“On Authority” Revisited

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Fredrick Engels argues against Anarchism on the basis that authority is needed to carry out a revolution against capitalism and the organization of society. This article argues that he fundamentally ignored what Anarchists actually meant when they said they were against authority.

The debates between Anarchists and Marxists in the first international were instrumental in the development of both schools of thought and as such in how both movements organized themselves. The fundamental Marxist text on the subject of authority was authored as a result of these debates; "On Authority" by Marx's closest theoretical ally Fredrick Engels. Historically Marxists have used this text to guide their ideas about the subject, specifically in regard to the state. From the point of view espoused by Engels authority itself is not negative, but can be positive if used by specific groups for a specific end. In the case of state authority Engels and Marxists after him argue that if it is created by and for the working class against the capitalist class within the class struggle then this authority becomes a weapon of the workers for their emancipation.

Anarchists have always maintained "anti-authoritarianism" which means that they oppose what they have referred to as "authority" in all circumstances, rather than viewing it as a tool which can be used for negative, or positive outcomes. For Anarchists this included state authority which they always conceived as a coercive mechanism that forced exploitation by the capitalist class on to the working class. Engels argues against "anti-authoritarianism" as such.

In Engels view "anti-authoritarianism" is a childish over-reaction to a multifaceted social question. If we oppose authority in every instance then we can 1; not properly carry out the operation of day to day life in a society and 2; not properly carry out the task of a socialist revolution against capitalism.

The aim of this article will be to review Engels' arguments and see how exactly they hold up to scrutiny.

The Running of Society

It is pretty obvious that in order to maintain a functioning society people need to exert force over things. They need to operate the railroads and trains to make them run on time, they need to organize factories to produce the needed products on time, ect. ect.. Engels argues that this is "authority". By exerting physical force over the railroads and trains we are in effect exerting our "authority" over them. "***Let us take another example — the railway. Here too the co-operation of an infinite number of individuals is absolutely necessary, and this co-operation must be practised during precisely fixed hours so that no accidents may happen. Here, too, the first condition of the job is a dominant will that settles all subordinate questions, whether this will is represented by a single delegate or a committee charged with the execution of the resolutions of the majority of persona interested. In either case there is a very pronounced authority. Moreover, what would happen to the first train dispatched if the authority of the railway employees over the Hon. passengers were abolished?"***

For Engels the Anarchist desire to abolish authority is ridiculous. All practical organization of society would be rendered impossible if authority was to be abolished. "***We have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and, on the other hand,***

a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate."

So the question is, are "the anti-authoritarians" , as Engels refers to Anarchists, really so ridiculous as to not recognize the authority exerted in social organization over things and even people? To answer this question we have to understand what Anarchists mean when they say "Authority".

When Anarchists rail against authority they are typically railing against a specific kind of authority, rather than authority in the abstract. Specifically the authority most prominent in our lives as members of a hierarchical class society. The authority of rulers over the ruled. The authority that capitalists impose over workers by monopolizing social production as their private property, the authority that the state imposes over society by creating and enforcing laws and regulations that establish and protect the claim capitalists have to social production, the authority of the family relations that allow men to control women in order to saddle women with the housework that reproduces the lives of the working class, ect. ect.. Here it is useful to quote an article from the Anarchist Mikhail Bakunin on the same subject written not long before Engels' piece. "***The most stubborn authorities must admit that then there will be no need either of political organisation or direction or legislation, three things which, whether they eminate from the will of the soverign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws – which has never been the case and never will be the case – are always equally fatal and hostile to the liberty of the masses from the very fact that they impose on them a system of external and therefore despotic laws." "The Liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognised them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatsoever, divine or human, collective or individual."***

This explanation makes clear that when Anarchists say they are against authority what they mean is that they are against the domination of one person by another, the rigid and hierarchical control of the mass of people by a bureaucracy, the exploitative power that bosses hold over workers, the misogynist restriction that men impose on women through patriarchal social norms. But what do Anarchists have to say about the authority that is exerted for practical purposes in social organization? Let us again turn to Bakunin. "***Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or the engineer. For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a savant. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor savant to impose his authority upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure. I do not content myself with consulting a single authority in any special branch; I consult several; I compare their opinions, and choose that which seems to me the soundest. But I recognise no infallible authority, even in special questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of such or such individual, I have no absolute faith in any person. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave, an instrument of the will and interests of others." "I bow before the authority of***

special men because it is imposed on me by my own reason. I am conscious of my own inability to grasp, in all its detail, and positive development, any very large portion of human knowledge. The greatest intelligence would not be equal to a comprehension of the whole. Thence results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labour. I receive and I give – such is human life. Each directs and is directed in his turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subbordination."

Here we can see that Bakunin recognizes authority that is based on expertise, efficiency, and practical social organization, precisely the authority that Engels accuses Anarchists of rejecting. Anarchists want an efficient, large scale, organized society created through the free agreement of associated people and as such accept the authority of delegation, expertise, and natural laws. We can then safely conclude that Engels' assertions about Anarchists ignoring the need for practical authority in social organization are fundamentally wrong.

Authority In Revolution

Engels also argues that without authority a revolution against capitalism can not be carried out. He exclaims "Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?!" and goes on to describe how when workers rise up against their oppressors they will arm themselves and exert supreme coercive and forceful authority over them with canons, bayonets, ect.. "***A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?"*** So then how do Anarchists conceive of revolution?

Anarchists are fully aware that a revolution against capitalism will mean that the working class overthrows the capitalist class by force and uses the same force to destroy the reactionary forces aiming to preserve capitalist society. In the 1936 social revolution in Spain lead by Anarchist unions, the CNT and FAI, the working class took up arms and forcibly suppressed an attempted coup by Francoist Fascists forcing them to flee the country. In this social revolution the Anarchist Buenaventura Durruti lead armed Anarchists in a fight against the Fascist reactionary forces. The question then is whether this revolutionary force of the masses of people is in contradiction with opposition to authority.

We have already established that Anarchists only oppose the kind of authority which is imposed from above through the domination and exploitation of people by other people. In this sense, to reverse Enegels' statement, a revolution is the most anti-authoritarian thing there is. When the masses of working people rise up to take possession of the production which they operate every day, when they destroy the state that exists to forcibly prevent them from taking this action, when women challenge and reorganize social relations to create equality between genders in the place of patriarchy, the hierarchical domination of people by people is being destroyed through the free organization of those formerly subjugated to said domination.

Anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker illustrates this point well when he contrasts the Marxist view of revolution to the Anarchist one. "***We already know that a revolution cannot be made with rosewater. And we know, too, that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously. On the day of victorious revolution the workers will have to impose their will on the present owners of the soil, of the subsoil and of the means of production, which cannot be done — let us be clear on this — without the workers taking the capital of society into their own hands, and, above all, without their having demolished the authoritarian structure which is, and will continue to be, the fortress keeping the masses of the people under dominion. Such an action is, without doubt, an act of liberation; a proclamation of social justice; the very essence of social revolution, which has nothing in common with the utterly bourgeois principle of dictatorship."***

Does Engels Have a Leg To Stand On?

The investigation of his arguments we have done here shows us that, in fact, he didn't. It is clear from the text that Engels did no real investigation into the positions of "the anti-authoritarians". He finds himself in debates with anti-authoritarians such as Bakunin and feels the need to respond and to do this pulls his own prejudices about the anti-authoritarian point of view out of a hat, regardless of any relation they have to the actual views of the anti-authoritarians. He compares the hierarchical domination and exploitation that Anarchists oppose to practical social organization between freely associated people, and then, even worse, the overthrow of these systems of exploitation and domination to said systems themselves. It's high time this little bit of Marxist common sense be discarded.

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