

Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. xix + 353 pp. \$85 (hardback), ISBN: 0-415-93317-X; \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 0-415-93318-8.

Reviewed for EH.NET by Mark Harrison, Department of Economics, University of Warwick.

This book has twin objectives. Parts I and II ("Communism" and "State Capitalism") lay out the authors' theory of political economy and social relations. Part III, which is more than half the book in length, then applies the framework to "The Rise and Fall of the USSR."

The book offers three main outcomes. First, at the core of Resnick and Wolff's understanding of what drives any society are the mechanisms and channels by which it appropriates and distributes the surplus product. This, they argue, follows the Marxian tradition. From here, they criticize a number of alternative existing approaches, some that claim to be Marxian and some that do not. The alternatives, they believe, place too much emphasis on the distribution of power and not enough on the distribution of resources. The problem that they find with starting from the distribution of power is that you can't pin it down empirically; when you look closely at the facts power turns out always to be diffused through society. Instead, they prefer to try to pin down how the surplus product is appropriated and distributed.

Second, Resnick and Wolff categorize various mechanisms for appropriating and distributing the surplus product; most important from the point of view of the book are "ancient," feudal, capitalist, socialist, and communist mechanisms. They use this framework to classify various kinds of institutions that existed in Russia and the Soviet Union before 1917, during the 1920s, the 1930s, the postwar period, and after the Soviet collapse.

Third, while properly impressed by the sheer variety and intermingling of institutions of different kinds in all their phases of development, the authors conclude that the dominant mode of production in Russia and the Soviet Union throughout the twentieth century was capitalist: plain capitalist before 1917 and after 1991, and state-capitalist in between. Thus while political power certainly changed hands during the Bolshevik Revolution and when the Soviet Union fell, one way and then another, the basic mode of production did not change and so less changed in an underlying sense than might appear at first sight.

Does Soviet history truly bear out the authors' theory? I must say yes, but in a sense for which they may not thank me: in my view the theory is trivial. The authors correctly wish to avoid the traps of determinism, and specifically those of the economic kind. Many Marxists of earlier generations based deterministic predictions on economic trends of one kind or another that eventually came to nought. Instead of determinism Resnick and Wolff offer the Althusserian concept of "overdetermination": "all aspects of society condition and shape one another" (p. 9). The result is that anything can lead to anything, or not, as the case may be (p. 78). Consequently no predictions are possible since anything or nothing can happen. A theory that is consistent with anything happening clearly cannot be refuted from history; in Resnick and Wolff's hands the purpose of historical analysis is only to illustrate the theory, not to subject it to any potentially damaging test.

Thus the book contains many statements that look substantial at first sight and then seem to dissolve into word play. For example the authors state that the "history of Russia was shaped, in part, by the specific and ever-changing class positions

occupied and negotiated by its people" (p. 146). Does "in part" mean a lot or a little? Why doesn't history shape class as well as class shaping history? Is the influence of class on history greater than the influence of history on class? How can we tell, and what difference does it make?

The authors' criticism of power-based analysis seems to me to be somewhat lazy. They view political power as a quicksilver that is always everywhere at once in society, and therefore nowhere in particular. On Russia before the revolution they write approvingly (p. 162) of the idea that "the czarist state was less controlling than controlled by Russian society." On the 1930s (p. 119) they criticize the idea that Stalin held a "monopoly on power" or brought about a "revolution from above"; here they refer to the recent "revisionist" historical literature that shows how there was also a "revolution 'from below' in the precise sense of all sorts of powers wielded by diverse groups of workers, intellectuals, planners, managers, and others -- powers with which Stalin had to contend and compromise." In a trivial sense this must be true: political power is never unlimited. But in a narrower sense it is simply false. While Stalin generally took decisions rationally, that is to say, taking into account the opinions and information provided by others, the research of R.W. Davies, Oleg Khlevniuk, and others has shown clearly that from 1932 onwards Stalin ceased to have to persuade or compromise with others to reach a decision and his decisions, once issued, were never challenged. While the political power of Stalin's successors was less untrammelled, general secretaries after Stalin continued to retain extraordinary personal prerogatives, for example, over the allocation of resources to the "military-industrial complex."

Perhaps Resnick and Wolff have a fair point in the following sense: some kinds of power matter more than others, and what they would like us to focus on is the power to appropriate and distribute resources. The Soviet surplus product was produced in state enterprises, but where exactly was it appropriated and distributed? Their answer (p. 166) is that this happened in Vesenkha, the "Supreme Council of National Economy," established in 1923 to administer state industry and "soon reorganised as the Council of Ministers." Its leaders were the "first receivers and distributors of the surpluses produced by industrial laborers" and "functioned similarly to a centralized board of directors of a private capitalist industrial combine." There is a factual error: Vesenkha was a ministry and its successor organization was not the Council of People's Commissars (from 1946 Ministers) which had existed from the first days of the October Revolution, but separate ministries of heavy and light industry and logging established in 1932. Setting that aside, the authors are still wrong: the most important decisions about the Soviet surplus product, those that fixed the annual budgets for investment and defense, were always taken at the very vertex of the system by the general secretary in the Politburo with no more than a handful of senior Politburo. Moreover this was no "board of directors" that, in the worst run of capitalist enterprises, must ultimately account for its decisions to the shareholders, the markets, or the courts.

The evidence base of the work is remarkable for its breadth, yet still deficient. I will give two examples. First, Resnick and Wolff claim that the burdens of taxation on "the desperately poor mass of individuals" had Tsarist society on the edge of revolt, and this resulted in a growing reliance on deficit finance in the "last decades" (pp. 160-61). I know of no serious historical support for the former claim and the latter is plain wrong. From the 1880s onwards, if we exclude the years of the war with Japan, which was financed by borrowing on orthodox tax-smoothing grounds, the reliance of the state budget on loans declined steadily. Similarly in relation to the 1920s Resnick and Wolff suggest that adverse terms of trade on the rural-urban market deprived

farmers of "sufficient revenues to secure their conditions of existence," an absurd exaggeration and misunderstanding of the true state of affairs.

Second, Resnick and Wolff devote major efforts to trying to track changes in the "appropriation and distribution" of the Soviet surplus product that resulted from Soviet price policies in the 1920s and collectivization in the 1930s, but they are apparently ignorant of the monograph on this topic published by A.A. Barsov in 1966, which led to a major controversy among western economists and historians, notably James R. Millar, Michael Ellman, and Alec Nove.

As a reader, despite being reasonably familiar with the historical literature about the Russian and Soviet economies and also with the concepts of classical Marxian political economy, I found this book very heavy going. On its own this cannot be a criticism: when my first year students complain that they have to work hard to learn new concepts I just tell them that's why they're at university. In the present case the book would benefit from more of the attributes of a good textbook such as definitions that are highlighted and cross-referenced. My patience was especially taxed by the attempts to mathematize various kinds of budget constraints, given in the form of equations yet "the word 'equation' does not signal any necessity that ... revenues equal expenditures" (p. 179n); the symbolization features many weird acronyms and subscripts that have no obvious intrinsic meaning and are not indexed anywhere. These are things that a good editor should have rooted out.

In summary this is a well-intentioned, complex work that is hard to do justice in a short review, but even summary justice must make an attempt at balance. The plaudits on the book's back cover describe it as "path breaking" ... "Whether one agrees or disagrees ... no future work ... will be able to ignore the sheer creative verve and intellectual rigor with which [the authors] lay out their arguments." While this reviewer is impressed by the efforts put in by the writers and required of the reader, the path that has been opened seems to lead nowhere; the rigor is superficial and the verve is not enough.

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