

Marxism, Anarchism, & the Genealogy of “Socialism From Below”

Tom Keefer

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A look into the political genealogy of “socialism from below” coined by American Trotskyist Hal Draper, its relationship to Marxism and anarchist thought, and it’s usefulness in contributing to the renewal of socialist politics today.

“It is Marxism itself, in what was the best and most revolutionary in it, namely its pitiless denunciations of hollow phrases and ideologies and its insistence on permanent self-criticism, which compels us to take stock of what Marxism has become in real life.”

—Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Fate of Marxism*¹

Introduction

We live today in an era in which socialism has largely lost its meaning, and at least in the mainstream political consciousness, much of its relevance. Its role as the bogeyman of U.S. empire has been replaced by Arab/Islamic “terrorism,” and even to those unconvinced by the triumph of capitalism and of “the end of history,” socialism’s meaning is obfuscated by an endless variety of parties, movements and states claiming to be socialist. The profusion of social democratic, Leninist, Stalinist, and Maoist governments over the past century which have failed to carry out their stated “socialist” objectives has dealt a serious blow to the integrity of the very concept of socialism and is largely responsible for today’s marginalization of revolutionary politics. Socialist organizations out of power have proved no better, as cultism, bureaucratization, and reformism have ossified and destroyed virtually every such grouping that has been able to amass more than a handful of members. Despite the best efforts of its founders, for most of the past century “scientific socialism” has become, as Cornelius Castoriadis puts it:

...an ideology in the full meaning that Marx himself attributed to this word. It has become a system of ideas which relate to reality not in order to clarify it and to transform it, but on the contrary in order to mask it and to justify it in the abstract. It has become a means of allowing people to say one thing and to do another, to appear other than they are.²

One response to this situation has been to articulate a politics of “socialism from below” to provide a revolutionary alternative to the moral crimes and political failures of both authoritarian Marxism and social democracy. Hal Draper, the inventor of this term, and David McNally, who has helped to popularize it, define socialism from below as working class self-emancipation based upon the fusion of revolutionary socialism with revolutionary democracy. Socialism from below is seen as the genuine inheritance of Marxian socialism as articulated in the declaration of the International Workers Association in 1867 that “the emancipation of the working classes must be

¹ Cornelius Castoriadis. “The Fate of Marxism”. In Roussopoulos, Dimitrios, I. (ed.). *The Anarchist Papers*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1986. p 80.

² Ibid, p 78.

conquered by the working classes themselves.”³ This conception of socialism, it is claimed, stands in direct opposition to the legacies of authoritarian “socialisms from above” – utopian socialism, insurrectionist/conspiratorial socialism, anarchism, social democracy, Stalinism and Maoism.

Over the past several decades the most influential political grouping to lay claim to the term developed by Draper and McNally has been the International Socialist Tendency (IST), which is one of the largest socialist groups in the English speaking western world. The IST is a political formation which, while emerging from the post-World War II Trotskyist movement, broke from orthodox Trotskyism by its categorization of the former Soviet Union as state capitalist. The IST has been the largest and most important Trotskyist group in the English speaking world over the past several decades, and has had a major impact on the anti-globalization and anti-war movements in England, Canada, and the US. The role played by the IST has been a controversial one, as many grassroots activists and organizers have criticized it for undemocratically controlling broad campaigns, forming unprincipled block with trade union bureaucrats and “left” liberals, using social movements as recruiting grounds for their organization, and demobilizing and rolling up grassroots organizations once they are of no more use to their party. Interestingly, the IST has been the *only* major Marxist political formation to have claimed to be organizing on the basis of a politics of “socialism from below,” although the term would seem to have little in common with its actual practice. In recent years this tendency has seen numerous defections from its ranks from groupings which have split from it in response to what they view as authoritarian and anti-democratic practices within the organization.

In the context of the recent emergence of significant global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements, many organizations on the far left are rethinking their analyses of a variety of political questions in a manner sympathetic to the approach proposed by Draper and McNally. In addition to an overall resurgence of anarchist politics, the principles of direct democracy and self-organization dominate much of the younger and more radical sections of the anti-globalization movement in North America and Western Europe, and there has been a willingness on much of the socialist left to engage in processes of regroupment with other left formations which focus on contemporary points of unity rather than historical disagreements.

The memory of Stalinism is fading as a new generation of radical anti-capitalists comes into existence, and as anti-globalization and anti-war movements begin to network themselves together in bottom up formations it, in some ways appears as if we are entering a historical period reminiscent of the days of the First International. In that era, a rapacious, unfettered capitalism rampaged across the globe and an internationalist and non-dogmatic revolutionary movement comprised of a wide variety of political traditions (Proudhonist, Chartist, Owenist, Marxist, and Bakuninist), arose to create a theoretical and practical working class resistance to it. The question to be explored is whether or not the concept of socialism from below provides a practical and theoretical base to transcend authoritarian versions of “socialism,” or if it is just another socialist “ideology” which papers over fundamental political differences, and thereby obscures the struggle against exploitation and domination.

The question of whether a politics of “socialism from below” can unite radical anti-capitalist forces becomes all the more interesting when considered in historical context, because the stress on exclusive agency “from below” has long belonged to the arsenal of anti-statist anarchism mobi-

³ The Marxist Internet Archive, “Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen’s Association (1867),” marxists.org/1867/rules.htm

lized against Marxist “authoritarianism.” The battle over the question of whether or not socialism could come “only from below” or must come “from below and from above as well” has been going on for much longer than many of the modern day participants in this discussion are aware. Debates between Marx, Engels and Bakunin regarding methods of organization and concepts of revolution polarized the First International and led to its eventual dissolution, while the degeneration of the Russian revolution provided fresh ground for a re-opening of this question and for a development of anarchist and left communist critiques of Marxism as “proletarian Jacobinism”. If, as Engels stated, “the Bakuninists for years have been propagating the idea that all revolutionary action from above was pernicious, and that everything must be organized and carried out from below upwards”⁴ and if, as Lenin stated, “limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below and renunciation of pressure also from above is *anarchism*,”⁵ how is it that Draper and McNally as Marxists from Leninist and Trotskyist traditions claim ownership over the concept of “socialism from below”?

This essay will try to answer these questions by moving beyond static categories of socialism “from above” and “from below” and seek to understand what the real issues are in this ongoing debate. To begin with, I will provide a review and assessment of the political genealogy of the term “socialism from below” and then discuss the manner in which the conflict between Marxists and anarchists in the First International related to questions of socialism from below. An assessment of the politics and potential of socialism from below would not be complete without addressing the question of the Russian revolution and its subsequent degeneration, which has posed the most significant problem for socialist revolutionaries in the 20th century. In the course of this essay I will rely on the insights of a variety of revolutionary schools of thought, which, while they have been largely ignored by the theoreticians of “socialism from below,” offer possibilities for pushing liberatory politics beyond the ideological constraints of a reductionist and moralistic analysis.

Socialism From Below and “Anarchist Libertarianism”

The term “socialism from below” was coined in 1960 by the American Marxist Hal Draper, in an essay entitled *The Two Souls of Socialism*.⁶ Draper, who was a founding member of the US Trotskyist movement but split with orthodox Trotskyism during World War II, wrote his essay to address what he called the “crisis in the *meaning* of socialism.”⁷ Faced with a host of competing socialist groups – social democratic, Stalinist, Maoist, and Trotskyist – all claiming the mantle of genuine socialism, Draper came up with the terms “socialism from below” and “socialism from above” to distinguish between authentic revolutionary socialism and its antithesis. Draper defined these two competing “socialisms” as follows:

⁴ Friedrich Engels, “The Bakuninists at Work: An account of the Spanish revolt in the summer of 1873,” www.marxists.org

⁵ V.I. Lenin, *On the Provisional Revolutionary Government, Collected Works*, Vol 8. 4th English Edition, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965.p. 481.

⁶ From the research I have done, Draper appears to have been the first person from a Marxist or anarchist background to use the phrase “socialism from below,” although many other revolutionaries have used the terms “from above” and “from below” when describing political practices.

⁷ Hal Draper, “*The Two Souls of Socialism*,” in E. Haberkern (ed.) *Socialism from Below*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press. Pp. 2–33. Also online at: www.marxists.org

What unites the many different forms of Socialism-from-Above is the conception that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be *handed down* to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact. The heart of Socialism-from-Below is its view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized “from below” in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history.⁸

This definition forms the substance of Draper’s essay and of his notion of socialism from below. Using it as a criterion he devotes the rest of his essay to examining a wide swath of socialist thinkers (from Kautsky, to Babeuf, to Saint-Simon, Bernstein, to US radicals) in order to categorize them as followers of a “socialism from below” or “socialism from above.” For Draper it is only Marx who truly occupies the category of socialism from below, for it was Marx who “finally fettered the two ideas of socialism and democracy together.”⁹ Draper argues that Marx did this not only in the realm of theory, but also in the practice of his day to day organizing.

Draper saves his fiercest criticism for two libertarian socialist critics of Marx – Proudhon and Bakunin. Draper condemns the racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism of Proudhon and lambastes him as a would be dictator, adding that “the story is similar with the second ‘father of anarchism,’ Bakunin.”¹⁰ For Draper, despite its “something from below” verbiage, anarchism “is not concerned with the creation of democratic control from below, but only with the destruction of ‘authority’ over the individual, including the authority of the most extremely democratic regulation of society that it is possible to imagine.”¹¹

Nearly twenty-five years after the publication of the *Two Souls of Socialism*, Hal Draper’s Marxism was re-popularized in a pamphlet entitled *Socialism from Below* by David McNally. McNally was then a member of the International Socialist Tendency (IST), a group whose U.S. section had been created in part by supporters of Draper’s analysis. Following the dissemination of McNally’s pamphlet, the concept of “socialism from below” was to become a touchstone in the political self-definition of the IST.¹²

McNally’s stated purpose in writing the pamphlet was identical to Draper’s – to address the “root of the contemporary crisis in the meaning of socialism”¹³ created by the crimes of Stalinism. The similarities go deeper, as McNally’s pamphlet adopts the structure of Draper’s “Two Souls of Socialism” by laying out a historical accounting of the predecessors of the modern socialist movement. In some sections of his work, McNally is obviously heavily indebted to Draper’s analysis. For example, in his section on anarchism, McNally not only borrows the same subtitle of “the myth of anarchist libertarianism” but in three separate places within the same section uses the exact same quotations that Draper uses to critique anarchism. McNally’s rejection of anarchism, like Draper’s, is threefold: anarchism represents the urges of the small shopkeeper and the petty bourgeoisie, not the working class; it is anti-democratic in its refusal of “democratic and

⁸ Ibid, p 3.

⁹ Ibid, p 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 12.

¹¹ Ibid, p 12.

¹² This remains the case today, with the term being regularly used by the group’s leading theoreticians as the party’s political basis of unity. David McNally left the IST in 1996 and was one of the co-founders of the New Socialist Group.

¹³ David McNally, “*Socialism from Below*,” newsocialist.org.

collectivist practice”; and its rejection of “political freedom” for a “freedom from politics” means that anarchism will never be able to provide “real direction to attempts by workers to change society.”¹⁴

The virulence of Draper’s and McNally’s critique of anarchism is the product of a difficult contradiction within orthodox Marxist claims to embody socialism from below – the fact that of all the revolutionary critiques of capital and the state, anarchism would seem to be the theoretical perspective that has most consistently advocated a politics “from below”. Not only that, but revolutionary anarchism is not easily dissociated from Marxism. As Enrico Malatesta noted, “almost all the anarchist literature of the 19th century was impregnated with Marxism.”¹⁵ The libertarian communist Daniel Guerin takes this analysis a step further by arguing that:

Marxism and anarchism are not only influenced by one another. They have a common origin, they belong to the same family.... Anarchism and Marxism, at the start, drank at the same proletarian spring. And under the pressure of the newly born working class they assigned to themselves the same final aim, i.e. to overthrow the capitalist state and to entrust society’s wealth, the means of production, to the workers themselves.¹⁶

While it is true that Proudhon and many of his followers were often reactionary, chauvinistic, and opposed to many aspects of working class self activity, Draper and McNally forget to mention that the followers of both Marx and Bakunin were often united against the Proudhonists. Despite their sharp disagreements on questions of the state and centralization, Marx and Bakunin:

both believed in the primacy of economic “base” over political “superstructure”; both wished to overthrow capitalism and were engaged upon working as active revolutionists to this end; both were socialists and collectivists, opposed to bourgeois individualism; both were bitterly at odds with religion; both had a veneration for natural science.¹⁷

Where they disagreed was precisely over what could be termed the principles of socialism from below. While both believed in working class self-organization, the debate between them was over exactly how this was supposed to lead to the emancipation of the working class. As Bakunin argued:

Marx is an authoritarian and centralizing communist. He wants what we want, the complete triumph of economic and social equality, but he wants it in the State and through the State power, through the dictatorship of a very strong, and so to say, despotic provisional government, that is by the negation of liberty. His economic ideal is the state as sole owner of the land and of all kinds of capital, cultivating the land under the management of state engineers, and controlling all industrial and commercial associations with state capital. We want the same triumph of social and

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Daniel, Guerin, “Marxism and Anarchism,” in Goodway, David (ed.) *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. 117.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 118–19.

¹⁷ Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*. London: Routledge, 1980, p 297.

economic equality through the abolition of the State and of all that passes by the name of law (which, in our view, is the permanent negation of human rights). We want the reconstruction of society and the unification of mankind to be achieved, not from above downwards by any sort of authority, nor by socialist officials, engineers, and other accredited man of learning – but from below upwards, by the free federation of all kinds of workers’ associations liberated from the yoke of the state.

Draper’s and McNally’s critique of anarchism is superficial and misleading insofar as it makes no attempt to address the anarchist “from below” critique of Marxist conceptions of party and state, reduces all anarchism to two individual theorists (Proudhon and Bakunin), and makes no attempt to address the insights of collectivist, democratic, and working class currents within anarchism.¹⁸ As vile, reprehensible, and deserving of condemnation as they are, the racist, sexist and anti-Semitic comments attributed to Proudhon and Bakunin should not be grounds for dismissing the entire theoretical edifice of anarchism. A little digging will reveal racist remarks from both Marx and Engels towards the Slavs, Mexicans, and other victims of “world history,” but reprehensible as these are, no one suggests that Marxism should be abandoned for this reason.

While Draper and McNally correctly attack the individualist and petty bourgeois tendencies present within anarchism, they forget that, as with socialism, there are “two souls” of anarchism. There is an anarchism which is petty bourgeois, anti-democratic, individualist, and based on a strategy of liberation from above, but there is also a working class, liberatory anarchism which on numerous occasions in history has taken part in great mobilizations against capital, state, and authoritarian socialist dictatorships.¹⁹ In focusing upon Proudhon and Bakunin, as though they were the be all and end all of anarchism, and not just representatives of particular anarchist currents at a specific historical juncture, Draper and McNally perform an act of erasure upon important anarchist theorists such as Malatesta, Kropotkin, Goldman, Berkman, Averich, Makhno and Durruti, all of whom extended and transformed anarchist thought in important ways. In addition to ignoring the militant anarcho-syndicalist movement that played such a crucial role in the early US labor movement, they also omit the revolutionary “from below” contributions of anarchism to the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

Draper’s attack on anarchism is not the only example of occlusion in his essay, as he declines to ask questions that his framework is incapable of answering. Thus, in saying that Bolshevism “is difficult to treat briefly”²⁰ and cannot be discussed within the scope of his essay, Draper fails to bring his analysis of socialism from below to one of the most pressing questions concerning the meaning of socialism: what happened to Marxism in the wake of the degeneration of the Russian revolution? Draper’s ducking of the question of whether “Leninism” was a form of socialism from above or below is matched by an unwillingness in this essay to pronounce upon several of the most important questions facing revolutionary movements: the nature and potentiality of the working class as a force for revolutionary change, the role of the revolutionary organization in the process of this change, and finally, the nature and role of the state in the revolutionary process.

¹⁸ A significant and highly detailed anarchist critique, a “Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally’s pamphlet *Socialism from Below*” has been made of McNally’s arguments regarding anarchism. I share many of the same critiques and for reasons of space I will not repeat it. The document can be found at: anarchism.pageabode.com.

¹⁹ See Wayne Price, “Socialism from Above or Below”, *The Utopian*, Number 3, Available at: www.utopianmag.com

²⁰ Hal Draper, note from 1970 edition of *Two Souls of Socialism*.

While Draper's focus on working class self-organization is sufficient to distinguish a genuine process of revolution from top down reformism or bureaucratic maneuvering "from above" in the historical examples he has listed, it is not sufficient to articulate what socialism from below concretely means in today's context. Draper's method is to list a long variety of great European socialist men and to lump them into various categories based upon what they have said or written.²¹ Not once does he speak of either the underlying capitalist tendencies of development or mention working class resistance to these processes and how this might have affected various social movements or the political development of various theorists. Draper's method is an ideological one (the creation of various fixed categories removed from the context of class struggle and material reality) and one in which, ironically enough, the very masses for whom he claims to speak are removed from the picture.

Lenin and Socialism From Below

Such is the general mechanism of the proletarian state power viewed "from above," from the standpoint of the practical realization of the dictatorship. It can be hoped that the reader will understand why the Russian Bolshevik who is acquainted with this mechanism and who for twenty-five years has watched it growing out of small, illegal, underground circles, cannot help regarding all this talk about "from above" or "from below," about the dictatorship of leaders or the dictatorship of the masses, etc., as ridiculous and childish nonsense, something like discussing whether a man's left leg or right arm is more useful to him.

– V.I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism*²²

McNally's major contribution to Draper's conception of socialism from below was to extend it to encompass the Leninist and Trotskyist tradition that the International Socialist Tendency bases itself upon. Draper defined the essence of Marxism as the synthesis of the ideas of socialism and democracy, with the emphasis that it is only the working class that will be able to fuse them together in a revolutionary whole. McNally, in preparing an extension of socialism from below to include Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolshevik tradition, defines the "essence" of Marxism slightly differently from Draper. From McNally's perspective, the essence of Marxism arises from the fact that "the working class had to emancipate itself through its own collective action" and to "overthrow the old state and create a new, fully democratic state for itself."²³ McNally then discusses the "revision" and co-option of Marxist revolutionary and self-emancipatory theory by social democracy, and, after a brief outline of Rosa Luxemburg's important conflicts with social democracy, turns to the main thrust of his argument – the contention that, due to its support for the slogan "All power to the Soviets" and its call for the destruction of the capitalist state apparatus, Leninism is the true representative of "socialism from below" after the practice of Marx and Engels.

²¹ Interestingly, in his listing of the all male figures representing the various schools of socialism from below and socialism from above, Draper neglects to mention the contributions of either Rosa Luxemburg or Alexandra Kollontai, presumably because of their arguments against Leninism and the bureaucratization of the Russian revolution would unduly complicate matters.

²² V.I. Lenin, *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1975. p. 39.

²³ David McNally, "Socialism from Below,"

McNally argues that following the October 1917 Bolshevik led uprising, the embryo of a truly socialist society had been formed in Russia. Because of the relative backwardness of Russian economic development, the failure of the revolution to spread to advanced capitalist societies, and the effects of imperialist intervention and the bloody civil war that ensued, McNally states that “workers’ democracy in a meaningful sense of the term had disappeared” by 1921.²⁴ McNally attributes this to the atomization and disappearance of the working class itself under the relentless blows of the counterrevolution and not to any actions taken by the Bolshevik leadership itself. The counterrevolution for McNally was only fully completed by 1927, when Trotsky was expelled from the party, and when the Left opposition which he led was ruthlessly suppressed by Stalin. For McNally, “when Stalin was committing barbarous crimes in the name of ‘socialism’, the lone voice of Leon Trotsky kept alive some of the basic elements of socialism from below.”²⁵ McNally continues his analysis of the degeneration of the Russian revolution, expanding upon the contributions of Trotsky, while also explaining the central theses upon which the IST broke from orthodox Trotskyism: the IST’s theory of state capitalism, its critique of Third World “from above” revolutions in China and Cuba, and its assertion that the world is again sliding into a period of crisis reminiscent of the 1930s.

McNally’s arguments concerning the degeneration of the Russian revolution may at first sound convincing, for they repeat the seemingly evident truths that the Bolsheviks were the victims of the unfavourable circumstances that they inherited after coming to power, and that the only real alternatives to Soviet power were the white armies of the counter revolution or those Bolshevik currents represented by Trotsky, Bukharin, or Stalin. However, in repeating this argument, McNally so simplifies his reading of Russian history that all real and imagined revolutionary critics of the Bolsheviks have been excised from his account. While it is true that his work is a short one, it seems odd that McNally left out the revolutionary critiques of Leninism made by Rosa Luxemburg, the “ultra-left” communists, Alexandra Kollontai and the Workers’ Opposition, and the Russian anarchist-communists, not to mention such momentous events as the Kronstadt revolt and the Makhnovist peasant uprising in Ukraine – all of which made coherent criticisms of Leninism and the Bolshevik tradition from the perspective of the self-organization of the masses from below. In McNally’s analysis, Trotsky stands as the sole opponent of Stalin and the degeneration of the revolution, because all others have been made to vanish.

It is undeniable that the failure of the Russian revolution to spread to advanced European nations and the impact of foreign intervention and civil war accelerated its degeneration. However, the sad fact is that this degeneration began *before* the Civil War and foreign intervention began. In his comprehensive study *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control*, Maurice Brinton provides numerous examples of the ways in which the Bolsheviks, in the months after they came to power and before the Civil War began, undermined workers’ self-management, disbanded and subordinated initiatives amongst the factory committee movement, and otherwise sought to maintain top down state and party control over the working class.²⁶ As Brinton argues, the struggle over whether socialism was to be built “from above” or “from below” was not debated in the abstract: “underlying the controversies, what was at stake was the whole concept of socialism: workers’ power or the power of the party acting ‘on behalf of’ the working class.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks & Workers’ Control 1917 to 1921: the State and Counter-Revolution*, p 18–27.

²⁷ Ibid.

Constraints of space prevent us from engaging in a detailed examination of the dynamics of socialism from below and socialism from above in the Russian revolution, although a series of interesting texts take up these questions, making powerful arguments that the Bolshevik regime was not a force of socialism from below. These include the work of the anarchists Voline and Paul Averich on Kronstadt and Makhno, and also the work of Samuel Farber in his book *Before Stalinism*. Also, a very thorough and well researched response to David McNally's pamphlet *Socialism From Below* in the introduction to the "Anarchist Frequently Asked Questions" document provides a point by point refutation of McNally's arguments concerning anarchism and the politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.²⁸

Lenin-ISM and Anarchism

In 1873, Engels wrote "The Bakuninists at Work: an Account of the Spanish Revolt in the Summer of 1873," an indictment of what he saw as the anarchist failure to lead a successful revolution in Spain, where the International was heavily dominated by Bakunin's followers. Engels criticized the political incoherence of the movement, its failure to articulate a clear political program, its refusal to participate in a coalition government with the Republican bourgeoisie, and its eventual participation in the government as an "impotent minority outvoted and politically exploited by the bourgeoisie."²⁹ Engels' account is certainly a damning one, and it is true that the movement he critiqued seems to have committed many of the same mistakes made by the main anarchist tendencies during the Spanish revolution of 1936.³⁰

But what is more interesting is that Engels rooted his critique of the anarchists in their refusal to support the application of "socialism from above" through revolutionary organizations and the state. As he put it: "the Bakuninists moreover had for years been preaching that all revolutionary action from above was pernicious, and that everything should be organized and carried through from below upward."³¹

In 1905, this debate over the concept of "socialism from below" moved eastward, and in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval then sweeping Russia, Lenin polemicized against his rivals Plekanov and Martynov in an article entitled "Only From Below, or From Above as Well as From Below?" on precisely the same questions that had faced revolutionaries in Spain. In an ironic twist of history, Plekanov was then arguing that "to participate in a revolutionary government together with representatives of the petty bourgeoisie would be a betrayal of the proletariat," a position he later reversed during the 1917 revolution.³² With major cracks appearing in the edifice of the Tsarist state, Plekanov's position was hotly criticized by Lenin, who thought that participation of socialists in a coalition government with progressive members of the bourgeoisie

²⁸ See a "Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally's pamphlet *Socialism from Below* at www.infoshop.org.

²⁹ Friedrich Engels, "The Bakuninists at Work: An account of the Spanish revolt in the summer of 1873," www.marxists.org.

³⁰ It is also true that later anarchist movements proposed solutions of these political questions—the contributions of the Platformists and the Friends of Durruti address precisely these questions, focusing upon the necessity of a united political and military program in times of revolution. See Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968* and Agustin Guillamon, *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939*.

³¹ Engels, "The Bakuninists at Work"

³² V.I. Lenin, *On the Provisional Revolutionary Government*, p474.

was necessary to push the revolution forward. Lenin argued that Plekanov's argument smacked of the anarchist principles unequivocally condemned by Engels.

Lenin summed up the argument between his paper, *Vyperod*, and Plekanov's *Iskra* as follows: "*Iskra* wants pressure from below, *Vyperod* wants it 'from above as well as from below'. Pressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens."³³ Lenin further stressed that what was at stake was a matter of principle: "we are for the moment not considering any concrete situation... We are dealing with the general question of principle, whether in the epoch of the Democratic Revolution it is *admissible* to pass from pressure from below to pressure from above."³⁴ Lenin proceeded to recount the lessons of Spain in 1873 as analyzed by Engels, that "true Jacobin of social democracy," who "appreciated the importance of action from above." Lenin's article concludes with five theses:

1) Limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below and renunciation of pressure also from above is *anarchism*.

2) He who does not understand the new tasks in the epoch of revolution, the tasks of action from above, he who is unable to determine the conditions and the program for such action, has no idea whatever of the tasks of the proletariat in every democratic revolution.

3) The principle that for Social-Democracy, participation in a provisional revolutionary government with the bourgeoisie is inadmissible, that every such participation is a betrayal of the working class, is a principle of *anarchism*.

4) Every "serious revolutionary situation" confronts the party of the proletariat with the task of giving purposive leadership to the uprising, of organizing the revolution, of centralizing all the revolutionary forces, of boldly launching a military offensive, and of making the most energetic use of the revolutionary governmental power.

5) Marx and Engels....would have called the new *Iskra*'s doctrinal position a contemplation of the "posterior" of the proletariat, a rehash of anarchist errors.³⁵

These theses are important as they show how once again the controversy regarding socialism from below arose, this time within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in the early years of the 20th century. What is also amply clear is that Lenin would have vigorously resisted any attempts by Draper or McNally to enroll him in the ranks of socialism from below, "at the posterior" of the proletariat.

Revisions to Socialism From Below

In 1997 David McNally came out with a second revised edition of "Socialism from Below" after he and others split from the IST in 1996 by forming the New Socialist Group in Canada.³⁶ This edition contained significant changes from the first and is worth mentioning in a study of the political genealogy of socialism from below. The 1997 version saw the deletion of much of his critique of anarchism, and the introduction of contributions from other Marxist theorists such

³³ Ibid, p 474.

³⁴ Ibid, p 475.

³⁵ Ibid, p 481.

³⁶ See www.newsocialist.org and www.etext.org for more information concerning the political issues involved in this split.

as Antonio Gramsci and CLR James, as well as expanded sections on racial, gender, and sexual liberation that go beyond the lip service that they received in the 1984 version.

McNally reduces his treatment of anarchism to thirteen lines of text printed in the original version of the pamphlet and deletes the rest of the section on anarchism without making any further additions. It is not clear why he has done this. There is no further mention of anarchism in the pamphlet, no attempt to grapple with other anarchist theorists, and no retraction of or elaboration upon his previous critique of anarchism. McNally's sections on Lenin, the Russian revolution, and the contributions of Leon Trotsky also remain essentially unchanged. One of the major additions to the pamphlet is an expanded section on the Italian communist leader, Antonio Gramsci, from whom McNally seeks to derive insights on hegemony, civil society, and the "war of position". For McNally, Gramsci's central insights lie in his notion of a "a new and more complex model of the revolutionary party,"³⁷ but McNally never goes into detail about what this means or whether or not it is qualitatively different from the Trotskyist model of party building. Gramsci has certainly left an important legacy for revolutionary activists confronting a relatively stable advanced capitalist society, but other than a mention of the need to closely link "spontaneous" struggles with the "leadership" of a "more complex" revolutionary party, McNally fails to distill what Gramsci's notions mean on a practical level for the theory of socialism from below. Some other important aspects of Gramsci's thought could have been drawn out and applied to central questions of socialism from below, but issues of class consciousness, the role of the revolutionary organization, and the question of the state are not aspects of Gramsci's thought that McNally addresses.

The other major addition to McNally's pamphlet is his section on "Rebels Within the Movement," a look at the liberatory contributions of feminist, anti-racist, and sexual politics to the practice of socialism from below. The development of this section of the pamphlet is a welcome addition to the brief mention of such issues in McNally's 1984 pamphlet, and to their complete absence in Draper's work. McNally turned to key revolutionary theorists who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from the orthodox Marxist canon in order to build an "inclusive" politics of socialism from below. Thus, the anti-racist perspective of CLR James is foregrounded, as are the struggles for sexual and gender liberation as advanced by Alexandra Kollontai and Wilhelm Reich. However, there is a problem with McNally's use of these figures. For while he supports an "inclusive" model of socialism from below, one in which the insights of James, Kollontai, and Reich can be "added on" to the already determined core of the theory, he is not interested in examining a transformative politics of socialism from below which might subject his formulations, in the best Marxist tradition, to the "ruthless criticism of everything existing."

Just as he did in his 1984 section on anarchism, McNally performs an act of historical erasure upon the theorists he examines. James, Kollontai, and Reich were not one dimensional figures who only focused on single issues of oppression that can be simply added to McNally's conception of socialism from below. At various points in their lives these thinkers articulated a comprehensive politics of socialism from below, a politics which was and remains in sharp conflict with McNally's version of a Trotskyist version of socialism from below. Fresh from a new study of Hegel and under the pressure of events such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956, C.L.R. James wrote *Notes on the Dialectic* and a pamphlet entitled *Facing Reality* which broke decisively from Trotskyism and pioneered a radical Marxist politics which transcended the notion of the revo-

³⁷ David McNally, *Socialism from Below*, 2nd ed. www.newsocialist.org/group.html.

lutionary party, and which rejected the notion of a period of transition between socialism and communism. At the close of the Russian civil war, Alexandra Kollontai led a bitter fight from within the Bolshevik party as part of an organized political tendency, the Worker's Opposition, against authoritarian measures that were being used by Lenin and Trotsky to centralize power in the hands of an unaccountable party elite. Wilhelm Reich called into question notions of the revolutionary party as the depository of socialist theory and sought to develop a critique of everyday life and class consciousness.³⁸

One would never know this from reading McNally's pamphlet. In the time that elapsed between the publication of the two editions, the growth of new social movements required a rethinking of race, gender and sex politics beyond the lip service paid to "anti-oppression" politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Because the orthodox party building Marxist tradition of the past seventy-five years has been so weak on the politics of oppression, McNally had to look beyond the boundaries of what was permissible in the IST in order to create his new and improved "inclusive socialism from below". But due to the fact that political perspectives which would disrupt his pre-arranged conception of socialism from below are excluded from consideration, the second edition of McNally's pamphlet, like the first, omits contributions from other revolutionary tendencies which could better address the problem of socialism from below, its dialectical relationship with socialism from above, and the controversies which have transfixed the socialist movement from its inception.

Conclusion: "From Below Only" or "From Below but Also From Above" ?

Whatever the inaccuracies of their historical claims, Draper's and McNally's concept of "socialism from below" and its focus on grassroots power and mobilization appear to present a welcome antidote to the utopian reformists, messiahs, conspirators, and "enlightened" dictators who have identified themselves as socialists. Their view seems to offer a chance for ordinary people to rework the world on their own initiative and in their own interests. On a closer examination, however, the term reveals inner inconsistencies and exhibits a consistent inability to deal with the complexity of the real world of class struggle. Something that is from below is only "from below" in relation to something else, a process occurring above it, or one emanating from the "higher" echelons of society downwards. Broadly speaking, it is relatively easy to distinguish political processes which occur from below, and which originate from within the ranks of the oppressed and exploited (strikes, protests, riots, or rebellions) versus political processes coming "from above" (new laws passed by parliament, decisions from the courts, or the order of an exec-

³⁸ It is preposterous to suggest that Draper, who was a serious researcher and archivist of the Marxist movement (he compiled a resource which provided a day by day breakdown of Marx's and Engels' lives), was unaware of the Bakuninist "from below" critique of Marx and Engels. It is likely that Draper's decision not to include Lenin and the Bolsheviks in his study stemmed from an inability to defend their record of centralized, top down control as a politics "from below", and from Lenin's own rejection of this term. It also seems odd that McNally, a leading figure within an avowedly Leninist organization, would have been unaware of Lenin's own view on the use of a "socialism from above". Recently, it would appear that McNally is increasingly moving away from certain of his previous formulations as indicated by his writings in a recent book, *Another World is Possible*, where he includes anarchist-communists as part of the "socialism from below" tradition, and in his recent article "Against the State" in *New Socialist* magazine where he appears to move away from certain Leninist formulations.

utive committee). At this abstract level it seems obvious that virtually all Marxist currents from Stalinist and Maoists to Trotskyists and Council Communists as well as all class struggle anarchists are in agreement with the necessity for “the masses” to overthrow the capitalist system and build a new social order. Consequently, the term “socialism from below” loses much of its relevance on this broad political terrain, as all non-utopian Socialists recognize the importance of some degree of mass struggle and involvement “from below” in creating social change. The more important question that needs to be resolved is how the struggle from below is understood as unfolding and how its structures and institutions are conceived of and articulated.

It is this debate – “from below only” or “from below but also from above” – that we see playing itself out in the historic battles between Bakunin and Marx, and later between Lenin and the anarchists and left communists, and indeed right up to the present moment. It is this tension on both the daily terrain of the class struggle, and in the conflicts between two evolved practices of revolution – Marxism and anarchism – that both Draper and McNally fail to capture in their writings on socialism from below. The question is not just whether struggles develop “from below” or “from above” on the macro and world historic level, but whether or not revolutionary organizations should in their day to day activities also operate “from above” as well as “from below” and how, if possible, they can combine these two processes and still remain committed to a genuine revolutionary politics. In a broad sense this means developing an analysis about how revolutionaries can build political organizations of significance, how they should interact with the trade union movement, under what conditions if any they should participate in electoral campaigns and sit in bourgeois parliaments, and what, if any, would be the nature of a revolutionary state and revolutionary organizations in a post-revolutionary society. Beyond answering these classic questions, any genuine form of socialist politics requires answers to the specific questions of how revolutionaries approach their day to day organizing, their relationships to their comrades, the political culture of their organizations, and their willingness to have their own preconceptions challenged by the changing realities of the class struggle. Addressing these questions proves to be completely beyond the Manichean “from below” / “from above” dichotomy articulated by Draper and McNally, which is only accurate in identifying the obvious fact that processes of revolution are transformative and largely uncontrolled explosions of self-activity from broad masses of people.

One approach, most often put forward by individualist anarchists, has been to suggest that liberatory actions and movements can only take place spontaneously and without leadership, a proposition which evaporates when we look at the concrete experience of any social struggle. There are always gradations of political consciousness and people who by virtue of their own material reality – especially their experience of various aspects of privilege and disadvantage – assume an endless variety of “leadership” positions within a given situation. For example, when union organizers are trying to win a union drive in a workplace, they do not simply hand out union cards to the first workers they come across and hope for the best. Instead, before making their move, they try to figure out as much as they can about the specific material relations of the workplace in question. Examining working conditions and the grievances of workers, they relate primarily to workers who, by virtue of their length of time on the job, the nature of their job in relation to other workers, their personal charisma, and shared bonds of gender, ethnicity, and language, have become capable of expressing the common grievances of significant numbers of their work mates by becoming leaders within their workplace. In order to be successful, union organizers must successfully map out workers’ social and political relationships and intervene

inexisting relations by targeting the most influential workers who are unofficial but *de facto* “leaders” within the workplace, to be brought on side for the campaign. It is these workers who are brought together as a committee which is then used to bring in other workers and organize the union drive in every department of the workplace. Ultimately the campaign must tie into the deeply felt aspirations and grievances of as many workers as possible at a given workplace; moreover, assumptions of the union organizers are often challenged by rank and file members. The success of the campaign is most often determined by the extent to which union organizers have the unofficial leaders of the workplace on side.

Paid union organizers, scouting out and then interacting with these “leaders” of the workplace, mobilize the workforce to demand higher wages and better working conditions. This everyday experience of the class struggle hardly seems to be in keeping with a practice of socialism from below. Some leftists (those mostly from an individualist anarchist or “ultraleft” perspective) might object that the unions themselves are co-opted by capital, and that by their very nature, they serve to pacify and integrate workers’ labour power into the market by providing class peace and stability in return for higher wages. These critics might argue that the trade unions would naturally use such top down methods of trying to organize a workplace from above, in order to maintain the power of the bureaucracy. However, even if this premise is accepted, it does not alter the fact that working class consciousness and self-organization is always uneven and that the same lack of spontaneity and ever fluid nature of leadership applies to other instances of social struggle as well, and not just to the organizing of unions. Even the most “spontaneous” wildcat strikes, including those which occur against the will of the union leadership, rely upon conscious or unconscious direction and activity through formal or informal channels that have been shaped by previous experiences of struggle. Unplanned riots also have their own leaders whom police agents are trained to identify and neutralize. These people may have more pressing grievances than others, they might be part of a prepared affinity group, or they might have had previous experiences in confronting and resisting authorities in similar circumstances. Conversely, it is possible that their role as leaders might come from not having any of these characteristics. All that is really meant when we say a struggle is “spontaneous” is that *we* do not know how or why the struggle started and who is leading it. It is a struggle which is unmediated by structures that *we* are aware of, but it is not a struggle unmediated by *any* structure, experience, or leadership, as all human beings exist within such social relationships.

While it can be accepted that revolutionary consciousness, in tandem with systems of capitalist oppression and exploitation, develops unevenly, it will not do for radicals to simply accept the situation, work with the most “advanced” layers of the working class and leave this situation un-problematized. For indeed, the actually – existing structures of leadership created by the everyday experiences of class struggle in a capitalist, racist, sexist and hetero-sexist world will reflect these patterns of domination and oppression and shape the kinds of leadership and resistance that emerge. Ironically, despite its reputation on the libertarian left, Lenin’s pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* offers an important approach to the questions and problems of leadership “from below” as it “spontaneously” develops through class struggle. Lenin’s discussion on the limitations of trade unionist political consciousness and the organizations created by day to day struggles and his insistence that revolutionaries must take up the fight against all forms of oppression in society (even in those areas seemingly not directly affecting the working class) remain relevant today. Lenin’s analysis is an important perspective from which to analyze one specific aspect of the problem of socialism from below – the limitations of “spontaneous” working class polit-

ical consciousness, although as Rosa Luxemburg argued, Lenin failed to make the same critical analysis of the vanguard party and forms of “socialism from above.”³⁹

Ironically, the two solitudes of far left thought – Marxism and anarchism – have both developed insights into the dialectic of socialism from below but have not yet managed to do so in a manner reflecting the complex interplay of formal organization and “spontaneity.” In its Leninist, Trotskyist, and Maoist forms, Marxism has paid great attention to the problems of unevenly developing working-class consciousness and has wasted no time in building organizational frameworks to address this problem – the “vanguard” party chief among them. Unfortunately, this approach has created greater problems than the ones it set out to solve, and today’s crisis of Marxism has everything to do with the historical failures of its organizational form. Anarchists and left communists for their part have developed an insightful critique of party structures and the perils of leadership “from above” but despite stressing the importance of working class self-activity they have had remarkably little overall success in implanting themselves or their ideas within the mass struggles of working class and oppressed peoples. While the historic defeat of the working class through the rise of Stalinism, the post-World War II consensus, and the more recent neo-liberal global offensive have arguably played a key role in decomposing working class political consciousness and thus limiting the possibilities for revolutionary anarchist and Marxist interventions, it is fair to say that a significant part of today’s theoretical impasse is due to a failure to productively synthesize the insights of Marxism and anarchism within the dialectic of socialism from below/from above.

Ultimately this synthesis is only capable of being produced through the concrete processes of great revolutionary upheavals, but some of its characteristics and possibilities can be captured by learning from past struggles and thinkers while also paying close attention to the ongoing and ever present class struggles that exist in the world around us. Important revolutionary thinkers and activists in the revolutionary tradition who have done important work in breaking down the contradictions between thinking and doing, teaching and learning, and party and class include Rosa Luxemburg, Bertolt Brecht, Paulo Freire and CLR James. A project of rediscovery of their critiques should not be seen as an abstract intellectual exercise, since to be useful, insights from the past must be located in the context of shaping the concrete struggles of the present. We should be comforted by the fact that there is no shortage of contemporary struggles in which the problems of uneven political consciousness and the problematic of leadership plays itself out, and indeed no political activity where these problems are not present. At the present moment on the global stage two vitally important revolutionary processes are grappling with precisely this problem. In Mexico, the EZLN (which in many ways initiated and helped to shape the international anti-globalization movement), has decided to launch a new process of mobilization and consultation where it seeks to generalize its practice of “leading by obeying” to create a new mass movement of Mexico’s poor and dispossessed. In Venezuela, another important process is taking place as the Bolivarian revolution is working itself out through a complex and interconnected process with a state and party led process “from above” connecting with self-organized and grassroots initiatives “from below,” reminding us of how complex and contradictory any real process of revolutionary change inevitably is. There are no easy answers, no pure version of any one revolutionary theory that can be mechanically applied to past or current moments, only a

³⁹ See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961.

“ruthless criticism of everything that exists” and a willingness to learn from our mistakes as we move forward.

Tom Keefer is an academic and activist based in Toronto, Canada.

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