Yet despite their Stalinist nature, both the DDR and Czechoslovakia are economically quite viable on a world scale, and would be much more so were it not for their forced integration into the Soviet
economic sphere. What Campeau avoids discussing completely, in his effort to show the independent invention of Stalinism in each society, is the nature of the Soviet world-system in all its political, economic and military nuances.

Campeau has written a book in the true Marxist mold: full of “objective necessities,” “historical forces,” “mature” and “immature” classes, a book which offers a class analysis but which ends by asserting that class structure does not exist. Most of all, Campeau’s Marxist faith is reflected in his view that Leninism was “theory” while Stalinism was “without theory.”

Of course Stalin had a theory. All Stalinists have theories. Of course he had a strategy. All post-revolutionary parties have strategy. The problem was that these theories and strategies had costs that proved unacceptable (for Campeau) and byproducts that made them counterproductive. Stalin’s “socialism in one country,” priority of the productive forces, emphasis on heavy industry, collectivization at all costs, fortress Russia, were all as “theoretical” as Leninism was improvisational. For who was but more improvisational and theoryless than the Bolsheviks, as Campeau himself shows. Were it not for Lenin’s and Trotsky’s willingness to substitute pragmatics for theory, there would have been no Bolshevik triumph. Improvisation, subjectivity, tactical turns later justified as theory, all these are not only part of Stalinism but of Leninism too. Strategy and tactics are, after all, what Leninism is all about. The proper contrast is between a theory-armed Lenin and a theory-less Stalinist, but between the theoretician Marx and revolutionaries of all sorts. Casting off theory (at the right time, of course), anticipating history, is the secret of all successful social movements.

Campeau’s analysis could have been better served if he had seen the conversion of the Old into the New Party in terms of general theories of how social movements become political institutions for which there is an enormous literature of Marxist, quasi-Marxist and non-Marxist orientation. 1 The study of the relation between social movements and their institutionalization invariably shows that institutions tend to create their own movements, just as Stalinism in Central Europe has tended to spawn the rebirth of Civil Society and reform movements of various stripes. 2 Since these reform movements take aim at key features of these systems — “leading role of the party,” separation of economic control from political leadership, replacing infallibility with accountability — they are not as reformists as Campeau would think. They are in fact quite revolutionary, which is why Stalinism resists them so harshly. Campeau poses a question of why post-revolutionary movements tend to be without adequate strategy (p. 178). On the contrary, it is post-revolutionary parties, which tend to be without strategy; social movements with a myriad of strategies keep popping up all the time.


For hard-core Marxists — especially those within East European states with archetypal Stalinist forms — analyzing Stalinism is obviously a key political task and a personal one. Yet to begin this task we must “deliver” socialism from its hermetically sealed womb. For socialism has neither degenerated from a glorious past, nor is it “on the horizon” in a radiant, post-Stalinist future. Socialism, Real Socialism, is here and now. This means that Marxists — and especially Marxists like Campeau — must come to grips with this fact if the socialist project is to have any significance at all. If we do not realize this antinomy, then we can never realize that unity of the possible and the necessary which Bahro, Campeau and so many others have wished for. Hopefully, Campeau’s forthcoming book will help us to look Real Socialism straight in the eye.

Steven Sampson


Attali subtitles his book “The Political Economy of Music,” which combined with the author’s background as a professor of economic theory and an advisor to former French President Mitterand, may warn the reader that this is a dry piece of Marxist analysis. Though Attali’s historical analysis of music is thoroughly economic, his honest critiques of Marxism and his downright libertarian, utopian and anti-economic conclusions are surprising and welcome. His points of reference are always wholly human and his vision is painted with imagination and colors that flow straight from the struggles of May 1968. In describing an evolution and anatomy of power through its tools in everyday life, which Attali has done with Time, 1 Medicine 2 and, in this case, music, power becomes demystified, its ghost can be seen, its end envisioned. Noise should be read by economists, who are largely unaware of their historic role. It will serve as an inspiration, as a philosophical foundation for politically conscious artists, and as an encouragement to develop counter-institutions in the world of music, which I see as one of Attali’s working solutions to the “state” of noise we are now in. Others should read Noise because we are all affected by music: we are all its listeners, its consumers. We all hum its tunes, mouth its lyrics. We all suppress the composer within us, and Attali describes how this keeps us caught in repetition, keeps us jailed.