

A Critique of Marxist Approaches

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Whether anarchists would like to admit it or not, Marxism has become fashionable once more. A real alarm at the global rise of the far-right, skepticism towards more “democratic” organizing after the fall of the Occupy Wall Street and alter-globalization movements, and a general need to contextualize the abject misery of everyday life have caused many to turn yet again to the Moor.

To be clear from the start (and avoid the inevitable accusations of dogmatism), it is possible as an anarchist to freely loot and employ creatively concepts from Marx’s analysis such as the theory of crisis, value theory, and even a kind of materialist approach to history (though it is important to remember that Marx certainly had no monopoly over the ideas; Bakunin, Stirner, and other anarchist contemporaries investigated many of the same problems in very similar ways). It should also be noted that Marx himself was far more radical than many of his followers, be they the regimes that ruled in his name, professional activists that pretend to read him, or those in the academy who have found a post-recession audience for half-digested pop Marxism.

At the same time there are elements of Marx’s work itself that any consistent anarchist simply cannot accept and in fact must strongly oppose. Concepts such as species-being—*gattungswesen*, also translated as genus-being— in particular present us with profound problems. Even with liberatory goals in mind, one risks alienating themselves and others when attempting to determine a totalizing nature. The project of reifying this or that as the “essence” of a certain “group” also serves to limit our struggles in the most insidious of ways: it offers the hope of a freer society whilst continuing to constrain us through the hard boundaries of the present.

The simplistic, almost teleological historical views adopted by Marx raise other questions still. Again, perhaps the biggest dangers here are practical; progressive metanarratives dividing historical development into neat stages are not only reductive, they have been used to justify among the most hideous examples of counterrevolutionary repression. After all it was this mechanistic view of human development that inspired the Bolsheviks’ inexorable march towards capitalism—building a brutal security apparatus, crushing workers’ uprisings, and dismantling both the soviets and the institution of the Russian commune (which Marx himself would see major revolutionary potentialities in).

No less questionable is the mythology of the dictatorship of the proletariat, perhaps the most well-known source of discord between anarchists and followers of Marx historically. The experience of Soviet Russia and even CNT-controlled Catalonia have decisively laid to rest the curious idea that further centralization of the state will lead to its eventual abolition. In his remarkably

prophetic description of the state under socialist high modernity (almost a century before work in the post-structuralist arena), Bakunin writes:

That would be the rule of scientific intellect, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant, and the most insolent of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of genuine or sham savants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant majority.

These are, however, theoretical problems that can be rejected by anyone who approaches Marx and his thought in a vagabond fashion – and therein lies a much greater *methodological* strain between anarchy and Marxism. If we understand Marxism to mean some unified body of theories developed by one man, it is impossible not to find a tension there with any worthwhile anarchist approach.

More specifically, the problem lies in an orientation that would have someone call themselves a “Marxist” and thus have these ideas rule over them. Anyone who believes that they have nothing to learn from anarchist or other approaches, that the fundamental problems of our time were addressed by someone 150 years ago, ascribes an almost mystical value to concepts like “material conditions” or “the dialectic,” and in debates dutifully refers back to what Marx or Engels wrote instead of what they themselves believe to be correct, is a rather miserable individual and probably not all that interested in the ruthless criticism of all that exists. In fact it is not difficult to see how such a rigid adherence to ideology could lead to support for new and highly sophisticated forms of domination, what dissidents in the tradition like Karl Korsch would accurately describe as “reactionary utopias.”

Winston Churchill’s wife complained about his drinking, to which he famously replied that he had taken more out of alcohol than alcohol had ever taken out of him. As individuals who wish to wield our critique as a weapon against the dominant culture, we must take more from Marx, all other theorists, and anarchism itself than they take out of us.

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