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Insurgent Notes: A New Libertarian Marxist Voice

An Anarchist Critique

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A review of a new on-line journal of autonomous Marxism.
What can anarchists learn from this trend of antistatist
Marxism. What are its strengths and its weaknesses?

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ments? do we support workers' union efforts? are we in solidarity with the oppressed of all races, nations, genders, sexual orientations, etc., even as we relate these struggles to the class conflict? (My answer to all these questions is "yes.") These are real issues which need to be worked out. But they are not differences between libertarian Marxists and anarchists; rather they are issues both within libertarian Marxism and within revolutionary anarchism.

The editorial states clearly, "*We look forward to comradely dialogue with such groups and individuals who may feel some attachment to [our minimal program of agreement] and also look forward to larger regroupments forged in the kind of practical struggles that can cut the knot of theoretical and practical disagreement.*" From this point of view, I welcome Insurgent Voices as a hoped-for contributor to the discussion.

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ally base themselves solely on “*the premises now in existence.*” They really base themselves on “*the great experiences in direct democratic management of production and society (soviets, workers’ councils) that came to the fore in the failed revolutions of the 20th century (Russia, Germany, Spain, Hungary)*”, their editorial states. In fact, their goal is virtually indistinguishable from class-struggle, revolutionary anarchism. Contrary to the implications of the Marx quote, they declare, “*a revolution [dominated by ‘soviet-type’ power] will not take place if there is not prepared in advance a substantial stratum of workers with a clear programmatic idea of what we wish to do with the world when we take it away from the capitalist class.*” (I could not have said it better myself.)

Why then should they see themselves as a separate trend from anarchist-communism? In my opinion, there is no need for a sharp line to be drawn between autonomist Marxism and anarchist-communism, any more than there is between anarchist-communism and anarchist-syndicalism. The distinctions are more historical than relevant to today, and should not be a barrier to working in a joint revolutionary organization.

Libertarian Marxists tend to discuss subjects in an abstract, intellectual, Hegelianized-Marxoid language. For example, the editorial expresses “*a commitment to ‘activity as all-sided in its production as in its consumption’ (Marx, Grundrisse), and the ‘development of human powers as its own end’ (Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations) within the expanded reproduction of humanity as the true content of communism....the fundamental problem identified by Marx as the alienation of universal from cooperative labor.*” This is all true, but does not replace a concrete discussion of how to integrate manual and mental labor.

While we may have abstract agreement on principles, there are real issues to be debated in terms of tactics and strategy, differences which have immediate practical results: are we for participating in united fronts with reformists? are we for raising revolutionary goals even while working in broad move-

There has recently appeared a new on-line journal, **Insurgent Notes: Journal of Communist Theory and Practice** (June 2010). Produced by “less than a dozen [U.S.] intellectuals and militants,” it is committed to what has been called “libertarian” or “autonomous Marxism.” This is also often called “libertarian communism” (a term which does not distinguish between libertarian Marxism and anarchist-communism).

Anarchists may see this journal as a sign of the increased interest in this Marxist trend (or rather, set of trends). The majority trend in world Marxism has been Marxist-Leninism (including Trotskyism and Maoism). It has been greatly discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites and by the developments in China. (Social democracy, the other main historical trend of Marxism, had given up its claim to Marxist theory by the 1950s. Its “socialist” or “labor” parties no longer claim to be in favor of a new, noncapitalist, society.)

At the same time, there has been the fundamental crisis of world capitalism since the 1970s (the end of the post-World War II boom). With the Great Recession of 2008 and after, the capitalist crisis has become plain for all to see. This has led many to look to the only radical theory which has an analysis of capitalism and its crises. Whatever the strengths of anarchism—which are many—only Marxism can do this. Without an understanding of the labor theory of value, of surplus value as the basis of profit, of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and of the epoch of semi-monopolies, imperialism, and capitalist decay, it is not possible to understand what is going on in the world today. This has led to a revival of interest in this minority trend in Marxism.

Anarchists may object to any notion of a “libertarian Marxism.” Since the faction fight between Marx and Bakunin tore apart the First International, anarchism and Marxism have been bitter opponents. Marxists have murdered many anarchists in various countries. Marxism has resulted in totalitarian, mass murdering, inefficient, state capitalist regimes,

the very opposite of the goals of libertarian communism (socialism).

However, many anarchists, from Bakunin onwards, have praised Marx's economic critique of capitalism and other aspects of Marxist theory. It is reported in Black Flame, "*Marx's analysis of the core features of capitalism deeply impressed the early anarchists....[It was] a theory of unprecedented and still-unmatched analytic power. The imprint of Marx's economic analysis can clearly be seen in the thinking of the anarchists....*" (Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009; pp. 85 & 87). Yet, "*the anarchists did not adopt Marx's ideas unconditionally or uncritically....They sought to delink Marxist economics from Marxist politics....Many anarchists and syndicalists rejected the view that capitalism would inexorably lead to socialism*" (same; pp. 87, & 96).

Many believed, as I do, that there were both libertarian-democratic and authoritarian sides to Marxism. "*There are ambiguities and contradictions in Marx's thought, which can be interpreted as 'Two Marxisms'*" (same, p. 93). This makes it meaningless to argue whether libertarian Marxism or Stalinism is the "true" Marxism—they are each validly based on different aspects of Marx's Marxism.

Not every anarchist felt positively about parts of Marxism (Kropotkin did not), but many did. And many anarchists have seen value in integrating aspects of Marxist theory with anarchism, such as Daniel Guérin, who was highly influential in modern French anarchism. My point here is not that this partial integration is a valid approach (although I think that it is), just the fact that many genuinely revolutionary anarchists, from Bakunin to Guérin, have thought that it was.

At the same time, there has long been a libertarian minority within Marxism which was antiauthoritarian, antistatist, anit-Leninist, and genuinely for proletarian revolution. Perhaps the first libertarian Marxist was the great utopian thinker, William Morris, a friend of both Engels and Kropotkin (see Thompson, 1976). There have also been the council commu-

of an ideal state of affairs but on the historical process (the real movement) which will (we think) replace the existing state of things with a new society. The quotation is from The German Ideology, but the thought appears throughout Marx's work and is central to his worldview.

What then do we say when a new state of things is produced by the real movement, and it is ugly? When the historical process produced Stalinist totalitarianism, most revolutionary Marxists said that, whether or not they liked it, this was "really existing socialism," after all, the result of the real movement of history, and they had to accept it. This was a basic cause of the disastrous capitulation of most Marxists to state capitalism.

There is certainly a need to analyze the dynamics of capitalist society, what is happening with it, and what are the possibilities for mass revolt against its status quo. This is essential to do, and Marxism is highly useful in doing it. But without a moral vision, "an ideal to which [we want] reality to adjust itself," we are morally and politically rudderless.

We do not need a detailed blueprint of a future society, but a vision, a set of values for the world we want. The working class revolution is unlike the bourgeois revolution in this regard. The bourgeoisie did not need a clear vision of what they were for (nor could they tell the workers that they would set up a new system of exploitation); all that was necessary was to clear away the obstacles to the free workings of the capitalist market. Once set free, the "invisible hand" of the market would organize a capitalist society. But the working class, if revolutionary, needs to be conscious of what it is doing, and to collectively make decisions about what it wants to set up. This includes a clear analysis of capitalism (to a great extent provided by Marx) but also a vision of what could be and what should be.

Libertarian Marxists are the minority trend among Marxists which did not accept Stalinism (or more precisely, Leninism). Fortunately, as can be seen in Insurgent Notes, many do not re-

only to class issues.) But they only say what they are against as opposed to what they are for.

It is correct to fight against the ideologies of classless nationalism and bourgeois anti-imperialism. But do we accept that nations exist and that some of them are oppressed by capitalist imperialism? Should revolutionary libertarian socialists participate in national struggles while proposing an internationalist program for their freedom? It is one thing to oppose pure-and-simple business unionism or to doubt that unions will ever be revolutionary. But should we participate in unions while opposing the bureaucrats? Support unionization drives? Support strikes? Should we be neutral between the unions and the capitalists? It is all very well to admit that there are “very real problems of race, gender, and alternative sexuality” (although they do not, apparently, admit that there are also “very real problems” of national oppression). And that these problems need to be related to class. But by itself, this is a rather anemic statement which leaves class-oriented revolutionaries on the outside of the movements, looking in. Compare this to the view of C.L.R. James, that the autonomous struggles of African-American workers could play a leading role in the struggle of the whole working class as well as in the Black liberation struggle.

Do We Need an Ideal Vision of a Better Society?

Perhaps the biggest difference between anarchists and Marxists is expressed in the quotation from Marx with which they chose to open their editorial: “*Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.*” In other words, Marx says, communists should not base ourselves on a vision

nists (who rejected Leninism), the Johnson-Forest Tendency (of C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskya), the early Socialisme ou Barbarie (of Castoriadis), the Italian autonomists, etc. These have built upon the libertarian side of Marx’s Marxism: the centrality of the working class while opposing all oppressions, the goal of a classless and stateless communist society, the belief that “the emancipation of the working class can only be conquered by the working class itself.” The politics of such Marxists is indistinguishable from anarchism in almost every way.

Again, my point is not that these libertarian Marxists are correct to be Marxists (I personally do not think they are, if “Marxist” is taken to mean totally adopting the whole world view of Marx). But it remains a fact that many revolutionaries have thought that it was correct, that they adopted Marx’s basic theories while sincerely believed in a program which was essentially the same as revolutionary, class-struggle, anarchist-communism.

Cleaver (who claims authorship of the term “autonomist Marxism”) says that he was influenced by Rosa Luxemburg and the council communists, as well as Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin, anarchist-communists. “That the former were ideologically ‘Marxist’ and the latter were not, interested me less than their common perception and sympathy for the power of workers to act autonomously” (2000; pp. 14-15). Precisely.

Personally, when I first became an anarchist (of the anarchist-pacifist school), I was also greatly inspired by the work of Erich Fromm, the humanistic Marxist. Even after becoming a Trotskyist (of an unorthodox sort), I and my comrades were influenced by (among others) C.L.R. James and Dunayevskya, in our attitude toward Black Liberation and toward economics and the nature of the Soviet Union. We were also influenced by Paul Mattick, the council communist

economist. I am still influenced by these sources (especially Mattick). I regard myself as a “Marxist-informed anarchist.”

Insurgent Notes

Like many revolutionary anarchists, Insurgent Notes rejects the “vanguard party”--but not the need for an independent organization of revolutionaries. In their introductory editorial, they express “*a deep-seated skepticism about vanguardist notions of revolution; while we at the same time affirm the need for some of kind of organization ...which conceives of itself not as ‘seizing power’ but as a future tendency or current in a future self-managed society*”.

Insurgent Notes stands on the ground of proletarian revolution, which is not true for all those who developed out of the libertarian Marxist tradition. There are many (even Cleaver) who reject the idea of revolution in favor of a gradual reformism based on alternate lifestyles and alternate institutions (so-called “exodus”). Many also reject the importance of the proletariat, replacing the working class with the concept of the “multitude,” as does Antonio Negri. Others expand the concept of the proletariat until it becomes meaningless, including almost everyone, even peasants (as Cleaver also does). Alas, these tendencies are similar to reformist trends within anarchism. However, the introductory statement of Insurgent Notes makes a point of downplaying struggles at the point of production (citing the unemployed Argentine piqueteros, for example, an important development, but one which was weakened by their lack of coordination with factory-based workers). Struggles outside of the workplace are vitally important, but they do not replace the need for workplace power.

The first essay on the site is by Loren Goldner, “*The Historical Moment That Produced Us; Global Revolution or Recomposi-*

tion of Capital?” This consists of a brilliant overview of the ebb and flow of revolutionary periods, from the 1840s to the future. He begins, “*Looking back from the vantage point of the latest phase of the world crisis that erupted in 2008 (itself merely the latest twist of the ‘slow crash landing,’ sometimes faster, sometimes slower, that began ca. 1970), and from the working-class response to it that, in fits and starts, is taking shape today,... the three and a half decades of the long slide of the world capitalist system, prior to the meltdown of October 2008, must appear as one of the longest and strangest historical periods since the communist movement first emerged in the 1840s.*” He examines the roots of the relative (apparent) prosperity of the recent past and the causes of the coming upsurge. I will not summarize it here, but this important essay alone is worth the effort to access this site.

Abstentionism or Participation in the Struggle?

The historical malady of extreme leftism (called by some, not me, ultra-leftism) was its sectarianism and abstentionism. Like anarchists, Insurgent Notes rejects electoralism (which was a major dispute between the anarchists and Marx historically). More ambivalently, their editorial also rejects “*nationalism of any kind...‘anti-imperialism’...any strategy of ‘capturing the unions’...by...‘boring from within’...‘identity politics’ as the ideological articulation of the very real problems of race, gender, and alternative sexuality, but which must be relocated in class politics.*”

It is hard to know what this means. They do not quite say that only the direct class struggle matters and everything else is a distraction. (This would contradict their emphasis on non-workplace struggles as well as the importance they place on being part of the “real movement,” which is never, ever, limited