

Why Steve Clark Can't Really Explain What Happened in Grenada

By Steve Bloom

Since the coup in Grenada and the U.S. invasion, quite a few pages in the Militant and Intercontinental Press have been devoted to explaining these events, presenting the views of the present leadership of the Socialist Workers Party or of others whose perspective they share. Articles on the subject include an initial assessment by Steve Clark in the November 7 IP, a report from the November SWP National Committee plenum in the December 9 Militant, a speech by Castro printed in the December 12 IP, and an interview with New Jewel Movement leader Don Rojas in the December 12 IP. The most recent effort appears in the December 1983 International Socialist Review, also by Steve Clark, entitled, "Grenada's Workers and Farmers Government, its achievements and its overthrow." This article continues the general approach of those that preceded it. Clark quotes extensively from both Castro and Rojas to back up his points.

Given the key role that the Grenadian revolution has played in the new strategic world outlook developed by the SWP leadership over the last few years, we should expect a serious and in-depth analysis from Clark of the counterrevolutionary events in that country. It is most remarkable that despite the length of the latest article (nine tabloid-sized pages) what probing Clark does into underlying causes goes barely further than a psychological level. We are informed: "On October 12, the Coard group placed Maurice Bishop under house arrest and organized to use whatever deadly force was necessary to establish its total domination." "A semi-secret factional grouping or clique around Bernard Coard had managed, especially since mid-1982, to strengthen its influence and control. . . ." "Coard's secret faction had moved from ambition and cliquism, to open treachery and betrayal of the revolution."

Clark quotes a similar comment from Castro: "Hyenas emerged from the revolutionary ranks." And Castro asks: "Were they simply a group of ambitious, opportunistic individuals, or were they enemy agents who wanted to destroy the Grenadian revolution?" Similarly, Clark quotes Rojas, explaining that Coard's faction "always maintained a kind of clique, an OREL clique, within the New Jewell Movement. . . ." (OREL was one of the groups that fused to form the New Jewel Movement in 1973; Coard was one of its leaders at the time)

Clark, who has presumably studied the historical materialist method of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky must know that these statements--though in general quite consistent with the facts as known--cannot be a sufficient analysis for revolutionary Marxists. Secret factions, cliques, ambitious individuals, and even enemy agents will inevitably exist within every revolutionary process (particularly after the conquering of governmental power). What is needed is an explanation of why, in this specific case these elements were able to gain sufficient strength and overwhelm the revolutionary forces. What objective and subjective factors combined to allow this to happen?

Accepting Clark's analysis as it now stands would be roughly the same as if, in discussing the degeneration of the Russian revolution, we could be satisfied simply with a statement like: "Stalin's clique, moved by personal ambition and a drive for power, proceeded from slander and falsification to the physical liquidation of the opposition." Of course, this is true. But it hardly stands as an explanation for what happened. The social roots and political revisionism of the Stalin clique must be thoroughly analyzed, along with the concrete factors that led them to power in opposition to the interests of the working class.

The counterrevolution in Grenada, while certainly not equalling the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian revolution in terms of its world historic significance, still represents an extremely profound event if viewed on the scale of the Grenadian revolution itself. In some ways it is even more profound, because it resulted not just in the degeneration of the revolutionary regime, but in its overthrow. A real assessment of the social and political roots of this process is essential, and must be undertaken.

Clark himself seems dimly aware of the problems that his article faces from a methodological point of view, and includes the following: "A materialist explanation for what happened in Grenada cannot rise or fall simply on an assessment of the actions of a single individual--even an individual whose role was unquestionably decisive. These events reflected the social consequences of objective difficulties from imperialist pressure, poverty, and small size already described. Coard exploited these real difficulties to gain a hearing from layers of politically inexperienced cadres in the NJM for his explanation that 'the problem is Maurice.'"

Yet after this nod of the head in the direction of the need for "a materialist explanation for what happened in Grenada," Clark leaves the reader--now waiting expectantly--with nothing more than a few generalities in the next paragraph about different reactions to the "objective difficulties . . . already described" by workers, petty-bourgeois, and others. He concludes by explaining: "Coard and his followers had become divorced from the Grenadian people and reflected attitudes of bureaucratism, careerism, and individual ambition characteristic of the petty bourgeoisie, not the working class."

In place of Coard's explanation, "the problem is Maurice," Clark would assert "the problem is Coard and others who reflected petty-bourgeois attitudes." Again we are compelled to ask: How did this petty bourgeois layer succeed in side-tracking the proletarian revolution?

In fact, Clark's statement that the Coard group reflected class differences within the NJM in combination with other assertions he makes elsewhere in the article creates a serious contradiction in his overall analysis. Earlier we were informed, "There is no indication that any explicit fundamental economic or social policy question was at the root of the betrayal by Coard and other NJM renegades." And later on, "The petty-bourgeois and bureaucratic modes of functioning by the Coard faction in the government, army, and party--not any thought-out alternative political course for Grenada--were at the root of this group's trajectory."

This is a very strange materialism which Comrade Clark is peddling, and a very strange petty-bourgeois current that overwhelmed a revolution without any political or programmatic challenge whatsoever. "Petty-bourgeois and bureaucratic modes of functioning" cannot be at the root of anything. They are organizational manifestations of deeper political and programmatic differences. Real differences between petty-bourgeois and proletarian currents cannot be purely organizational, and the differences between petty-bourgeois and proletarian modes of organization are always, and only, a reflection of the difference between proletarian and petty-bourgeois politics.

If, indeed, Clark is correct, that class differences within the NJM were reflected in the development of the Coard group, then we must all the more resolutely strive to uncover the political differences that must be at the root of these events, and explain how they served a different class interest. At least, we must do this if we are really interested in a materialist analysis--particularly when the differences pose the question of continuing revolution vs. counterrevolution. In a small country like Grenada, accidental factors, personality clashes, "petty-bourgeois modes of functioning," etc. can play a much larger role in determining the shape of events; but they still cannot be decisive in the final analysis.

Why is it that Clark and the SWP leadership are faced with such a serious flaw in their understanding? Why are they unable to undertake a genuine materialist explanation of the counterrevolution in Grenada? Even if there is not sufficient information to really explain the growth and development of the Coard faction from a sociological point of view, there should at least be consideration of how that faction was able to overthrow and murder Bishop and the other NJM leaders (something we do have information about). The reason this is absent from the SWP leadership's analysis is that to discuss these things they would have to come to terms with their schematic and idealized approach to the Grenadian revolution over the last four years.

A Marxist analysis of this counterrevolution must base itself on the contradictions that existed within the revolutionary process itself. Some of these contradictions were inevitable given the international context of a revolution in a small, economically backward country (the objective difficulties explained by Clark). But some of these contradictions did not stem from such objective problems. They were rather the result of subjective weaknesses in the ideology of the New Jewel Movement.

The SWP leadership has consistently refused to even consider or discuss such subjective weaknesses--declaring any attempt to do so an attack on the Grenadian revolution or on Maurice Bishop personally. There can be little doubt that the same charge will be levelled against this article. But a genuine assessment of what happened in Grenada (one that goes beyond surface phenomena) cannot be made without taking these subjective contradictions into account--just as Marx and Engels could not discuss the defeat of the Paris Commune without explaining the errors made by the Communards in their struggle against Versailles. This was hardly an "attack on the Commune" (or even on its leaders).

Any internal counterrevolution--i.e. one that is not a result of external invasion by an overwhelmingly superior military force-- must ultimately be explained by a lack of sufficient mobilization on the part of the masses. No investigation of such an event can be adequate without an inquiry into the reasons for such a demobilization of the proletariat and its allies.

In analyzing the degeneration of the Russian revolution, for example, Trotsky explained that the proletariat became tired as a result of years of civil war and struggle against imperialist invasion. The most militant fighters suffered the highest casualties in these struggles. By the time the military threat to the revolution was defeated, the masses lacked sufficient strength to combat the new, internal danger from Stalin and the bureaucratic clique he represented.

Was the defeat in Grenada a result of a similar tiring-out of the masses? That would have to be the case if we attribute events, as Clark does, simply to "objective difficulties." But Clark does not follow this logic through, and for obvious reasons--since it would be very difficult to substantiate any notion that the Grenadian masses had been worn down by their objective problems. All factors indicate that, on the contrary, they maintained their willingness and ability to mobilize in defense of their revolution as they had in the past. But if that is the case, then something else must have created the necessary preconditions for Coard's attempt to seize power.

The fact is that the Grenadian people were unable to adequately defend their revolution primarily because the Coard-Austin coup caught them (as it did the rest of the world) completely by surprise and politically unprepared. The cause of this lies not with the backwardness of the masses, or in "objective difficulties." It is a result of a failure on the part of the Bishop wing of the NJM leadership to understand the necessity of making the masses themselves a part of the debate with the Coard faction about the direction of the revolution. The masses were not involved in the struggle until they had already been completely disarmed, and a severe blow against the revolution had been struck.

Both Clark and Rojas date the beginning of the problems that ultimately culminated in the coup from at least the middle of 1982, more than a year before the actual counterrevolution. By September 1983, the danger had become acute enough that a large majority of the NJM Central Committee voted for a perspective condemning Bishop's leadership. Yet Bishop, and those who supported him within the CC didn't breathe a word about this dispute outside of the NJM, and perhaps (it isn't completely clear) not even the party ranks were informed.

We know that although this dispute was given an organizational form by Coard and his supporters, it had a basis in important political differences--even if they were not "explicit" or "thought out" (to use Clark's terms). Clark quotes Rojas explaining: "Bernard and his people . . . said they were dissatisfied with the pace at which the process was evolving. . . . Somehow the notion that this process was not going fast enough entered into the ideological discussion in the party and led to a kind of cleavage."

It is also clear that in any open discussion of the problems facing the revolution among the masses, Bishop and his perspectives would have won a resounding victory. Had the advocates of this line within the NJM gone to the people with this discussion (and not just the Grenadian people, but the whole international revolutionary movement), mobilized them against the perspectives of the Coard group, and defeated it politically, then the demoralizing defeat, which paved the way for the U.S. invasion could in all likelihood have been avoided.

But we must also carry our assessment one step further, because the failure of Bishop to undertake this kind of struggle was not simply an error of judgement--a failure to recognize the seriousness of the challenge presented by Coard--although such an error was no doubt involved. There was also a methodological error, one inherent in the Castroist ideology of the NJM.

Castroism is a profoundly revolutionary current, which has always put the interests of the masses first and foremost in the revolutionary process. In this it stands in stark contrast to Stalinism--which subordinates those interests to the needs of a privileged bureaucracy in the workers' states. But Castroism does suffer from a serious weakness in that it sees the consciousness of the vanguard party (the Cuban CP, the NJM, the FSLN) as the primary guarantee for the continued health of the revolution, rather than relying on a process of discussion and decision-making by the masses themselves.

Such an approach can work reasonably well as long as the party, and its central leadership, remain healthy and on course. But severe problems are revealed when events occur such as those in Grenada. If the leading party is not directly and immediately accountable to the people for its actions, and the party becomes out of tune with the masses, and out of tune with objective reality, a severe crisis is inevitable. To avoid this there must be a mechanism by which the masses themselves can correct, or even replace the ruling party if that is required.

This takes us, finally, to another problem illustrated by the Grenadian events: the need for the free expression and open competition of different political perspectives and tendencies within the revolutionary movement. The model of a monolithic party organization--which prohibits or severely limits the formation of internal groupings--ruling over a one-party state does not derive from Marxism or Leninism. It is a notion that has arisen within the workers' movement because of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR. Unfortunately, because of the historical circumstances in which the Castroist current has evolved, it has adopted this model, which is in complete contradiction to the broader revolutionary and humanitarian perspectives which Castroism has consistently fought for.

Clark and the SWP leadership strongly object to Coard's "secret factionalism." But the fact is that in a Castroist party every faction must be secret, because no other kind is permitted. This is a severe weakness. The correct and necessary response to the development of a faction such as Coard's is not primarily to complain about the fact that it was secret, but to bring it out into the open, make it public, respond to it, and defeat it politically.

The development of different perspectives and programs about how to move forward is inevitable within the working class movement, both before and after the taking of power. Because of this, it is also inevitable that political groupings--tendencies, factions, and parties --will arise which express those differences. This is a necessary and useful part of the revolutionary process. Such political groupings will sometimes reflect differing class perspectives, but may also result from real and honest disagreements about how to advance the interests of the workers and their allies.

Even when alien class forces or interests are involved, the best way to combat this is by encouraging a free and open debate. All that can be accomplished by prohibitions and administrative remedies is to guarantee that any problem or disagreement will be expressed secretly, or in other ways that are destructive to the real interests of the revolution.

The involvement of the masses directly in a process of free and open debate among competing tendencies or parties--within the context of the socialist revolution--is the only way to really assure their continued consciousness, participation, and mobilization. On this continued mobilization and vigilance of the workers and their allies hinges the success of the revolution; and its defense against counter-revolution, whether internal or external.

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