

Ted Grant: A political appraisal of the former leader of the British Militant Tendency

Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part obituary. The first part was posted September 27.

If Ted Grant can be said to have made an original contribution to Pabloite revisionism, it is in the form of his theory of proletarian bonapartism. According to Grant the Stalinist bureaucracy could carry out social transformations in Eastern Europe because, he claimed, it was the indirect representative of the proletariat.

Grant presented this as a development of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union. This was in fact very far from the truth. Trotsky identified Stalinism as a form of bonapartism and referred to the Soviet thermidor, but was careful to be concrete about what he meant by those terms and to distinguish between Soviet bonapartism and the earlier forms of bonapartism associated with the French Revolution.

In 1794 Robespierre was overthrown on 9 Thermidor and power shifted to more conservative Jacobins who relied for support on propertied sections of the third estate. In 1799 Bonaparte seized power in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire on behalf of the wealthiest sections of the French bourgeoisie. But neither of those regimes threatened the essential shift which had taken place in property relations. They remained defenders of bourgeois property rights and in that sense retained a certain progressive character in relation to the feudal absolutist regimes that still dominated Europe.

A comparison might be drawn with the way in which after 1924 power in the Soviet Union passed from the hands of the revolutionary vanguard to the more conservative layers in the bureaucracy and working class. But while Napoleon could not return to feudalism, since capitalism developed of its own accord once it was liberated from the restraints of a feudal regime, the situation in the Soviet Union was very different.

Socialism does not develop in the same way as capitalism. It has to be built consciously. Thus the Stalinist regime exposed the proletarian revolution to dangers that Bonaparte did not present to the bourgeois revolution in France. Stalin was obliged to defend the nationalised property relations on which his position and that of the rest of Kremlin bureaucracy depended, but by repeatedly strangling revolutionary movements internationally so as to prevent a resurgence of the revolutionary vanguard in the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy he headed fundamentally undermined those property relations and prepared the conditions for the restoration of capitalism.

For Grant, however, bonapartism was bonapartism. If Napoleon Bonaparte could overthrow feudalism in eighteenth century Europe then Stalin could overthrow capitalism in twentieth century Europe, went his reasoning. And so, when the Soviet Red Army occupied Eastern Europe after World War II, Grant declared that the Eastern European states were "workers states" because they had come under the domination of

Moscow.

For Grant—as for all the Pabloites—Stalinism in power equalled a workers state. They thus imbued Stalinism with an essentially permanent revolutionary mission. The only problem they identified with it was a lack of genuine workers' democracy, but not the danger of counterrevolution and capitalist restoration at its hands.

Grant applied the same logic to Yugoslavia under Tito and to China under Mao. Subsequently, he developed the theory that these and a long list of other countries—including Cuba, Burma, Syria, Kampuchea, Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia—were examples of what he called "proletarian bonapartism," which were capable of developing the productive forces of these countries and should be regarded as progressive.

Trotsky likened the bureaucracy to a tumour that could grow so large it overwhelmed the organism, but could never take on an independent life of its own. Grant's adult political career, however, was based on the premise that the bureaucracy had developed this independent capability.

According to Grant, the laws of dialectical materialism decreed that generations of humanity were to be condemned to the slave labour and prison camps of dictatorial regimes in the name of Marxism. Even as the Soviet Union was being liquidated, Grant claimed that the August 1991 coup attempt showed that sections of the bureaucracy were still defending socialism.

The process of degeneration in the Soviet Union could not extend infinitely. At some point the process of degeneration identified by Trotsky had to lead to the restoration of capitalism if a political revolution did not overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Grant lived long enough to see his perspective refuted by history. Trotsky's perspective, which Grant had declared to be disproved after World War II, was thoroughly vindicated.

Nonetheless Grant carried blithely on, oblivious to the changes around him, whether with regards to the Soviet Union or the degeneration of Labour into a right-wing neo-liberal party of business. He was capable of continuing along his own political path in this way because he had no understanding of Marxism. What passed for Marxism with him was a set of dogmas repeated with religious fervour. The classic works of Marxism had for him the character of sacred texts to be cited in the way that fundamentalist preachers cite the Bible.

Grant and Venezuela

One curious by-product of Grant's dogmatism is that it has earned him something of a ghostly afterlife in Latin America, where Venezuela's Hugo Chavez claims that he keeps at his bedside a copy of *Reason in Revolt*, the book Grant wrote with Alan Woods. It is a rambling work that purports to combine Marxist philosophy and a re-examination of modern science with an analysis of the capitalist crisis. On the basis of no training

or experience in science, Grant and Woods take it upon themselves to correct modern science “using the method of dialectical materialism.” To give a flavour of this strange book: they deny the possibility that black holes exist because they claim the phenomenon is not consistent with dialectical materialism. The Big Bang theory, which is now widely accepted by cosmologists on theoretical grounds and is supported by observational data, they dismiss as “mystical speculation” based on “abstruse and esoteric mathematical formulae.”

Grant and Woods present dialectical materialism as a readymade magic key to the universe that will enable them to unlock the secrets of nature without the need for arduous scientific work. Those who employ this method of reasoning always know what constitutes “dialectical materialism” because it is whatever they say it is. Their conceptions are never forced to come into contact with experience since they avoid the process of repeated investigation and interrogation of concrete reality that characterises Marxism. It is an entirely self-serving and subjective method that has nothing in common with Marxism except a certain similarity of phraseology. Grant and Woods are adept at using Marxist phrases, but they do so in a purely rhetorical rather than scientific manner. Scientific-sounding language is deployed in the same way that an advertising company might claim that a new miracle scientific ingredient in their product works wonders.

It is worth examining *Reason in Revolt* in slightly more detail because the book has a direct political relevance that illustrates the connection between their philosophical method and their opportunist politics.

According to Woods, Chavez was particularly taken with a section in the book on Gibbs energy. Woods describes how when he was introduced to Chavez as one of its authors the president congratulated him and recommended it to all his followers. Woods recalls that Chavez said, “You know, I have got that book at my bedside and I am reading it every night. I have got as far as the chapter on ‘The molecular process of revolution.’ You know, where you write about Gibbs’ energy.” So impressed was Chavez by the section on Gibbs energy that “he quotes it continually in his speeches. Mr. Gibbs has probably never been so famous before!” [8]

Professor J. Willard Gibbs FRS, the nineteenth century American mathematical physicist, is in fact well known for his contributions to statistical mechanics and was famous long before he came to the attention of Grant, Woods or Chavez. Any high school student of science who has studied the hydrogen fuel cell will have heard his name and used the equations he developed. His concept of free energy mathematically describes the amount of energy that is needed to drive or can be got out of a chemical reaction. They would be hard pressed, however, to say why Gibbs energy rather than other quantities in the field of thermodynamics, such as Helmholtz energy, or indeed Boltzman’s constant, should be singled out for political acclaim.

Turning to Grant and Woods’ book would not immediately clarify the connection between the thermodynamic properties of a chemical reaction and socio-political processes. There is, we are told, a comparison between the role of Gibbs energy and what Trotsky terms the “molecular process of revolution.” Trotsky does indeed use that phrase in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, although he had no occasion to refer to Gibbs energy and nor does he press the analogy to the point that the social and political process is equated with the chemical one.

Trotsky was drawing an illustrative analogy between two similar processes in the entirely different spheres of chemistry and politics. Grant and Woods are declaring an equivalence which is totally invalid. In chemistry the component parts of the reaction never become conscious of what they are doing. In politics they do and, in the case of socialist revolution, they must.

The History of the Russian Revolution is a classic example of the application of historical materialism to a political event, in which Trotsky

makes a concrete analysis of the objective and subjective conditions that brought about the Russian Revolution. He traces the changes in political consciousness that took place within the different classes in Russian society and within distinct layers of classes and identifies the factors that influenced those changes. He lays bare the relationship between the individual consciousness of workers, soldiers, sailors and peasants and the social consciousness of classes.

Grant and Woods offer us nothing so concrete. Their discussion of Gibbs energy comes in the course of a section on the role of the individual in history and the relationship between the part played by the individual and objective economic conditions in history. “In certain instances, even a single individual can play an absolutely decisive role,” they tell us; and they point out correctly that without Lenin and Trotsky the Russian Revolution of October 1917 would not have happened. The success or failure of a revolution is dependent on “the degree of preparation, foresight, personal courage and ability of leaders.”

In a certain general and entirely abstract sense this is true. Leaders in any historical situation need these qualities. But what specific preparations must the leaders of a socialist revolution make, what foresight must they exhibit, and in relation to what must they show courage? What personal abilities do they need? Marxists have always maintained that the leaders of a socialist revolution must consciously reflect the objective, historically derived interests of the working class. Not so Grant and Woods. The class character of a leader is of no consequence. He becomes the unconscious or semi-conscious vehicle for objectively revolutionary developments.

It is for this reason that Chavez responded so enthusiastically to this section of Grant and Woods’ book. All that is important, Grant and Woods are saying, is that a bold and audacious leader should take decisive action. That is what makes a revolution, according to them, even if this does not include decisive measures against capital.

Chavez is not slow to cast himself in the role that Grant and Woods have written for him. There is one problem. Chavez is a former paratrooper who knows nothing about Marxism, while Lenin and Trotsky were Marxists who had trained themselves in the scientific analysis of society and historical processes and spent a lifetime studying the questions that confronted the international workers movement. Grant and Woods claim to be great admirers of Lenin and Trotsky, but as far as they are concerned a bourgeois populist leader like Chavez can play the same role as a proletarian revolutionary leader, so long as he has a little advice from the International Marxist Tendency. But as they say in *Reason in Revolt*, “In dialectics, sooner or later, things change into their opposite.” It seems that we are to suppose that ultimately Chavez will magically change from a bourgeois nationalist into a proletarian internationalist.

Concluded

Notes:

8. Alan Woods, *Encounters with Hugo Chavez*, 29 April 2004. www.marxist.com/Latinam/encounters_with_hugo_chavez.html



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