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# Socialism from Above or Below

“the two souls of socialism” revisited

Wayne Price

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Price, Wayne (2000). "Anarchism as Extreme Democracy." *The Utopian: A Journal of Anarchism and Libertarian Socialism*. Vol. 1. Pp. 32–42. Online (PDF format) at [www.utopianmag.com](http://www.utopianmag.com); click on "Archives," then "Utopian vol. 1," then title.

The quotation at the right is from the beginning of "The Two Souls of Socialism," by Hal Draper (1992), published as a pamphlet in 1966. Draper's editor notes, "Its political impact on a generation of socialists in the United States and Great Britain has been considerable." (Haberkern, 1992, p. xvii) It influenced that wing of Trotskyism which rejected Trotsky's belief that the Soviet Union under Stalin (and after) was some sort of "workers' state." Instead, these semi-Trotskyists held (correctly) that the U.S.S.R. had developed a bureaucratic ruling class which collectively exploited the workers.

Draper's pamphlet was rewritten as the first half of a work by David McNally, "Socialism from Below" (1984). This has been circulated by the International Socialist Organization, which remains a major part of this international semi-Trotskyist tendency. McNally rewrote "Socialism from Below" in 1997; this version has been circulated by the New Socialist Group in Canada. He has recently rethought and rewritten his socialism-from-below perspective in a new book (2002). Draper himself went on to publish four volumes on *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, elaborating on his arguments.

I was one of many of this broad tendency who were inspired by Draper's conception of two "souls" of socialism. My friends and I felt then, and I feel now, that it gave a profound insight into the relationship between socialism and freedom. In the '60s and '70s, it inspired us to keep on struggling for a libertarian-democratic vision of socialism. At that time most self-admitted revolutionaries were admirers of Mao, Ho Chi Minh, or Fidel Castro: left Stalinists. There were many decent activists who were unhappy with the nature of such regimes—the one-party states, banning of strikes, suppression of dissent, etc. But they often felt that this was what socialism appeared to be, and therefore had to be supported against U.S. imperialism. Draper pointed to an alternate tradition within socialism, one rooted in popular, radically democratic resistance, which was counterposed to both capitalist imperialism

and to any new bureaucratic ruling class. In its essentials, this remains the center of my political views.

Today such state-Communism has been relatively discredited with the fall of the Soviet Union and the turn of the Chinese state to open capitalism. As a consequence, the concept of socialism-from-below has become widely attractive to many radicals. However, the concept of socialism-from-below, at least as raised by Draper and by McNally (at least until his most recent book), has been used ambiguously. Contrary to the views of the anarchists, these writers claim that Marxism is most consistent with revolutionary socialism-from-below, and that anarchism is an example of authoritarian socialism. I will argue instead that the divide between authoritarian and libertarian-democratic tendencies runs through (inside) Marxism as well as through anarchism. However, I believe that, while there is value in Marxism, overall, anarchism is most consistent with the development of a liberating socialism-from-below.

## Social Change from Above or Below

To rephrase the core of Draper's argument, which I still see as valid:

From time immemorial, the oppressed and exploited have looked to someone in authority to help them, to some strong leader or some faction of the ruling class. The unhappy peasants looked to kings to protect them from aristocrats and aristocrats to protect them from kings. People vote for liberal politicians to save them from conservatives, for "lesser evils" to shield them from "greater evils." Oppressed people internalize their society's view of themselves as weak and unworthy, and instead hope for some messiah, some man on a white horse, to come and lead them to the promised land.

example, anarcho-syndicalism was thoroughly a working class movement.)

However, there has also been another tendency. Individuals and groups previously influenced by Marxism have used the concept of Socialism-from-Below as a bridge to anarchism. They have either abandoned Marxism or are open to some sort of synthesis between Marxism and anarchism (this is true of McNally's latest [2002] effort to rethink the concept of socialism-from-below). In either case they reject Marxism-Leninism in favor of a revolutionary libertarian-democratic socialism.

Draper divided the types of socialisms into those promising liberation from above and from below. If he made mistakes in applying this concept, we anarchists can still appreciate the value of his insights.

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to capitalism. Opposition forces often do not even claim to be socialist. For example, in a large part of the world, anti-imperialism has taken the reactionary form of Islamic authoritarianism.

In this context, there has been an international revival of anarchism, for the first time in over eighty years. The movement has spread throughout the U.S. and Western Europe, but also to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It represents the desire for a new, humanistic, order, which is neither overtly capitalist nor any sort of bureaucratic so-called socialism (really state capitalism). It is a new birth of libertarian-democratic socialism-from-below.

Naturally, the Marxists have not given up. In particular, there has been a growth of that wing of Marxism which is least associated with either state-Communism or the Social Democrats. There is an interest in the autonomist or libertarian Marxists, whose politics are very similar to anarchism. More dangerous is the growth of the anti-state-capitalist wing of Trotskyism previously mentioned, which remains Marxist-Leninist. It broadens its appeal by referring to the concept of Socialism-from-Below, taught by Draper. It uses this concept to support Marxism, not only the Marxism of Marx, but also of Lenin and Trotsky. It uses it to attack “the myth of anarchist libertarianism.” (Draper, 1992, p. 11; McNally, 1984)

Given the reality of Marx’s centralism, and the actual practice of Lenin and Trotsky, this tendency has in effect been using the concept of Socialism-from-Below to justify socialism-from-above. They have used it to make Marxism-Leninism look good to activists otherwise attracted to anarchism. They do not explain how they would avoid the fate of the earlier Marxists who led to reformism or totalitarianism. They add all sorts of irrelevant arguments about anarchism’s class basis. (Irrelevant, since Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky came from bourgeois-aristocratic backgrounds, while, for

Periodically the wretched of the earth rise up against their rulers and strike blows for freedom. But again and again, they have ended up only replacing one ruling group with another. Real gains were made over time—such as when the aristocracy was replaced by capitalist-ruled semi-democracy. In the course of revolutions, organs of popular self-management have repeatedly been created, such as councils, soviets, factory committees, neighborhood assemblies. But a free, cooperative, society was never won. The ideals of freedom, equality, solidarity, and self-government, have never died out, but neither have they ever been achieved for more than brief moments in history.

The desire for freedom is rooted in the class struggle, and ultimately in the nature of humanity. But there is also a felt need for authority, which is socially rooted in the layers of petty privileges within the system (privileges based on race, gender, education, craft, and so on). Everyone is taught to “get ahead” and “make something of yourself” by climbing up the hierarchy, by getting a little more (or a lot more) than those below you. Success, as measured in capitalism, is to rise to the top of the hierarchy, to be a boss. Socialism-from-below challenges all that in the name of solidarity and equality.

Socialism from below is not simply a matter of supporting the majority against the minority. For most of the time, in non-revolutionary conditions, most people accept the existing system of rule by elites (this acceptance is what makes conditions non-revolutionary, by definition). Popular “acceptance” may be given with ignorant enthusiasm or with bitter resignation or something in between. Only a small group may continue to advocate that people rely on themselves. This revolutionary minority may participate in the smaller struggles and day-to-day conflicts of the oppressed, while still advocating popular struggle for total emancipation.

At the same time, there are mass struggles in which elites try to use the people as a battering ram. These leaders wish to use popular mass movements in order to force their way into the

ruling stratum, gaining some benefits for their followers. They may use the aroused people to overthrow the old rulers and to become the new bosses. Thus the U.S. and French revolutions, which put the capitalist class into power. Thus the Communist Party-led revolutions, which put a bureaucratic class into power. These were all mass revolutions, but (in the end) led from above.

This pattern of reliance on good leaders (rulers) has been the dominant tendency in all previous struggles and, naturally, also in the history of the socialist movement. Infinite forms of socialist reformism have flourished, all relying on accommodation with some faction of the existing capitalist class and its state. A variety of more-or-less revolutionary tendencies has advocated the overthrow of this state and its replacement with a new state—a state-capitalist dictatorship.

But also in the socialist movement, another tendency has come to fruition, from time to time. This is the tendency of working people to rely on themselves and to boldly stand in opposition to ruling elites (existing rulers or would-be new rulers). Working people have organized themselves to stand outside of and against the powers that be. They may use the resources of leading individuals, but these are chosen by the people, controlled by them, and removable by them. Even limited reforms are won by pressuring the rulers from outside, not by seeking access to power. This is the true, revolutionary, libertarian-democratic, tradition of socialism-from-below. It was expressed in the great sentence at the beginning of the Provisional Rules of the First International (written by Marx but loved by anarchists), “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” Or as William Morris put it, “Change for the better can only be realized by the efforts of the workers themselves. ‘By us and not for us’ must be their motto.” (1986, pp. 144–145)

It has been argued by Marxists that it is only now, with industrial capitalism, that it becomes possible for this approach

The same is true for the followers of Lenin, of Mao, and of Trotsky. But unlike Marxism-Leninism, anarchism is not named after Proudhon, Bakunin, or Kropotkin. We are not Malatestians or Emma Goldmanites. Few read their books. This situation creates weaknesses, of course, in the limitations of anarchist theoretical work and the lack of homogeneity among anarchists (although the Marxists are also pretty heterogeneous and often ignorant of what Marx really said). The errors of Proudhon and Bakunin are their errors, long abandoned by the movement they initiated. Over time new errors are created, often preventable if the anarchist movement were more theoretical and historically-minded. But at least we are not bound by orthodox tradition, in its insights and its errors.

In short, anarchism also has its authoritarian, from-above, side, which is—as Draper says—rooted in an ambiguity about democracy. But at its heart, anarchism is open to a libertarian-democratic socialism-from-below.

## Revolution from Below

Draper begins his pamphlet by saying there is a crisis in what we mean by socialism. “For the first time in the history of the world, very likely a majority of its people label themselves ‘socialist’ in one sense or another; but there has never been a time when the label was less informative.” (1992, p. 2) He was referring to all those who regarded themselves as Communists, Social Democrats, Democratic Socialists, Laborites, Arab Socialists, African Socialists, and so on. Today the term Socialism has become vague to the point of nullity. Even its anti-capitalist meaning has often been abandoned.

But it is no longer true that socialism of some kind is supported on a world-wide mass basis. After 1989, Marxism has been largely discredited. Social Democracy and state-Communism no longer pretend to offer an alternative



in areas where individual choice should be primary. For example, the majority has no right to impose its views of religion on minorities, nor to impose popular views of voluntary sexual practices. And even when majority decisions are made, the opposing minority must have a right to defend its opinions, and to try to become a majority in the future. (If this is not allowed, then the majority cannot be said to really be the majority, that is, for individuals to have heard all sides and freely made up their minds.) New ideas begin as minority opinions before they win their way.

However, as I have argued (Price, 2000), some anarchists have made the mistake of opposing the whole concept of “democracy.” Draper is correct to point out that there are decisions which must be made, affecting whole communities (no matter how decentralized). To oppose any form of collective, democratic decision-making only leads to some minority making the decisions (as in the “tyranny of structurelessness”). If no one can tell me what to do, then I must be the king. I think Draper is right to point to this error as the base of the authoritarian trends in anarchism.

On the other hand, there are many anarchists (e.g., Tucker, Chomsky, Bookchin) who have seen themselves as continuing the radical democratic tradition which goes back to the capitalist democratic revolutions of the U.S. and France. Anarchism as a conception of extreme, direct, participatory democracy is widely recognized. (In his centralism, Draper rejects the concept of “participatory democracy.”) Included in anarchist programs of voluntary association is the “self-management” and “self-organization” of all industries and communities—which are just other ways of saying “democracy.”

In any case, the relationship between the anarchist movement and its founders is very different than that between Marxism and its founders. Marxism is named after its founder. His works are sacred books. His words are quoted in arguments.

to consistently exist and even to win. Now there exists, on a worldwide scale, a type of working class which is capable of organizing itself, and of cooperatively managing society. Now technology exists which makes possible creation of a new society of plenty for all and the integration of work and creative play. (Also, this technology is now so dangerous that it must be taken away from all minorities if humans are to be sure of surviving.) Whether this argument is correct is not a matter of abstract theory but something to be proven in practice, if we can.

Means must be consistent with ends. Anarchists argue that a self-managing, self-organizing, society of free, cooperative individuals, can only be created by a popular movement which is itself self-managing and self-organizing. It is not possible to create a new society in which the working people would be set free once led there by a wise and benevolent set of (“temporary”) masters. Shepherds do not take care of sheep for the health of the sheep.

Enemies of the working class often point out the workers’ weaknesses: their racism, sexism, nationalism, superstition, and so on. All of these exist, to a greater or lesser extent. How will they overcome these weaknesses? Draper answers, “How does a people or a class become fit to rule in their own name?”

Only by fighting to do so.... Only by fighting for democratic power do they educate themselves and raise themselves up to the level of being able to wield that power. There has never been any other way for any class.” (1992, p. 33)

## Something Went Wrong with Marxism

These basic arguments, I think, remain essentially correct. However, alongside them, Draper makes a more specific argument in favor of Marxism. He places Marx and Marxism at

the center of his vision of socialism-from-below. It is true that Marx's goals were socialist democracy, the end of the state, the emancipation of the working class, and the end of alienation in work and life (all goals consistent with anarchism). But something went terribly wrong with Marxism.

Marxism first produced the bureaucratic-reformist social democratic parties. They supported their imperialist states in World War I, sabotaged the German and Russian revolutions afterwards, failed to fight fascism, and supported Western imperialism in the Cold War. Today these so-called socialist or labor parties have completely given up any pretense of advocating a different social system than capitalism.

In 1917, an attempt to revive revolutionary Marxism was made by Lenin and Trotsky. It resulted in the totalitarian nightmare of Stalinist state-capitalism. Since 1989, state-capitalism has mostly collapsed into Western-style private capitalism, with mass misery its result.

Trotsky's attempt to revive early Leninism was also a dismal failure. The various Trotskyist tendencies generally capitulated to forms of Stalinism or to U.S. imperialism, or both.

Draper, at least, knows all this, and says so. Furthermore, he criticizes authoritarianism in almost every leading member of the Marxist movement outside of Marx and Engels themselves. In various works, Draper (1992, 1990, 1987) attacks the authoritarianism of the founders of the German Social Democratic Party, especially Ferdinand Lassalle; the developer of Marxist revisionism, Eduard Bernstein (protégé of Engels), as well as the "pope" of Marxist orthodoxy, Karl Kautsky; leaders of early French Marxism, Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue; the leader of British Marxism, H.M. Hyndman; and the founder of Russian Marxism, George Plekhanov.

In Draper's "Two Souls" essay, he makes brief but favorable comments about Lenin. He quotes Max Eastman as calling Lenin a "rebel" whose "passion was to set men free." (1992, p. 26) The original pamphlet had a picture on the cover with

## The Two Souls of Anarchism

Draper really hates anarchism: "Of all ideologies, anarchism is the one most fundamentally antidemocratic in ideology..." (1990, p. 132) More anti-democratic than Nazism or Stalinism? The very extremism of the statement shows that political prejudice is operative here. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Draper cannot have useful insights.

While it seems counter-intuitive to use socialism-from-below to attack the anarchist movement, Draper seeks to support this with historical evidence. Proudhon, the first person to call himself an anarchist, is shown by Draper (1992, 1990, 1969) to have had all sorts of unpleasant traits. Proudhon was a white supremacist (who supported the South in the U.S. Civil War), an anti-semiter, an extreme misogynist, pro-French imperialism, pro-strikebreaking, and pro-dictatorship, aside from advocating a reformist strategy. Bakunin was the one who really initiated the revolutionary anarchist movement. Draper (1990) cites the facts of Bakunin's repeated super-vanguardist secret conspiracies by which he hoped to control mass movements from behind the scenes. Bakunin's anarchist editor, Sam Dolgoff, says that Bakunin's "...closest associates...considered his schemes for elaborate, centralized secret societies incompatible with libertarian principles." (1980, p. 182) The anarchist-terrorists of the late nineteenth century sought to substitute for the working people by individual heroism (the same sort of individual bombings was to be done in the 1970s by overt Stalinists)

The fundamental flaw of anarchism, according to Draper, is that it is opposed to democracy. It is true that many prominent anarchists can be quoted as opposing "democracy," from Proudhon to Malatesta to Woodcock. Often this is meant primarily as a rejection of the phony democracy of the capitalist state, which hides the rule of its capitalist minority. At other times it has been used to oppose the domination of a majority

This advocacy of centralism in social, economic, and political areas was an important part of Marx's Marxism. Later Marxists supported their capitalist national states and their empires, justifying themselves with Marx's centralism. Similarly, Lenin always regarded himself as a centralist. He aimed to create a centralized party, ruling a centralized state, directing a centralized economy. For all that Lenin did not intend to create the brutality of Stalinism, this program certainly laid its foundation. Trotsky held this vision of centralism in all areas. Carried to its logical conclusion, Marxist centralism leads to a totalitarian state capitalism.

Marx's centralism was supported by his view of history as marching on, essentially automatically, from capitalism into socialism. He saw centralization as the wave of the future. Draper rejects the claim that Marx thought that "socialism is inevitable." But his own writings show that Marx's strategy relied on an expected tendency of the system to move automatically in a progressive (and centralist) direction.

Anarchists see historical movement as much more open-ended and indeterminate than do Marxists. They may agree with Marx, as I do, that there are social tendencies within capitalism which push toward socialism, specifically the class struggle as well as all other struggles against oppression. But we cannot say what the outcome will be. Socialism is a commitment, not a prediction. If socialism is to win, it must be supported for reasons of morality and values, not because some social forces tend in that direction (among others).

In sum, a major weakness of Draper's view of socialism-from-below is the belief that Marxism as a worldview—even the Marxism of Marx and Engels—is "from below" in some essential sense. This mistake is abetted by his blindness to the anti-democratic nature of economic and political centralism.

Lenin plainly in the "Socialism from Below" arrow. But Draper does not spend time trying to defend Lenin as a revolutionary-democratic socialist, which would be difficult. In a later work (1987), he details how Lenin, Trotsky, and all the Bolsheviks used the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a justification for the dictatorship of their party over the proletariat.

The only historical Marxists whom Draper (1987) cites as on the side of socialism-from-below are Rosa Luxemburg and William Morris. While Luxemburg saw herself as an orthodox Marxist, her heritage has never been integrated into either social democracy (which she criticized all her life), Stalinism (which never had any use for her), or even any of the Trotskyisms. Similarly British socialists have regarded Morris as either an icon or an eccentric craftsman, ignoring his anarchist-influenced utopianism. That is, Luxemburg and Morris are the exceptions which prove the rule. It is precisely the revolutionary-democratic aspects of their socialism which keep them outside of the main tendencies of Marxism. (Draper also admires Eugene Debs, who was not clearly a Marxist. In any case, he also fits the category of someone who was not taken into any of the Marxist traditions.)

## The Two Souls of Marxism

What Draper regards as the key to socialism-from-below is the Marxism of Marx and Engels and really no one else. Marx was, as Draper notes, a leader of the most extreme German democrats in the fight against the Prussian feudal state. He came to socialism already a believer in democracy-from-below. Marx integrated radical democracy and collectivist-socialism. This synthesis of revolutionary socialism and revolutionary democracy is the greatest of Marx's contributions, Draper claims, more important even than his Capital. Draper's four

fat volumes on Marx's politics are an elaborate effort to demonstrate this.

I do not intend to argue this point here. At the very least, it is easy to show that Marx would have been appalled by Stalinist totalitarianism. He and Engels would probably not have even accepted the bureaucratic statism of the social democratic parties. They had a belief in democracy as integral to their socialism. But this does not settle the question.

Even if we accept Marx's democratism, we have to ask, What about all these other guys? How did all of these followers of Marx end up as toadies to the imperialists or totalitarian mass murderers (or both)? From Marx's time to quite recently, tens of millions of working people have died at the hands of Marxists. Draper claims that this was due to the ideas of emancipation-from-above being regenerated within Marxism by the realities of capitalism. Marxists, like all socialists, are affected by the elitist social psychology all around them. In their politics and their day-to-day lives they have to deal with the reality of a hierarchical society. All this is morally corrupting. No doubt this is a factor. But is there anything in Marxism itself (in Marx's Marxism, that is) that lends itself to this authoritarianism? Does socialism-from-above have any roots in Marx's work? Given this history, it is hard to believe that it does not.

For example, most radical German democrats, such as Marx, were centralists. They hated the division of Germany into many feudal kingdoms. Instead, they wanted to unite the nation under a central parliament, replacing the king by an elected body but even more centralized than the Prussian monarchy. They confused the need for unification with centralization. They were influenced by the centralist heritage of the Jacobins of the French revolution. (By contrast, in the U.S. revolution, it was the more conservative of the revolutionaries who were centralizers, while the more radical Jeffersonians were decentralist-federalizers.) Centralization requires the

rule of the few (at the center) over the many—however “democratically” the few are chosen. There is no contradiction in seeing Marx as both a radical democrat and a centralizer. He believed that they went together. In a backhanded way, Draper admits this. “...Marx advocated neither what was called ‘centralization’ nor ‘decentralization,’ but rather a course hostile to both; the construction of a central government from below.” (1990, p. 172) How this is different from advocating centralization is not clear.

Marx saw movement toward centralization as a progressive aspect of capitalism. He supported capitalism's tendency to create big factories, big industries, big cities, and big nations. (Therefore he supported large nations when they absorbed smaller, weaker ones, such as in eastern Europe or when the U.S. seized half of Mexico.) His program was the centralization of all industry into the control of a centralized association of the workers. As stated in the *Communist Manifesto*, “The proletariat will...centralize all production in the hands of the state... All production [will be] concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation...” (Marx, 1974, pp. 86 and 87) He never changed this program.

Marx did not see that centralization under capitalism was often inefficient in terms of productivity, done only for the sake of financial reasons or for greater control over the workers. Today centralization is monstrously overdone in most areas of politics, economics, urbanism, and industry, resulting in a stifling gigantism.

Draper buys into this centralizing orientation. In “Two Souls” he argues against the anarchists, “The great problem of our age is the achievement of democratic control from below over the vast powers of modern social authority.” (1992, p. 13). But democratic control from below is only possible if we break up these “vast powers.” Existing “social authority” needs to be replaced with a federation of associations which are rooted indirectly in democratic workplaces and communities.