

## **Rethinking class power in the Russian factory 1929-1991**

**By Mike Haynes**

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## **Abstract**

The nature of the labour process in the Soviet era workplace is an important topic in its own right. But it has also been suggested that its legacy might help to explain some of the difficulties of the transition years since 1991. This paper reviews the argument that Soviet workers experienced a more or less unique set of internal workplace relations which determined the non-capitalist nature of the labour process. It argues that the case for the uniqueness of the Soviet workplace is unproven and that it rests on weak conceptual foundations.

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## Introduction

The question of the nature of the Soviet workplace and the form and determinants of the Soviet labour process remains a matter of fundamental dispute. It lies at the heart of the discussion of the fate of the revolution - was there any kind of qualitative change with the victory of Stalin at the turn of the 1930s? It lies at the heart of the question of the nature of the USSR - what kind of political economy did it have between 1928-1929 and its collapse in 1991? And it lies at the heart of some discussions of the transition - has the legacy of the Soviet era been overcome in the workplace or is it still the case that Soviet style workplace relations remain resilient and an impediment to the real subsumption of labour to capital?

This paper reviews the way in which the Soviet labour process in the years 1929-1991 has been conceived in the three major approaches in the debate on what kind of society Russia was. It then considers the adequacy of what Michael Burawoy (1997) has called the 'plant sociology' approach, arguing that the workplace can only be understood in relation to the greater whole and its role is misconceived if workplace relationships are seen as the central cause of 'systemic' failure. Thirdly, it suggests that while the emphasis on workplace resistance is important in showing the nature of social relations in the USSR the political significance of these forms of resistance is frequently exaggerated in the accounts of social historians both from the point of view of the workers themselves and the regime. Fourthly, and finally, the paper suggests that in analysing society in general and the workplace in particular more attention should be paid to looking at the way in which those who controlled the means of production and the workforce viewed their own position.

## The Soviet workplace in relations to theories of the USSR

The debate on the nature of the USSR revolves around three positions. The dominant view accepts it as some kind of socialist society - degenerate or not. A second view sees it as neither fitting the analysis of socialism nor capitalism. It therefore considers the USSR to be some new third form, *sui generis* for some - part of a wider group for others. The third view argues that it can be analysed as a form of capitalism. The argument between these three views is long standing and has been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Binns & Haynes, 1980; Haynes, 2002a). What is important here is that they each give rise to different ways of thinking about the social relations of the USSR and its many workplaces. Since different writers have taken up these three approaches in different ways, variations exist in the way that arguments are formulated. Table 1, however, tries to set out the main arguments and their sub groups to draw out what is central to the argument about the workplace.

The first difference is over whether the system in the USSR constituted a different mode of production and, if so, of what kind? A second area of debate is then whether the social relations that existed were class ones in the capitalist sense. Marx distinguished between the working class 'of itself' and 'for itself'. Because of the repression they experienced workers in the USSR could not become a class 'for themselves' and therefore articulate open class consciousness. But were the social relations such that they were even a class in the first sense? This question gives rise to arguments over whether workers were 'exploited' and if so what determined the form and level of exploitation? Finally, these arguments feed into and off arguments about the extent to which work in the USSR took the form of 'wage labour' and what role, if any, the law of value, played in determined social relationships and the system's overall rise and fall.

Before 1991 most accounts of the USSR took the first view set out in table 1. Soviet propaganda claims that the system was in some sense socialist were accepted at face value. Even on the critical left, the dominant critique tended to be inspired by Trotsky and therefore accept that the system, although degenerate, remained in some sense socialist (Bellis, 1979). The second line of argument, that it was a *sui generis* form, and the third, that the USSR was some form of capitalism, tended to be more marginal to the debate. The collapse of the USSR, if anything, re-inforced the first account in mainstream writings. The fall of the USSR was seen as an opportunity to write off what ever kind of society it was and the idea of socialism in general. On the left, however the balance of argument has

now changed. The Soviet collapse weakened the Trotsky position. Claims that the system retained some residual superiority collapsed and, contrary to the theory's predictions, Russian workers did not rise to defend the system. The main debate seems now to be between versions of 'exceptionalism' and 'state capitalism' both of which have been used and developed as frameworks for the analysis of Russia's past and present as well as political engagement.

**Table 1.** Theorisation of Soviet society and workplace relations according to different approaches

Form of analysis	Independent mode of production	Nature of ruling group	Nature of workers	Mode of surplus appropriation	Wage labour	Law of value
Socialist/degenerate workers state	Yes	Bureaucracy	Working class	Bureaucratic diversion	No	No
Exceptionalist: Ticktin, Filtzer, Arnot	No - sui generis	Elite	Working class	Coerced and chaotic	No?	No
Clarke <i>et al.</i>	Possibly	Stratum/elite possible class	Working class	Coerced and chaotic	Yes?	No
Capitalist: State capitalism	No	Ruling class	Working class	Capitalist ie. coerced and economic	Yes	Yes
Simple capitalism	No	Ruling class	Working class	Capitalist ie. coerced and economic	Yes	Yes

In these debates the analysis of workplace relations has come to play a central role. The major multi-volume English language history of the Soviet working class by Filtzer, for example, uses the exceptionalist approach (Filtzer, 1986; 1992; 1994; 2002; see also: Arnot, 1988). Similarly, Clarke *et al.*'s attempt to explain the failure of the transition in terms of the way that "the Soviet enterprise was ... the rock on which the liberal programme foundered ..." continues this focus with its emphasis workplace relations before and after 1991 (Clark *et al.*, 1993 p.29). "Soviet workers were outrageously insubordinate", writes Ashwin whose account follows Clarke *et al.*'s approach (Ashwin, 1999 p.6). Accounts written within the framework of state capitalist analysis tend to have a wider set of concerns. Yet if they differ on the nature of the Soviet labour process, they share the view that its understanding is a crucial component of the understanding of the USSR and therefore needs to be properly conceptualised and analysed in its historical evolution (Haynes, 2002b; Haynes & Husan, 2003; Resnick & Wolf, 2002). Moreover, Murphy's account in the same tradition does share the intense focus on the workplace analysing how Russian workers gained and lost power through the experience of a single workplace and seeing in the usurpation of their power in the 1920s the origins of the rise of state capitalism (Murphy, 2005).

But how should the workplace be understood? If the exceptionalist school is distinguished by its special focus on the workplace and intra and inter-enterprise relations this overlaps with a growing historical literature on the history of Soviet workers which also shares a workplace focus. While this work does not make the same broader claims to be found in commentators like Clarke *et al.* and Filtzer it is often equal to them in its claims for the significance of 'the shop floor'. "Whether ruled by a traditional or new labor hierarchy, the shop floor remained an unruly place. It was a world the regime could terrorise politically but could not control economically or administratively" (Shearer, 1996 pp.233-234; see also: Kuromiya, 1988; Siegelbaum, 1988; Kotkin, 1995; Strauss, 1997; Pittaway, 2005 attempts to generalise the argument to the Soviet bloc after 1945). In the next section we will therefore consider the argument that the Soviet workplace as it emerged in the 1930s had unique forms and that these forms were decisive in determining the overall character of the USSR as a 'social formation' or 'mode of production'.

## The workplace and the wider system - the limitations of 'plant sociology'

Is it possible to talk about 'the Soviet workplace'? Most discussions assume that such variation as existed - over time, space, economic sector etc - remained contained by an underlying set of relationships that operated throughout the Soviet period and for some, like Clarke *et al.*, beyond it. It is often implied that the variation between workplaces was less than to be found in the West. Soviet workplaces were larger and therefore fewer in number, the proliferation of organisational forms was more restricted, and these forms derived much more closely from the alleged peculiar political economy of the regime than in the West. These are hypotheses which are all worth testing. But for the purposes of our exposition here we too will treat 'the Soviet workplace' as if it was a more or less constant thing, allowing primarily for its more complete and organised development over time.

We should begin by noting that it is a commonplace of workplace sociology in the west that the labour process is marked by formal and informal relations that give rise to widely varying levels of commitment and productivity. These have been noted between workers in the same plant; between different plants in the same company; different plants in different companies; across sectors, national economies and, of course, over time too. Writing which assumes that the discipline of the market eliminates these variations is very wide of the mark although such an assumption often underpins stereotypical comparisons between the 'Western' and 'Soviet' workplace.

What then was distinctive, if anything, about the Soviet workplace? There would seem to be two possibilities. First that there was something specific to the shop floor. The second is that any distinctiveness arose from the wider set of relationships that enterprises had with other enterprises and the state. The first argument is what Burawoy has termed a 'plant sociology' approach and it lends itself to contemporary ethnographic observation and historical accounts which try to tease out the hidden informal elements of the development of the workplace. But it seems difficult to sustain the argument that by looking at the shop floor in isolation something specific and peculiar to the Soviet system can be found. In *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman commented that:

Soviet industrialisation imitated the capitalist model; and as industrialisation advanced the structure lost its provisional character and the Soviet Union settled down to an organisation of labour differing only in details from that of the capitalist countries, so that the Soviet working population bears all the stigmata of the Western working classes (Braverman, 1974 p.12).

Subsequent attempts to show that Soviet workers were marked by different stigmata because of forces that arisen behind the factory gate, in the 'hidden mode of production', have not been impressive. Burawoy himself in a review of one study of informal relations asks:

Is there anything specific to these informal relations ...[the author] ... unwittingly perhaps, reproduces the classic shop floor accounts of American industry. We can find here Alvin Gouldner's indulgency patterns, Donald Roy's goldbricking and quota restriction, patronage in recruitment and promotion. Like the 'plant sociology' of the 1950s, these Russian studies of the 1990s tend to isolate the shop floor and downplay the very external forces that produce its distinctiveness (Burawoy, 1997 p.1437).

But Burawoy does consider that the USSR had a distinctive political economy. Plant relations have to be understood as part of a set of wider system forms. For Burawoy this involves recasting Kornai's 'soft budget constraint' within a more radical analysis of social relations. Clarke *et al.*, Ticktin and others in the various ways do a similar thing although they might eschew any direct link to Kornai's work. Nevertheless they share a focus on the inability of the centre to secure its aims and thus the discipline that would have reduced the alleged autonomy of the shop floor. As Clarke *et al.* put it, "Soviet workers are powerful, in that managers are unable to impose labour discipline, and have to make concessions to enlist their co-operation, but they are weak in that they are atomised and have no means of collective resistance" (Clarke *et al.*, 1993 p.16).

This type of discussion, however, depends upon a separation of the Soviet system from its location in the wider global system. 'System' is assumed to be a set of 'internal' relations and the focus is to cut through what Tamas Bauer once called "the world of plan fetish" to "the cunning laws of plan-bargaining" (*quoted in Kraus, 2005*). If 'plant sociology' isolates the 'the shopfloor', this wider approach isolates the Soviet economy and the enterprise relationships within it. This gives the discussion of workplace relations a peculiarly static character and it diverts attention from analysing the drive to expand production to the problems encountered in achieving this.

We can allow that there was pressure on those in control of the enterprises to try to reduce their targets but this still leave unexplained why the centre put such pressure on them and why the targets were as they were. As the ghost writer of Leonid Brezhnev's memoirs put it, "it was generally realized that, in our planning, we were in duty bound to proceed not from what was 'possible', but from what was needed" (Brezhnev, 1982 p.78). But what determined what was needed?

This question is too rarely posed. When it is most commentators would recognise the decisive role of external pressures in the form of military and economic competition with the west. This found its reflection in the regime's self proclaimed mission - 'to catch up and overtake' the West. And it was this that determined the development drive and the basic proportions in the economy - the focus on accumulation, heavy industry, the military etc. As the resolution of the 15<sup>th</sup> party Congress in 1927 put it:

In view of a possible military attack by capitalist states against the proletarian state (sic), the Five Year Plan should devote maximum attention to the fastest possible development of those sectors of the economy in general, and of industry in particular, which play the main role in securing the country's defence and providing economic stability in war time (*quoted in Ellman, 2004 p.842*).

This was re-inforced by Stalin in his 1931 speech to industrial managers and it remained the constant driving force of Soviet policy, allowing the Soviet state to eventually achieve a tenuous strategic parity with the USA in the 1970s (Gregory, 2003; Davis, 2002).

The difficulty is that this competition is not theorised but simply taken as a given. A separation therefore develops between the analysis of the USSR (and its satellites after 1945) and the trends and tendencies in global capitalism. The USSR existed within the world economy but it was not part of it. This, of course, was the position of Stalin and when, after 1945 trade links within the 'Socialist Camp' grew he went one step further and posed the idea of two parallel systems. "The economic consequences of the existence of two opposing camps was that the single all-embracing world market disintegrated, so that now we have two parallel world markets, also confronting one another."

It should be observed that the USA and Great Britain and France, themselves contributed - without themselves desiring it, of course - to the formation and consolidation of the new parallel world market. They imposed an economic blockade on the USSR, China and the European people's democracies, which did not join the 'Marshall Plan' system, thinking thereby to strangle them. The effect, however, was not to strangle, but to strengthen the new world market (*quoted in Kraus, 2005*).

This separation can only be made if a number of assumptions are accepted which, if they are problematic for the USSR, are even more so for the West. The first is the implicit tendency to reduce the world economy, and capitalist competition within it, to commodity forms on the world market. In the 1930s Russia did, to an extent, develop in isolation from the world market but it did not become isolated from other, more militarised forms of competition, any more than did say Nazi Germany. Were these militarised forms of competition not part of the capitalist system?



The answer does not have to be yes. There has been a long tradition of writing on the global system, which sees it as having two elements - economic competition and inter-state competition. This latter competition is supposed to have a degree of autonomy from capitalism, to pre-date it, exist along side it, and possibly outlast it. However this argument has usually been questioned by Marxists who have seen forms of state competition, imperialism and war as deriving from elements intrinsic to capitalism. Moreover in order to secure the means to compete here, it has been increasingly necessary to constrain forms of commodity production to feed the militarised competition without thereby separating them from a wider capitalist logic. As Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring*, "nothing is more dependent on economic conditions than the army and navy. Armament, military structure and organisation, tactics and strategy, depend primarily in the existing level of production and on communications" (Engels, 1988).

No less problematic is the confusion that is created in the analysis of the relationship of capitalism and the state. The different national capitalisms could not exist without the frameworks created by the respective 'nation' states. But state action has everywhere involved direct state production as well as the maintenance of indirect support for capitalism through the stated supported structures. The scale of state production has grown over time, especially but not exclusively in relation to war. The recent waves of privatisation have reduced but not eliminated state production and have often produced bastardised state-private forms, which make any legalistic separation difficult in prestige even if it had any meaning in theory.

Thirdly, the argument about the central determining role of global economic and military competition does not simply imply this rested on the Soviet economy as an external weight but that it was internalised and reproduced by it. The separation of the external and the internal is an illusion theoretically but it is also an illusion in terms of any understanding of the dynamics of the system. It distracts attention from explaining why the top down pressures came in the form that they did, in favour of an analysis of frictions in the system that are too often treated in an *a priori* way. But frictions cannot explain movement. Nor can any sense be made of the scale and seriousness of any frictions without some idea of movement and the force behind it.

But how serious were the frictions in the Soviet system? Here again the 'enterprise-work-place focus' is seriously limited in what it can tell us. Much of the discussion of the USSR, at least until the 1970s, focused on 'the romance' or 'threat' of its development. Subsequently a more critical view developed and this seemed to be confirmed by the collapse of 1991. But an adequate account of the trajectory of the USSR has to account for both its successes and its failures. As Allen notes, "in certain respects and at certain times, [the Soviet economy] performed well; in others it did not" (Allen, 2001 p.860). Accounts, which focus on the complex of intra and inter enterprise bargaining, however configured theoretically, find this hard to explain. The most common claim now is that Soviet development was always inefficient but in the first decades this inefficiency was hidden by the pattern of 'extensive development' drawing on the existing supplies of land, labour and capital. When these declined, the system slowed to stagnation.

Even when the Soviet system was closed to outside inspection abundant evidence existed from published sources of its inefficiencies and incoherencies. Now, with the archives open, more graphic detail is available. The difficulty that remains is to know how to interpret this? Most of the existing discussions reflect a lack of engagement with the evidence of comparative economic history and therefore often end up with distorted ideas of the scale and causes of problems in the USSR.

There are two ways in which this problem can be approached. One is through the history of 'micro-economic' relationships, the story of plants and their relationships, the problems of centralised direction etc. The second is through an analysis of aggregate growth and productivity change. The former is the approach most commonly found in historical accounts. There are, however several difficulties with it. The first is that it is a fallacy to think that individual examples of inefficiencies can meaningfully added up to generate an overall sense of inefficiency. Economists have long

understood that we can make no *a priori* assumptions about the extent to which inefficiencies support or counter-act one another.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, it does it follow that if inefficiencies could be summed then they should be. This would require an exploration of the way in which the real system functioned because in its terms, what appeared as dysfunctional elements might be quite functional. Allen's analysis of the 'successes' of Stalinist industrialisation sees the 'soft budget constraint' as a positive element encouraging the transfer of surplus rural labour to industry where its marginal product was positive, even if low (Allen, 2001, p.865; 2002 *passim*). Archival evidence seems to be establishing that the real system operated at key times on the basis of 'rules of thumb' that might be effective in achieving narrow objectives (Gregory & Harrison, 2005). In this context rule breaking was endemic but not necessarily frowned upon if it produced what the centre wanted. The comments that the ghost writer of Brezhnev's memoirs, attributes to the Soviet leader are instructive, "had our best workers and innovative engineers begun working to rule, observing all the paragraphs in the instructions, we could never have been able to meet the rigorous deadlines of the construction work" (Brezhnev, 1982 p.80). Part of this real logic of the system arose from the very fact that the Soviet leadership presided over the rapid militarised development of a backward society where painful choices were necessary and much of the economy was forced to act as buffer for the rest. This is by no means as unique a situation as is often implied. As Alfred Zauberman once put it, "Soviet strategy was, and under existing conditions had to be, the 'poor-man's variant'" (Zauberman, 1976). Thus when David Shearer suggests that "the Soviet's lack of attention to auxiliary processes was one of the major causes of this 'backwardness'" (Shearer, 1996 p.235) he gets the causation entirely the wrong way round. Such 'inefficiencies' were a consequence of backwardness, by no means unique, and a necessary sacrifice to the achievement of the higher goal of growth.

Thirdly, it also needs to be recognised that many factors determine how an economy develops and the focus on endemic irrationalities at the plant and enterprise level simplifies these and does not allow an evaluation of what is more or less important. How, for example, do we compare the impact of bargaining irrationalities with say, the gross allocation errors at the centre which Robert Allen sees as the eventual cause of the USSR's downfall? (Allen, 2003).

Finally, an obvious question to ask about 'micro-economic' inefficiencies is what was their trend over time? Given the enormity of the evidence about the crudeness of industrialisation in the 1930s it seems implausible to argue that such inefficiencies increased over time. Did they then stabilise or diminish? Most accounts would seem to agree with Zauberman that at the centre, "after a period of reliance on purely technological characteristics, the investment practice spontaneously turned to some rough economic indicators" (Zauberman, 1976). Similarly, if the complexity of lower level and plant relations grew over time so did the sophistication of those running the system. Perhaps those who make this case for the centrality of this problem assume inefficiencies and contradictions declined only to rise again towards the end of the system? The difficulty is that few make this argument want to link it to an analysis of the long-term trajectory of the system.

One way around this is to focus more on the macro economic level and calculations of overall levels of efficiency and productivity change. An enormous literature exists on this mostly focused on US-Soviet comparisons. For the Soviet leadership, trapped initially in competition with potential European enemies, then, after 1945, with the USA the relevant comparison was with the USA and advanced Western Europe. These were the economies that they were trying to 'catch up and overtake' and the ones against which the Soviet leadership would eventually measure their failure. But a proper historical comparison has to be informed by a realistic sense of how backward countries develop at the aggregate level as well as in micro terms. Here, as Allen has recently re-emphasised, the Soviet record was, for a long period, good and its alleged peculiarities in comparative terms appear far from unique. This is important to stress in its own right. It also raises the question of why, if the internal economy was so full of perverse incentives and grotesque levels of irrationality, the drag did not prevent the USSR from being successful in its leaders terms for so long?

Several pieces of evidence are important here. One is the overall rate of growth. For all the qualifications to the data it remains the case, as Allen puts it, that "from 1928 to 1970 the USSR did not grow as fast as Japan, but was arguably the second most successful economy in the world" (Allen, 2001 p.861). Secondly, in comparative terms what is interesting in the Soviet productivity record is not its heavier reliance on 'extensive' growth but how common this is in 'catch up' economies. "Productivity grew at a rate similar to that of the East Asian economies during their boom. Indeed, the sources of high-speed growth in the USSR look much like those of South Korea or Taiwan" (Allen, 2001 p.867). Thirdly, Allen also questions the idea that the system had a weak capacity to innovate. All 'catch-up' economies develop by emulation so this in itself is hardly unique. Beyond this the problem with the Soviet system, especially in its later days, he suggests, was not so much building new plants and developing new processes as an inability to restructure away from old ones.

Expressing the problems in this way might invite the question of why, if the system was so 'successful', it failed? There is no space here to offer an alternative account. But two points are worth making. Firstly, such alternative accounts exist from Allen's emphasis on policy errors through to state capitalist accounts which focus on the wider determinants of the rate of return on investment. Secondly, the 'Soviet failure' took place against a background of falling rates of growth in the advanced western states which again raises the question of the extent to which explanations should seek unique internal elements.

This critique does not dispute that problems existed between the enterprises and the centre, between enterprises themselves, and within the workplace. Rather what it disputes is their significance relative to other issues and their explanation. As capitalism became monopolised at the turn of the twentieth century and state elements became more apparent, classical Marxist theorists like Hilferding and Bukharin began to analyse new features of its operation and especially the more indirect working of the law of value in ways that anticipated elements of the Soviet discussion. If the comparisons is made between the real USSR in the years 1928-1991 and textbook capitalism then the differences appear great, if the comparison is of real and real they look less so. There is a certain irony here in the development of the argument of Janos Kornai. Having argued that the 'soft budget constraint' was a key systemic element of the Soviet type system and a cause of its failure, he is now arguing that it is an hegemonic concept in political economy that can be applied, east and west, south and north. In particular, over time, "the capitalist budget constraint has gradually softened... a critical review of modern capitalism in the light of S[oft] B[udget] C[onstraint] phenomena would seem entirely worthwhile" (Kornai *et al.*, 2003 p.1131). It would indeed. Unwittingly, perhaps, he now invites the view that the peculiarities of the Soviet system and its workplace consequences were not as unique as was once claimed.

## **Alienation, exploitation and workplace resistance**

The Soviet system from 1928 was driven by accumulation and the build up of the military-industrial complex. This put enormous pressure on workers (and peasants). The early stages saw patterns of accumulation that were so primitive as often to be counterproductive, as William Chamberlain put it in the mid 1930s, for the USSR "the process which someone wittily described as 'starving itself great' can be said and indeed has been pushed to a point where it is distinctly subject to the law of diminishing returns" (*quoted in* Engerman, 2000). After the post-war recovery drive accumulation began to take more sophisticated forms. But the consumption share remained suppressed and the absolute and relative pressure on workers remained considerable. Yet any open revolt was limited and intermittent. Three broad explanations have been offered for this. One is that, despite its problems, the Soviet working class identified with and gave loyalty to the regime because it offered a limited social compromise based on a positive recognition of the status of workers reinforced by opportunities for social mobility. The second approach denies this integration, arguing instead that it did not happen because the rapidity of social change was such that working class identity never had a real chance to develop. Soviet workers lived lives of fragmented and disrupted identities. The third approach also denies integration but points to a profound alienation which could only be dealt with by

large-scale coercion, which, if it diminished over time, never disappeared. This produced an atomisation that prevented collective action but it could not stop individualised forms of resistance.

It is with this third explanation that I am primarily concerned here. This takes two forms. Those who see Soviet Russia as some variant of capitalism tend to look at workplace relations in antagonistic terms. Resistance existed and expressed this antagonism but so long as it remained individualised it was limited in its impact. Accounts which stress the non-capitalist nature of the USSR tend, to the contrary, to see a degree of complicity and collusion between managers and workers in their workplace as they both tried to manipulate the system. Writing of the 1930s Filtzer talks of the "highly specific network of worker manager relations on the shop floor, which derived from the political relationship between industrialisation and the emerging Soviet elite's consolidation of power" (Filtzer, 1986). This argument is then taken up and developed in his three successor volumes on Soviet workers (Filtzer, 1992; 1994; 2002). It is echoed by Clarke *et al.* Indeed he goes further suggesting that "there was ... a high degree of collusion by their workers in their own exploitation, and class conflict was displaced and diffused into individualised and sectional conflicts with hierarchical structures" (Clarke *et al.* 1993 p.19).

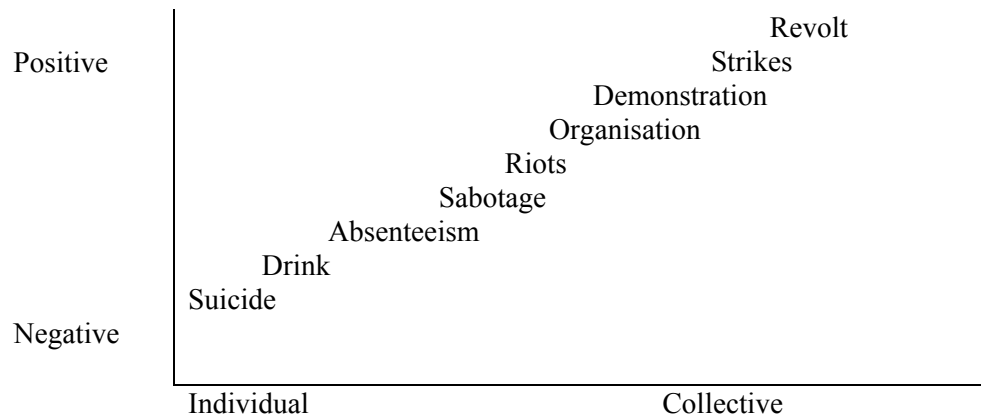
Posed in this way all of these approaches raise problems of aggregation. If it is dangerous to talk about 'the Soviet workplace' it is no less dangerous to talk about 'the Soviet worker'. A recent study of British workplaces suggests that "a workplace does not speak with a single voice, but with a Babelesque din" (Cully *et al.*, 1999 p.15). As yet we know relatively little of this din in Soviet factories and workplaces. But some attempt must still be made to grasp the whole and I want to suggest that the emphasis on shop floor compromise over pressure is exaggerated.

Some form of slave, peasant, worker resistance is apparent in all modes of production since the ruling class, or its agents, cannot be at the back of every producer all of the time. Under capitalism managers oscillate between wanting workers to follow orders as cogs in the machine and wanting them to be superheroes, anticipating every problem and plugging every gap. This tension is endemic to the capitalist labour process under capitalism. Its degree varies as does the capacity of managers to enforce their will. But this does not mean that the only stable forms occur when workers feel the discipline of unemployment, as is sometimes suggested, or that workers manipulation of this tension is the major source of instability in the system.

Secondly, if we consider the development of the USSR in Marxist terms then the speed of its development, the high investment shares and the low rates of consumption would all seem to point not only to high rates of exploitation but higher rates of exploitation than for comparable societies in the west. This would seem to be puzzling if the function of the alleged collusion was to reduce the effective level of pressure and therefore the rate of exploitation. It does not explain why, if workers had so much negative power, they were forced to tolerate such severe pressure on their living standards for so long.

Thirdly, forms of resistance need to be carefully analysed. Labour turnover rates were high although they varied over time and place. Production was padded, norm cheating was endemic, quality problems were real. It is important to recognise that there was a genuine degree of shop-floor autonomy not only because this is important in its own right but also because it also reveals a complexity that can help undermine the simplistic and debilitating totalitarian paradigm. But it is equally important to keep this resistance in perspective. If traditional left wing historiography can be accused of romanticising collective traditions of resistance, much contemporary writing in a supposedly post collective action age seems to go even further in romanticising individual acts of resistance and deviance. Much individual resistance is negative. It expresses discontent but it offers no way forward. Worse it can even undermine the individual themselves or those closest to them. Suicide is an extreme example. This was clearly a product of anomie, a cry of rage and despair, a rejection of the system but was it productive? And if I kill myself by causing an accident to others how does this

help? Individualised resistance and deviancy, whether in society at large or the factory, has to be recognised as "a weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985).



**Figure 1.** Spectrum of forms of conflict

Just because individualised forms of resistance are weapons of the weak though they tell us much about the real texture of the relations in a society and undermine the claims of its rulers for consent, in practice it is also something that they find relatively easy to contain. Forms of resistance can be analysed on along a scale which can run from the most individualised forms to the most collectivised forms. I would argue that as we move from the individual (suicide, alcoholism, job change, low work effort) to the collective (union organisation, go slows, token strikes, sustained conflicts etc) so the political sign of the resistance changes from negative to positive. Equally the problems posed by these for managers and the higher authorities also change.

## Looking at the workplace: the managerial perspective

There has been much less concern in recent historical writing with the role of those who controlled the workplace whether directly as enterprise managers or indirectly as part of the higher state apparatus. While those theories that see the USSR as some form of state capitalism are happy to talk of these people as part of a 'ruling class', the exceptionalist approach is more circumspect. Some (for example: Ticktin, 1973; Filtzer) reject the idea of a Soviet ruling class in favour of talking about an 'elite' though this does not imply an analysis that derives from Pareto and Mosca. Others (for example: Clarke *et al.* 1993) use the term class interchangeably with terms like elite and stratum but do not pursue the argument about whether there was a ruling class in the Marxist sense. Empirically none of these writers has really been concerned to examine the material and ideological dimensions of managerial power though they often refer to inequality, bureaucracy, paternalism, collusion etc. Nor have they been concerned to show how workplace power might tie top managers to those above them since their focus has been more on enterprise-centre conflicts (for a review of western literature on Soviet era management see Liuhto, 1999).

Can we talk of 'Soviet management' as if it is a unity? The discussion that has taken place has again focussed on the issue of commonality. This is well put by Liuhto (1999 p.9):

Previous findings emphasise the homogenising effect of the centrally planned system on enterprise management ... research is based on the assumption that relatively little variation could be found in the management of Soviet enterprises which operated under the central planning. On account of this, management of enterprises under the Soviet planning system ...[can be] .. referred to as 'Management Sovieticus'.

For reasons of space we will follow the argument about commonality but again note its crudity and suggest that, as with the workers, an exploration of both the factors creating a degree of commonality and some basis for variety need to be explored more.



Another issue that needs noting is the question the contours of Soviet management. It is sometimes implied that separating managers from workers is uniquely difficult in the USSR (for example: Ashwin, 1999 p.8). But it is not clear that this is so. The term manager is used promiscuously across the world. It is commonly applied to people with the most minimal supervisory roles, including supervising themselves. This is partly because a blurring of the management/worker relationship serves an ideological function. One minute those who run the system will happily declare 'we are all workers now', another it will be that 'we are all managers now'. What is more difficult is the recognition of difference and conflict. But this blurring also arises because some managers 'manage' and do some 'non management' work at the same time. We should not therefore be surprised to find one US study of a Russian plant of 8000 workers suggesting that it had 2000 managers (Luthans *et al.* 1993). This elastic use of the term manager tells us nothing about the American or the Soviet workplace. It does tell us quite a lot about the refusal, East and West, to examine management as power over people and resources.

As any expression of workers power withered in the late 1920s, power gravitated upwards. In the period of the first five-year plan control at the top was consolidated (Kuromiya, 1984). Henceforth the USSR would be driven forward from the top down. This required the development and consolidation of the new groups, which, in the first instance, allowed for considerable mobility. The purges added a further element of disruption. In these early stages the focus was on doing rather than the sophistication of what was done. Over time, however, there was an evolution in levels of education and the sophistication and specialisation of managerial functions. Keep neatly describes this as a shift from managers as "trouble-shooters to professionals" (Keep, 1995 pp.65-67). This also led to a shift of ways in dealing with workers from the foregrounding of measures of 'coercive compliance' towards a system based more on material rewards and 'normative compliance' though one in which coercive compliance never remained far away. How should these relationships be viewed if we take a top down view rather than a bottom up one?

Evidence about Soviet era managerial behaviour can be derived from Soviet era discussions of what should have happened (rules and ideas for appropriate practice); the abundant evidence of difficulties discussed in the Soviet press; memoir accounts - whether earlier or more recent; interviews from the Soviet period (through, for example the Soviet Interview Project) or more recent; archival work; and finally a small number of comparative studies done as the Soviet system entered its final phase.

First we should acknowledge that Soviet managers were able to draw on an uneven but serious discussion of approaches to management. This discussion itself has an interesting history. It was serious in the 1920s and this early discussion is misunderstood if it is simply seen in terms of Lenin, Taylor and Gastev. This discussion, however, was also a victim of the industrialisation drive, ironically the assertion of a new degree of managerial power in the factories was accompanied by the destruction of any managerial theory. This created an uncomfortable problem for later Soviet theorists who wanted to claim that development had been 'scientific' all along (Popov, 1981). From the 1950s a significant discussion of 'how' to manage external and internal enterprise relations of all kinds did develop. If the materials were often restricted, the sophistication of the discussion should not be underestimated (Vidmer, 1981). Soviet managers may not have been fluent in the management speak of the Western consultants who came to enlighten them in the early 1990s but they were not the benighted groups that they were often assumed to be. The nature and evolution of Soviet management ideology as ideology is therefore an interesting topic that is worthy of being revisited.

But, as in the west the difficulty to use these sources to distinguish the 'fact' of the managerial role from what Mintzberg called its 'folklore' (Mintzberg, 1975). The rhetorical folklore of what managers should do is often belied by actual day to day behaviour. This was also true of the Soviet workplace, "in the actual working world of the Soviet enterprise ... theory yields to practice, with all its complications and exceptions to the rules" write the authors of a 1987-1988 comparative study of US and Soviet plants. This did not mean that the practice of Soviet management, in the terms of the

system, was as deficient as is often claimed. To survive, cope and succeed Soviet managers had to deploy considerable talents, often, as we have already noted, in larger units than in the west (Vlachoutsicos & Lawrence, 1990 p.59 & 51).

The few comparative studies that were done at the turn of the 1990s are interesting here. No special claim should be made for these and sceptics could easily see them as examples of what C. Wright Mills once called "abstracted empiricism", the results of which "no matter how numerous, do not convince us of anything worth having convictions about" (*quoted in Cully et al.*, 1999 p.2). But for all that, often unwittingly, the authors throw up some interesting issues, especially in terms of attitudes, what managers did and attitudes, not least to workers.

Generally these studies point more to the similarity of management east and west than its differences. Moreover insofar as differences are identified they perhaps point in uncomfortable directions for those who stress the uniqueness of Soviet production relations.

Take, for example, the study by Luthans, Welsh and Rosenkrantz (1993) who applied the same techniques that they had used to analyse the roles of US managers. Table 2 sets out their main finding of how time was deployed.

**Table 2.** Deployment of 'managerial' time in Tver Cotton Mill and US managers

	Russian sample	US sample
Traditional management	42.5	32
Communications	34	29
Human resource issues	15	20
Networking	8.5	19

As the authors write, "Russian managers gave relatively more time and effort to traditional management and communication activities and relatively less to human resource and especially networking activities during working hours" (Luthans *et al.* 1993 p.756).

A small comparative study whose design might be questionable cannot obviously refute the big claims made for the general character of enterprise relations. But it is surely disconcerting for the claim about the special character of these relationships and especially the idea Soviet managerial paternalism was structurally forced to be more "personal, particularistic, discretionary" (Ashwin, 1999 p.16). One of the few comparative empirical studies seems shows less time being spent on 'human resource' issues than in the US. The limited time spent on 'networking' is also intriguing in terms of the emphasis on both *blat* and the need for contacts. No less interesting the same project also investigated worker-management relations in terms of changing shop floor systems and found, to the surprise of the investigators, that inviting Russian workers to be more formally participative produced demobilisation rather than, as in the US more (Welsh *et al.*, 1993).

Other investigators were also surprised by the "limited interest in human resource topics such as communication and motivation .." that they found (Puffer *et al.*, 1997 p.268) In fact comparative studies of managerial attitudes throw up data which re-enforce the image of Russian managers as traditional 'bosses' concerned with the deployment of power. As with US managers Russian managers shared the 'humanistic' view that work should be a positive and meaningful experience for all in a humanised workplace. But they also exhibited a widespread espousal of an individualistic work-ethic reflected in an assent to ideas that "to be superior a person must stand alone" with marginally the highest support for these views coming from the older and most 'Soviet' part of the sample:

Studies have found that Russian managers scored high on the dimensions of 'power distance', which results in an orientation to keep a clear separation between those with more power and

those with less. To protect their autonomy top-level managers would subscribe even more strongly to the importance of maintaining this distance (Puffer *et al.*, 1997 pp.267-8).

This was not to say that paternalism was not present but that its quality may not have been all that is made of it. Ashwin, for example, in her account notes in an aside that in the West a paternalistic ethos is common but often has more style than substance. She does not consider the extent to which this might also have been true of the USSR because it would obviously undermine claims about the role of 'instrumental personal ties' that were supposed to determine manager-worker relations.

These issues by no means exhaust the issue of the Soviet 'ruling class' and the role of managers within it. As with the argument earlier, to focus narrowly on the factory is too limiting. The issue of 'class relations' seen from the top also has to engage with wider issues of power, income and wealth as well as ideology - questions which those whose vision is set by the factory plant fail to properly address. Hopefully enough, however, has been said to suggest that the case remains to be proven the Soviet system was built upon a set of workplace relations whose effects fall outside of the range that could be expected from a 'capitalist' society and that point to the need for a special political economy focusing on the uniqueness of the system and deriving this from either what happened in the workplace or as the workplace interacted with the 'centre' of the system.

## Notes

1. In orthodox economics this problem is analysed in terms of the theory of the second best. Very crudely in a world of multiple inefficiencies we cannot assume that the elimination of one or more will increase the overall level of efficiency in an economy. Thus if the part of the strawberry harvest rots in the field, sugar production is short and there is a shortage of jam jars, so far as jam production is concerned we do not have three cumulative inefficiencies. And to solve one problem without dealing with the others might increase the real level of inefficiency.

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