

Anarchism, Marxism and the lessons of the Commune

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“On March 17th the Communist Government completed its ‘victory’ over the Kronstadt proletariat and on the 18th of March it commemorated the martyrs of the Paris Commune. It was apparent to all who were mute witnesses to the outrage committed by the Bolsheviki that the crime against Kronstadt was far more enormous than the slaughter of the Communards in 1871, for it was done in the name of the Social Revolution, in the name of the Socialist Republic.”

– Emma Goldman¹

There are a few sure things about reading history books. Firstly, and most obviously, you generally know how it ends (badly, in the case of the Paris Commune). What is important is what you learn from the events discussed. Secondly, when it is a Marxist account you are guaranteed that it will (at best) ignore or (at worse) distort the anarchist involvement and analysis of events. In this, Leninist Donny Gluckstein’s account of the Paris Commune² does not disappoint: he both ignores key aspects of the anarchist critique *and* distorts what parts he does cover.

The Paris Commune is a significant influence for all revolutionary socialists, anarchists as well as Marxists. It should be well known in libertarian circles so there should be no need to discuss its history in any great length. Not only were there “among the Communards Anarchists and Syndicalists of a number of different brands”³ but Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin saw the Commune as a striking confirmation (in both positive and negative senses) of anarchist ideas. Karl Marx produced his classic *Civil War in France* immediately after its fall and added what he considered its key lesson – “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”⁴ – to the next preface of the *Communist Manifesto*. Lenin placed it at the heart of his *State and Revolution* and proclaimed that while “anarchists had tried to claim” it as “a corroboration of their doctrine” in fact they “completely misunderstood its lessons and Marx’s analysis of these lessons.”⁵ More recently, Leninist Paul Blackledge has utilised this work to suggest the “problem for Bakunin was that Marx was palpably correct” as “the Commune was a novel form of government and indeed a novel form of state” and so Kropotkin produced “an immanent critique of Bakunin’s analysis of the Commune.”⁶

We will use Gluckstein’s book as means of exploring the lessons from the Commune, to show how anarchist ideas are distorted and how the standard Marxist interpretation he summarises is flawed. It will reaffirm the anarchist influences on the Commune, the place of the Commune in anarchism and the anarchist critique of it. It will also show how implausible Leninist attempts to appropriate it for their tradition are, for, while Gluckstein praises the Commune for introducing “workers’ control of production” and “democracy from below,” (53) he fails to mention the awkward fact that the Bolsheviks abolished both.

¹ Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970), 199.

² Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune: A Revolutionary Democracy* (London: Bookmarks, 2006).

³ G.D.H. Cole, *A History Of Socialist Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1961) 2: 167.

⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 270.

⁵ Lenin, *Collected Works* 25: 481.

⁶ “Freedom and Democracy: Marxism, Anarchism and the Problem of Human Nature”, *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Saku Pinta and David Berry (eds.), 26–8.

Proudhon, Marx and exploitation

While Marx in *The Civil War in France* failed to mention any intellectual influences on the Commune, so presenting it as something which appeared to spring from nowhere, Gluckstein rightly notes that “for all its daring and forward-looking ideas” it was “not written on a blank sheet.” (85) He follows most historians of the Commune into splitting the Commune’s political influences into three: Jacobin, Blanquist and Proudhonist. The first were radical republicans, inspired by the Jacobins of the Great French Revolution and primarily sought political change, with the social question being addressed later. The Blanquists followed their eponymous hero, Louis Auguste Blanqui, in favouring a party of professional revolutionaries who would seize power in a coup and implement socialism from the top-down. The “Proudhonists” were inspired by the federal socialism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to call themselves an anarchist, and were a mixed bag, whom Gluckstein rightly splits into right and left wings.

That the Commune was heavily influenced by Proudhon’s ideas should go without saying and the best that can be said of Gluckstein’s account is that he at least acknowledges this by stating that while Marx “played a significant role” in the First International that did “not mean, however, that the French section was full of Marxists. Here the Proudhonists were the most influential current.” (82) However, his discussion of Proudhon’s ideas is a travesty.¹ To be charitable, it simply repeats the standard Marxist analysis of the Frenchman’s ideas so his account is not breaking new ground in distortion. Given how regularly this nonsense is repeated, it is worthwhile contrasting Gluckstein’s account to what the “father of anarchism” actually argued.

The usual Leninist equation of a market economy with capitalism is repeated, with Gluckstein stating Proudhon’s “criticisms of the failings of capitalist society where sharp” but he “did not reject the market system as such.” (72) Confusing capitalism with the market allows Proudhon to be presented as an advocate of wage labour and it is asserted that he market exchange under capitalism was based on freedom and equality:

“It followed that, since the selling of labour was itself a form of commercial operation, when employees went to work for the bosses they were not being exploited because ‘any man’s labour can buy the value it represents.’” (72)

Significantly, Gluckstein quotes Marx quoting Proudhon. Indeed, he rarely quotes Proudhon directly, suggesting a lack of familiarity with the source material for if he were at all familiar with it then he would have known that the anarchist explained how property – wage labour – “violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism,” resulting in the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist who employed him.² Ironically, the passage Marx rips out of context

¹ At least he relegates Proudhon’s sexism and racism to an endnote, where they should reside as they were in contradiction to his basic ideas as subsequent libertarians argued.

² Pierre-Joseph *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), Iain McKay (ed.), 132.

and which Gluckstein regurgitates was Proudhon taunting bourgeois economists on why the surplus produced by labour was not enjoyed by the workers who created it:

“Why do not the economists, if they believe, as they appear to, that the labour of each should leave a surplus, use all their influence in spreading this truth, so simple and so luminous: Each man’s labour can buy only the value which it contains, and this value is proportional to the services of all other workers?”³

Proudhon explains why this does not occur under capitalism, how selling their labour and its product ensures workers are exploited by their employers, how it is wage-labour that produces this outcome. So if the “exchange of commodities through a market system” was for Proudhon “fundamentally fair,” it did *not* follow that “the selling of labour was a form of commercial operation, where employees... were not being exploited.” (72) Showing his utter ignorance of the matter, Gluckstein asserts that “Karl Marx, who studied Proudhon’s work carefully, had a very different analysis which located exploitation at the very heart of the capitalist production process.” (72) In reality, Proudhon had argued that this was the case from 1840 onwards. He was well aware that workers produced a value greater than what they received in wages:

“Whoever labours becomes a proprietor... I do not mean simply (as do our hypocritical economists) proprietor of his allowance, his salary, his wages, – I mean proprietor of the value which he creates, and by which the master alone profits... *the worker retains, even after he has received his wages, a natural right of property in the thing which he has produced.*”⁴

Compare this to the “Marxist” account Gluckstein provides in which the worker “will normally create during a working day more value than his daily wages with which the capitalist has purchased his or her labour power”. (72) In this, Marx was echoing Proudhon rather than presenting a different analysis:

“I have shown that every labour must leave a surplus; so that, supposing the consumption of the worker to remain constant, his labour should create, on top of his subsistence, an ever greater capital. Under the regime of property, the surplus of labour, essentially collective, passes entirely... to the proprietor”⁵

This, obviously, is a theory of surplus value being produced in production, as recognised by more informed Marxists like John Ennenberg who notes that Proudhon’s ideas were “anticipating what Marx and Engels were later to call the appropriation of surplus value”.⁶ This was part of the reason why “property is theft,” the other being that the appropriation of the means of live by the few placed the rest in the position of having to sell their labour (and so its product) to those who did (“We who belong

³ Proudhon, 178.

⁴ Proudhon, 114.

⁵ Proudhon, 253.

⁶ *Proudhon and His Age* (New York: Humanity Books, 1996), 55.

to the proletarian class: property excommunicates us!”⁷). Thus, the theft of the land and workplaces needed by all to produce and live, allowed the theft by the owner of the product and surplus created by labour.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gluckstein fails to mention an essential part of Proudhon’s analysis, namely his concept of “collective force”. This was “[o]ne of the reasons Proudhon gave for rejecting” property, that “collective endeavours produced an additional value” which was “unjustly appropriated by the *proprietaire*.”⁸ Edward Hyams, whom Gluckstein quotes in support of his incorrect account, summarised it well enough even if he did not use the term:

“The proprietor (capitalist)... cheats [his workers] abominably: for he has paid nothing for their collective effort, only for the individual effort of each.”⁹

This is on the page *before* the one Gluckstein quotes from Hyman’s book: so much for the notion that Proudhon thought “the crime [of theft] did not occur in the labour process.” (72) Marx, incidentally, repeated Proudhon’s analysis of the role of “collective force” in *Capital* in essentially the same fashion but without acknowledgement.¹⁰

Gluckstein explains the “Marxist” theory of exploitation in terms of “the difference between the value created by labour power once it is put to work, and the value of labour power itself”. (73) Yet Proudhon had raised this in 1846 when he noted labour “is a thing vague and indeterminate in its nature, but qualitatively defined by its object – that is, it becomes a reality through its product.”¹¹ Marx, ironically, “made some disparaging remarks about this passage” yet this “anticipated an idea that Marx was to develop as one of the key elements in the concept of *labour power*, viz. that *as a commodity*, labour produces nothing and it exists independently of and prior to the exercise of its potential to produce value as *active labour*.”¹² Likewise Marx is quoted from 1871 on the “despotism of capital over labour” (97) yet Gluckstein fails to mention Proudhon’s “property is despotism” from 1840.¹³ This is unfortunate because it was this despotism which allowed exploitation to occur as workers “have sold their arms and parted with their liberty” when they become an employee.¹⁴ Proudhon, then, was well aware of the oppressive nature of wage labour:

⁷ Proudhon, 103.

⁸ K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 64–5. Proudhon’s own account can be found in *What is Property?* and is repeated in subsequent works, including *System of Economic Contradictions (Property is Theft!)*, 117–8, 212–3).

⁹ Edward Hyams, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works* (London: John Murray, 1979), 43.

¹⁰ *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1976) I: 451.

¹¹ Proudhon, 176–7.

¹² Alan Oakley, *Marx’s Critique of Political Economy: intellectual sources and evolution, 1844 to 1860* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 1:118.

¹³ Proudhon, 133.

¹⁴ Proudhon, 212.

“Thus, property, which should make us free, makes us prisoners. What am I saying? It degrades us, by making us servants and tyrants to one another.

“Do you know what it is to be a wage-worker? To work under a master, watchful of his prejudices even more than of his orders... Not to have any thought of your own... to know no stimulus except your daily bread, and the fear of losing your job!

“The wage-worker is a man to whom the proprietor who hires his services gives this speech: What you have to do does not concern you at all: you do not control it”¹⁵

Moreover, he linked rising inequality to the exploitation produced by the hierarchical relationship created in the capitalist workplace.

“I have shown the entrepreneur, at the birth of industry, negotiating on equal terms with his comrades, who have since become his workers. It is plain, in fact, that this original equality was bound to disappear through the advantageous position of the master and the dependence of the wage-workers.”¹⁶

Proudhon clearly saw exploitation occurring in the workplace and so his “position that property is theft locates a fundamental antagonism between producers and owners at the heart of modern society. If the direct producers are the sole source of social value which the owners of capital are expropriating, then exploitation must be the root cause of... inequality.”¹⁷ Indeed, he linked his analysis of how exploitation occurred within production – by the appropriation of the “collective force” by the capitalist – with his calls for both association (“By virtue of the principle of collective force, workers are the equals and associates of their leaders”¹⁸) and socialisation (“All human labour being the result of collective force, all property becomes, by the same reason, collective and undivided”¹⁹)

Gluckstein does, in passing, acknowledge Proudhon’s actual position by noting that big capitalists “could be excluded from commodity production through mutualism, or workers’ co-operatives.” (75) If Proudhon really thought that exploitation did not occur within the workplace then why did he advocate co-operatives? Why did he consistently argue for the abolition of wage labour? Simply because, contra Gluckstein, Proudhon knew that “industrial democracy”, in which “all positions are elective, and the by-laws subject to the approval of the members,” would ensure that “the collective force, which is a product of the community, ceases to be a source of profit to a small number of managers” and becomes “the property of all the workers.” Thus “workers’ associations... are full of hope both as a protest against wage-labour, and

¹⁵ Proudhon, 248–9.

¹⁶ Proudhon, 192.

¹⁷ Enrenberg, 56.

¹⁸ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1846) I: 377.

¹⁹ Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 137.

as an affirmation of *reciprocity*” and their importance lies “in the negation of the capitalist regime.” His aim was “Capitalist and landlord exploitation stopped everywhere, wage-labour abolished, equal and just exchange guaranteed.”²⁰

So even a basic awareness of his ideas would be sufficient to recognise that Gluckstein’s claim that, for Proudhon, exploitation “did not occur in the labour process” and so it “must come from outside of the commercial or capitalist relations, through force and fraud” (72) is nonsense. The notion that Proudhon was not against wage labour simply cannot stand even a superficial look at his works.²¹

²⁰ Proudhon, 610, 586, 558, 596.

²¹ Proudhon did oppose communism and so was, as Kropotkin discussed in “The Collectivist Wages System” in *The Conquest of Bread* and elsewhere, in favour of the “wages system” (i.e., distribution by deed, not need) but this is not identical with support for workers selling their labour to a boss.

Proudhon and Associational Socialism

Like Marx,¹ Proudhon was well aware that the “market system” was not identical to capitalism, that “capitalist society” was marked by wage labour and that such an economic system was not the end of social evolution.² Like Marx, he repeatedly called for the abolition of wage labour (hence his consistent support for co-operatives).

Gluckstein obscures this by his flawed account of the Associational Socialism then predominant within the French labour movement. He is keen to assign the idea of socialism based on co-operatives to Louis Blanc whom he claims “originally promoted” the idea and his ideas were “attractive to people in small workshops that operated with minimum machinery” for in these cases it was superficially plausible that the co-operatives “could win in competition with the capitalist system.” This is dismissed as “classic reformism” and doomed to failure due to “industrial development [having] rendered it impossible to out-compete the capitalist.” Marx is quoted approvingly indicating that a “workers’ government” was needed to foster a national production based on a common plan. (197–8)

This is wrong for three reasons.

The first is that Blanc did not think that co-operatives, by themselves, could out-compete capitalism. He was of the opinion it was “necessary to use the whole power of the state” to achieve the organisation of labour for what “the proletarians lack to free themselves are the tools of labour” and “these the government must furnish them.” The state “should place itself resolutely at the head of industry” and “would constitute itself, by and by, as master of industry and in the place of monopoly we have obtained... association.”³ That Gluckstein seems unaware of Blanc’s actual position is strange as it is well-established in the secondary literature. Moreover, if he had consulted the writings of Proudhon, he would have discovered the repeated criticising of Blanc’s system because it was state run and financed. This centralised form of association was denounced as a new form of wage-labour in which simply mean replacing capitalists with bureaucrats. As history shows, Proudhon was right.⁴

The second is that other socialists recognised the need for associations to replace wage-labour. Proudhon had also popularised the idea of workers associations (co-operatives) as the basis of socialism from 1840 onwards when he had stated managers “must be chosen from the workers by the workers themselves”⁵. While 1851’s *General idea of the Revolution* is particularly strong

¹ “Let us suppose the workers are themselves in possession of their respective means of production and exchange their commodities with one another. These commodities would not be products of capital.” (*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [London: Penguin Books, 1991] 3: 276)

² “The period through which we are now passing – that of machinery – is distinguished by a special characteristic: WAGE-LABOUR.” He denounced “the radical vice of political economy”, namely “affirming as a definitive state a transitory condition – namely, the division of society into patricians and proletarians.” (Proudhon, 190, 174)

³ Louis Blanc, quoted by Vincent, 139–40.

⁴ Proudhon, 204–6, 215–7, 296, 399, 556–7.

⁵ Proudhon, 119

on this, it can be found in almost all of his works.⁶ For Proudhon, the workplace must be run by “industrial associations, small worker republics” and so “industrial democracy must follow industrial feudalism.”⁷ As Dorothy W. Douglas correctly noted, “the co-operative movement... syndicalism... guild socialism... all bear traces of the kind of self-governing industrial life to which Proudhon looked forward.”⁸

The third, and most importantly, is that Blanc – like Proudhon – did *not* originate the idea of workers associations. While Gluckstein misdates the publication of Blanc’s influential work (*The Organisation of Labour*) to 1847 rather than 1840,⁹ the fact is that “Associationism” was born during the wave of strikes and protests unleashed by the 1830 revolution. That year saw Parisian printers, for example, producing a newspaper (*L’Artisan: Journal de la classe ouvrière*) which suggested that the only way to stop being exploited by a master was for workers to form co-operatives. During the strikes of 1833, this was echoed by other skilled workers and so co-operatives were seen by many workers as a method of emancipation from wage labour long before Blanc put pen to paper.¹⁰

In other words, Blanc and Proudhon simply took up the ideas expressed by workers and interpreted them in different ways. This is important because simply acknowledging that other socialist thinkers raised the idea of workers co-operatives as an alternative to wage-labour still gives credence to Lenin’s notion that the working class could not come up with socialist ideas by themselves.¹¹ The opposite is the case with, for example Proudhon picking up the term *Mutualisme* from the workers in Lyon in the early 1840s and their ideas of co-operative credit, exchange and production influenced him as surely as his influenced the Lyon workers. Thus, there was “close similarity between the associational ideal of Proudhon... and the program of the Lyon Mutualists” and “it is likely that Proudhon was able to articulate his positive program more coherently because of the example of the silk workers of Lyon. The socialist ideal that he championed was already being realised, to a certain extent, by such workers.”¹²

Then there is the usual Marxist nonsense that “Proudhon wanted to return society to an earlier golden age.” (73) In reality, he did not and he championed association precisely to accommodate the development of industry and large-scale production.¹³ Yet, he was also well aware that in the France of his time artisans and peasants predominated and so any serious socialist theory and

⁶ For an overview of Proudhon’s ideas on associational socialism and their evolution see Vincent’s excellent account.

⁷ Proudhon, 780, 610. Proudhon appears to have first used the term “industrial democracy” in 1852 when he noted “an unavoidable transition to industrial democracy”. (*La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d’État du 2 décembre* [Antony: Tops-Trinquier, 2013], 156)

⁸ “Proudhon: A Prophet of 1848: Part II,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 35: 1, 54.

⁹ Blanc’s original articles on which the book was based appeared in *Revue du progrès* in 1839. (Vincent, 138)

¹⁰ Bernard H. Moss, “Producer’s Associations and the Origins of French Socialism: ideology from below”, *Journal of Modern History* 48: 1, 73.

¹¹ As expressed in *What is to be Done?* (1902), Lenin argued that “there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement” and so socialist consciousness “would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness... The theory of socialism... grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.” (*Collected Works* 5: 384, 375) For more discussion, see section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012), volume 2.

¹² Vincent, 164.

¹³ “M. de Sismondi, like all men of patriarchal ideas, would like the division of labour, with machinery and manufactures, to be abandoned, and each family to return to the system of primitive indivision, – that is, to *each one*

movement had to recognise this fact. Gluckstein knows this, as he admits that, in 1871, “[o]lder forms of production predominated” as well as “the prevalence of artisans and handicraft production” in Paris and elsewhere in France. (69) Yet this does stop Gluckstein – like Engels before him – labelling Proudhon anachronistic in spite of him advocating ideas applicable to the economic structure he lived in rather than, as with Marx, ones that only became predominant decades after his death. Rather than being and backward looking, Proudhon tailored his ideas to the economy he faced. As Daniel Guérin summarised long ago:

“Proudhon really moved with the times and realized that it is impossible to turn back the clock. He was realistic enough to understand that ‘small industry is as stupid as petty culture’ and recorded this view in his *Carnets*. With regard to large-scale modern industry requiring a large labour force, he was resolutely collectivist: ‘In future, large-scale industry and wide culture must be the fruit of association.’ ‘We have no choice in the matter,’ he concluded, and waxed indignant that anyone had dared to suggest that he was opposed to technical progress.

“In his collectivism he was, however, as categorically opposed to statism. Property must be abolished. The community (as it is understood by authoritarian communism) is oppression and servitude. Thus Proudhon sought a combination of property and community: this was association. The means of production and exchange must be controlled neither by capitalist companies nor by the State... they must be managed by associations of workers”¹⁴

Indeed, it could have been Proudhon talking when a club meeting in Paris proclaimed the commune “will place its contracts with workers’ associations which will replace the big bosses, the great companies (railway companies in particular...)” and “organise the democratic and social Republic.” (104) After all, as Proudhon recalled in 1851:

“I said one day, in February or March 1849, at a meeting of patriots, that I rejected equally the construction and management of railroads by companies of capitalists and by the State. In my opinion, railroads are in the field of workers’ companies, which are different from the present commercial companies, as they must be independent of the State.”¹⁵

While grudgingly admitting that “Proudhon’s criticisms of the failing of capitalist society were sharp and won him many converts,” Gluckstein also asserts, with casual abandon, that Proudhon’s ideas are “easily recognisable as the precursor of neo-liberal economics today. But Proudhon’s ideas were located in a different context and so took a far more radical form when adopted by the male artisan class.” (72) Since when did neo-liberalism refrain from using the state to impose its reforms and skew the market in favour of the capitalist class? When has the capitalist state ever left working class people alone when they act for themselves? Equally, when has an advocate of neo-liberal economics ever argued that *laissez-faire* capitalism meant “the victory

by himself, each one for himself, in the most literal meaning of the words. That would be to retrograde; it is impossible.” (Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 194)

¹⁴ Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York/London: Monthly Review Press, 1970) 45.

¹⁵ Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 583.

of the strong over the weak, of those who have over those who have not”? Or denounced capitalist firms because they result in “the worker [being] subordinated, exploited: his permanent condition is one of obedience” and so people are related as “subordinates and superiors” with “two... castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society” and urged co-operatives to replace them? Or suggested that “workers’ association will remain a utopia as long as government does not understand that it must not perform public services itself or convert them into corporations but entrust them by term lease at a fixed rate to companies of united and responsible workers.”¹⁶ Like Marx Proudhon was well aware of the role economics played in defending, justifying, rationalising capitalism: “Political economy – that is, proprietary despotism – can never be in the wrong: it must be the proletariat.”¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Proudhon had nothing but contempt for the neo-liberals of his time and they for him.¹⁸

Given that Gluckstein seems to draw almost exclusively from secondary sources to create his account of Proudhon’s ideas, it comes as no surprise that he utilises a quote by Proudhon via the unreliable J. Salwyn Schapiro¹⁹ to suggest Proudhon was opposed to “common ownership” when, in reality, his source wilfully mistranslates the word *communauté* (community). (75) What Proudhon meant by “community” is well-known as is his reasons for opposing it (although Gluckstein fails to mention both) and it was *not* common ownership but rather the State control which nationalisation created that he opposed.²⁰ This can be seen when he argued that mutualism is “association, which is the annihilation of property” for while “the use” of wealth “may be divided” as “property [it] remains *undivided*” and so “the land [is] common property” and capital is “*common or collective*.”²¹ As he put it during the 1848 Revolution:

“under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership... We want ... democratically organised workers’ associations... that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.”²²

So Proudhon was also for associations of associations. Fifteen years later, in 1863, he called this system an “agricultural-industrial federation” in *The Federative Principle* and this “summarised” all of his economic ideas “developed over the last twenty-five years.”²³ Even Gluckstein cannot ignore this, noting that for Proudhon “the many tiny²⁴ economic units would federate together... group into local communes... and then upwards into regional and finally national federations”

¹⁶ Proudhon, 732, 583, 718.

¹⁷ Proudhon, 187.

¹⁸ “The school of Say,” Proudhon argued, was “the chief focus of counter-revolution” and “has for ten years past seemed to exist only to protect and applaud the execrable work of the monopolists of money and necessities, deepening more and more the obscurity of a science [economics] naturally difficult and full of complications.” (Proudhon, 587) All of which seems sadly too applicable today!

¹⁹ J. Salwyn Schapiro, “Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Harbinger of Fascism”, *The American Historical Review*, 50: 4 (Jul., 1945).

²⁰ “The members of a community, it is true, have no private property; but the community is proprietor, and proprietor not only of the goods, but of the persons and wills.” (Proudhon, 131)

²¹ Proudhon, 93, 148, 153.

²² Proudhon, 377–8.

²³ Proudhon, 714

²⁴ It must be physiologically significant that Leninists write about Proudhon, and anarchists in general, advocating “small” and “tiny” workplaces. Apparently *size* *does* matter and Leninists think their productive units are much, much bigger than anarchist ones. In reality, of course, anarchists advocate appropriately sized workplaces and are not

(75) Still, he does manage to do better than Engels who proclaimed Proudhon “regarded association with positive hatred” and so “combin[ing] all these associations into one great union” was “the direct opposite of the Proudhon doctrine.”²⁵

In summary, Proudhon favoured workers’ co-operatives (or association) as he was well aware that bosses kept part of the value produced by workers. That Gluckstein does not know this basic fact shows the superficial nature of his critique. Dependent on a selective reading of secondary sources, he ironically confirms the comments of one such author he quotes: “since [Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy*] no good Marxists have had to think about Proudhon. They have what is mother’s milk to them, an *ex cathedra* judgement.”²⁶

hung-up about their size. Marxists may fetishise large-scale production, but it does not follow that their assumption that anarchists take the opposite position and fetishise the small-scale is accurate, rather we support the appropriate level of production based on an evaluation of objective requirements and the social and ecological costs involved.

²⁵ Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, 31.

²⁶ Hymans, 92.

Proudhon and the State

Gluckstein's use of secondary sources ensures that he misrepresents Proudhon on numerous subjects beyond his economic theories. In terms of his political ideas, an unwillingness to discuss *why* Proudhon held these views adds to the problems this approach inherently creates.

As an example of the former, Gluckstein utilises (74) Schapiro's hostile and inaccurate article to provide his readers with a quote from Proudhon: "All this democracy disgusts me... What would I not give to sail into this mob with clenched fists!" Yet consulting the letter this is from, it quickly becomes clear that Schapiro is wilfully quoting Proudhon out-of-context to bolster his preposterous suggestion that he was a "harbinger" of fascism. In reality, Proudhon was bemoaning how others on the left were attacking him as "a false *democrat*, a false friend of progress, a false republican" due to his critical position on Polish independence. Unlike most of the rest of the left, Proudhon opposed the creation of a Polish state as it would not be a democracy but rather run by the nobility and so would "catholic, aristocratic, [and] divided into castes".¹ Context shows that Proudhon is making an ironic comment about those on the left who violate their own stated democratic principles by supporting the creation of such a feudal regime. Likewise "this mob" does not refer to "the people" as Schapiro and Gluckstein sought to suggest but rather to a group of Proudhon's critics: Schapiro made no attempt to indicate the change in subject nor, for that matter, even the change of page!²

He relies on Schapiro's hostile and inaccurate article for other false assertions, not least that Proudhon "favoured war"³ (216) when in fact the work in question (1861's *La guerre et la paix*) sought to explain how war could be ended once and for all, finishing with the cry "HUMANITY DOES NOT WANT ANY MORE WAR."⁴ He likewise utilises Schapiro for his summary of Proudhon's position on Louis-Napoleon's coup, noting that it was "bizarre" and expressed in "a pamphlet with the extraordinary title *The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d'état*" (74–5) when what is "bizarre" and "extraordinary" is judging a book (not "a pamphlet") by its title. Suffice to say, Gluckstein's summary leaves a lot to be desired (like Schapiro's⁵). For Proudhon, the coup "demonstrated" the Social Revolution only in-so-far as it showed that the situation before December 1851 could *not* be maintained and that some kind of change was possible, whether positive or negative. This, in turn, meant that Louis-Bonaparte had two options – embrace the

¹ Proudhon, *Correspondance de Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Paris: A. Lacroix, 1875) XI:196–7.

² "Hal Draper on Proudhon: Anatomy of a Smear," *Anarcho-Syndicalism Review* No. 77 (Fall 2019).

³ Other claims by Schapiro parroted by Gluckstein are addressed in "Neither Washington nor Richmond: Proudhon on Racism and the Civil War", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 60 (Summer 2013).

⁴ *La Guerre et la Paix, recherches sur le principe et la constitution du droit des gens* (Paris: Dentu, 1861) 2: 420.

⁵ Space precludes discussing Schapiro's many distortions beyond noting that he presents Proudhon as having "hailed the dictatorial Second Empire" (726) in this work when, in reality, it was published *before* Louis-Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor in December 1852. So the work was addressed to someone who was, in theory, still the democratically elected President of the Second Republic, albeit one who had vastly increased the powers of his office in the name of defending male universal suffrage against a Parliament which had limited it. In terms of his use of State repression, while substantial, was far less than that of the various governments between June 1848 and December 1851.

social and democratic revolution (and so end his personal power) or embrace reaction (and so maintain his personal power).⁶ Or, in the words of its final chapter, “Anarchy or Caesarism.”⁷ That Louis-Bonaparte chose the latter was perhaps unsurprising and while Proudhon’s work is hardly his best, its arguments are not even summarised by Gluckstein who clearly has only read its title.

As well as showing the dangers of insufficient research – or doing as little research as needed to confirm your assumptions or prejudices – this also highlights a key flaw of Gluckstein’s account of both Proudhon’s ideas and the anarchist critique of the Commune. Simply put, he does not explain *why* Proudhon opposed the state and argued against political action. Given that the reason he held these positions feeds directly into the anarchist critique of the Commune, it is doubly unfortunate that it is not discussed.

Gluckstein does quote Proudhon arguing that “the social question can only be resolved by you, by you alone, without the assistance of power.”⁸ (74) So why did Proudhon stress self-organisation and change from below? This was because he recognised that the state (“power”) was run by capital. As he put it, to “conduct this offensive and defensive war against the proletariat a public force was indispensable” and this “finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.”⁹ Forgetting that Proudhon successfully stood for election, Gluckstein uses out-of-context quotes to bolster the claim that “the idea of any working class political involvement enraged him.” (74) Yet his experiences in Parliament are of note when seeking to understand and explain his position – particularly when Proudhon explicitly uses them to confirm his earlier analysis of the class nature of the state, as he did in his 1849 work *Confessions of a Revolutionary*.¹⁰

Thus, his critique of the State was built on a clear understanding of its class nature and basis, that the Republic “is nothing but the offensive and defensive alliance of those who possess, against those who do not possess”, a “coalition of the barons of property, commerce and industry against the disinherited lower class.” A centralised, unitarian, indivisible republic creates a division between rulers and ruled and so “the citizen has nothing left but the power of choosing his rulers by a plurality vote.” Thus France was “a quasi-democratic Republic” in which citizens “are permitted, every third or fourth year, to elect, first, the Legislative Power, second, the Executive Power. The duration of this participation in the Government for the popular collectivity is brief... The President and the Representatives, once elected, are the masters; all the rest obey. They are *subjects*, to be *governed* and to be taxed, without surcease.”¹¹ It “no sooner exists than it creates an interest of its own, apart from and often contrary to the interests of the people; because, acting then in that interest, it makes civil servants its own creatures, from which results nepotism,

⁶ Indeed, Louis-Napoleon “would have to reform the constitution by making it more democratic” and “carry out social and economic, as well as political reform” and so “the book, strictly interpreted, does rule out collaboration. So exacting are the conditions set for collaboration that they could not possibly be met.” (Allan Ritter, *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 187–8)

⁷ Proudhon, *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d’État du 2 décembre*, 174.

⁸ Compare this to one Communard who urged people to “[e]xpect nothing from the government; do it yourself... Associate yourself with comrades in the workshop, with your neighbours in your *quartier*.” (quoted by Martin Phillip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organisation in the Paris Commune of 1871* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 135)

⁹ Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 223, 226.

¹⁰ Proudhon, 423.

¹¹ Proudhon, 566, 573.

corruption, and little by little to the formation of an official tribe, enemies of labour as well as of liberty.”¹²

The centralisation (*unité*, unity) of the “indivisible republic” was not a neutral form of social organisation but rather “the cornerstone of bourgeois despotism and exploitation.”¹³ It was needed to secure bourgeois rule:

“And who benefits from this regime of unity? The people? No, the upper classes... Unity... is quite simply a form of bourgeois exploitation under the protection of bayonets. Yes, political unity, in the great States, is bourgeois: the positions which it creates, the intrigues which it causes, the influences which it cherishes, all that is bourgeois and goes to the bourgeois.”¹⁴

Given that even a democracy was enchained to capital and could not be captured, Proudhon turned to the working class economic self-organisation so that “a new society be founded in the heart of the old society” and by this “combat and reduce power, to put it in its proper place in society, [for] it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave.”¹⁵

This is something that Gluckstein, in theory, is aware of. He notes that “the communards had no doubt of the limitations of suffrage operating where capitalist economics was dominant.” (46) Which is exactly why the various shades of “Proudhonists” were either against standing or hesitant about in elections. As history shows, social democracy failed to live up to the hopes of Marx and became as reformist as Bakunin had warned.¹⁶ Gluckstein himself notes that these parties “end up running the capitalist system” (204) and so have “foundered on the state machine, the British Labour Party being one example. These movements thought they could use the existing power structures to bring about the changes they wanted.” (63) Yet he fails to link this end with the means used, with the awkward fact those parties had following Marx’s call to take part in “political action” and organise as a political party rather than as a militant union movement desired by the “Collectivists” in the International.

Likewise, Proudhon was not convinced that any centralised state socialist structure would be anything other than state capitalism: “We do not want expropriation by the State of the mines, canals and railways; it is still monarchy, still wage-labour.”¹⁷ Again, this was the case with Labour’s nationalisation and, of course, under Lenin, Trotsky and then Stalin. As he had predicted, if government is substituted for private ownership, then “nothing is changed but the

¹² Proudhon, “Regarding Louis Blanc – The Present Utility and Future Possibility of the State”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 66 (Winter 2016).

¹³ Proudhon, *La fédération et l’unité en Italie* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1862), 33.

¹⁴ Proudhon, *La fédération et l’unité en Italie*, 27–8.

¹⁵ Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 321, 226.

¹⁶ When “common workers” are sent “to Legislative Assemblies” the result is that the “worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois” for “men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.” (*The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869–71* [Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1994], Robert M. Cutler (ed.), 108).

¹⁷ Proudhon, 378. This position was first raised in *What is Property?* and its critique of “community” alongside property. He essentially argued that state communism (the only kind that existed then) would mean “the community is proprietor, and proprietor not only of the goods, but of the persons and wills.” (Proudhon, 131)

stockholders and the management; beyond that, there is not the least difference in the position of the workers.”¹⁸ Replacing the private boss with a public bureaucrat did not create socialism.

This was why Proudhon advocated political, economic and social federalism so that “no longer do we have the abstraction of people’s sovereignty as in the ’93 Constitution and the others that followed it, and in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Instead it becomes an effective sovereignty of the labouring masses which rule and govern... the labouring masses are actually, positively and effectively sovereign: how could they not be when the economic organism – labour, capital, property and assets – belongs to them entirely”.¹⁹ As well as economic association and federalism, Proudhon also urged community federalism and Gluckstein does admit that a “federation of communes” – “Free France, that is communal France in federal form,” as one Communard put it (52) – would “replace the state, as Proudhon had envisaged.” (101) Yet at the same time he asserts that “Proudhon’s approach was to focus on economics alone” and “the state had to be disregarded.” (74) Proudhon, though, was not indifferent to the State and sought ways to undermine it until such time as it would disappear – he simply recognised that political action instead of popular pressure and economic transformation from below would never result in real change. Given the subsequent history of capitalism, he seems to have had a point.

Thus it is simply untrue to claim that Proudhon “held back from dealing with the core of the system – the exploitation at the heart of the capitalist-worker relationship, and the state which exists to protect that exploitative process.” (76) He was well aware that the state was a capitalist tool and that wage labour lead to exploitation.

¹⁸ Quoted by Ritter, 167–8.

¹⁹ Proudhon, 760–1.

“Left Proudhonists” or Collectivists?

Rather than being at odds with Associational Socialism, Proudhon was one of its most influential advocates. His ideas found expression in working class circles during and after his lifetime and when Proudhon expressed support for workers associations as the basis of libertarian socialism he was not expressing new ideas but rather expressing a common perspective developed within working class circles and this was later reflected in the Continental European sections of the First International and within the Commune.

It comes as no surprise, then, that during the Commune, numerous workers urged the Council to promote co-operatives as the means of solving the “social question.” The Communal Council itself decreed that workshops whose owners had fled should be given to “the co-operative association of workers who were employed there.” (30) Like Proudhon, it raised the possibility that *all* large workplaces would be turned over to workers’ associations. However, the Commune (like Proudhon) was fundamentally gradualist in its approach. This failure to take a revolutionary approach was highlighted by Bakunin and subsequent libertarians as a key flaw in the Commune.

Gluckstein does seem to contradict himself by providing some praise for Proudhon, noting that the “strengths of Proudhon’s approach – his anti-authoritarianism and stress on self-organisation by the working class – were adapted” by his followers. (75) This is a significant improvement on, say, Engels who considered “anti-authoritarianism” as being total nonsense and inapplicable to modern society.¹ He also notes that “Proudhonism had deep roots in the working class movement and laid stress on action from below.” (83) This is an improvement on Lenin who argued that “the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy... strives to proceed from the top downward.”²

After Proudhon’s death, militants influenced by him revised and developed many of his ideas. Based on their experiences, many became (like Eugène Varlin) organisers of trade unions and strikes as well as rejecting his patriarchal notions. Gluckstein labels these “Left Proudhonists” (134–5) but a far better term would be “collectivists” – what Bakunin initially called his politics before taking up the term anarchist. Like the French militants, Bakunin favoured collective ownership, economic struggles and strikes, the expropriation of capital by unions and a decentralised, federal social organisation based on communes and workplace associations. Yet this is hardly a radical departure as may appear at first for these militants sought to extend Proudhon’s “agricultural and industrial combination” from just co-operative credit and workplaces to trade unionism. That Proudhon had rejected this position does not mean denying the obvious links between the “left mutualists” (collectivists) and his ideas.

¹ See “On Authority” (*The Marx-Engels Reader* [London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978], Robert C. Tucker (ed.), 730–3). For a critique of his argument, see section H.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

² Ironically, “the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy” was “to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible... upholds autonomism and ‘democracy,’ carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism.” (Lenin, *Collected Works* 7: 396–7)

By not presenting accurate account of Proudhon's ideas, Gluckstein also presents a false picture of the theoretical influences within the International and inflates that of Marx in the process. As G.D.H. Cole notes, the French Internationalists, including Varlin, were "strongly hostile to centralisation. They were federalists, intent on building up working-class organisations on a local basis and then federating the local federations. The free France they looked forward was to be a country made up of locally autonomous communes, freely federated for common purposes which required action over larger areas... In this sense they were Anarchists." Varlin "had at bottom a great deal more in common with Proudhon than with Marx" and had a "Syndicalist outlook."³

To quote Varlin himself, unions have "the enormous advantage of making people accustomed to group life and thus preparing them for a more extended social organisation. They accustom people not only to get along with one another and to understand one another, but also to organise themselves, to discuss, and to reason from a collective perspective." As well as mitigating capitalist exploitation and oppression in the here and now, the unions also "form the natural elements of the social edifice of the future; it is they who can be easily transformed into producers associations; it is they who can make the social ingredients and the organisation of production work."⁴

While such views can be found in Bakunin's writings, nothing like this can be seen in Marx's so Gluckstein suggesting the correspondence between Marx and Varlin "is surely significant" in refuting the "[m]any recent historians [who] feel the need to deny any Marxist influence in Paris" (210) is clutching at straws. The notion that Varlin was a Marxist cannot be squared with him warning that "placing everything in the hands of a highly centralised, authoritarian state... would set up a hierarchic structure from top to bottom of the labour process". Rejecting state ownership he had, like Proudhon, suggested that "the only alternative is for workers themselves to have the free disposition and possession of the tools of production... through co-operative association".⁵

As can be seen, Varlin's position was close to Bakunin's – perhaps the fact that Marx also corresponded with the Russian Anarchist shows a "Marxist influence" in his ideas? This is an example of the many times Gluckstein seeks to bolster Marx's influence in a revolution and an International section were little existed. Yet, the similarities with Bakunin's ideas are obvious, although go unmentioned by Gluckstein as Marxists regularly ignore the obvious links between Bakunin's ideas and what later became known as syndicalism.⁶ Unsurprisingly, when Bakunin met Varlin at the International's Basel Congress and, "once the program of the Alliance was explained to" Varlin, he said he "shared the same ideas and agreed to co-ordinate with their revolutionary plans."⁷ "Varlin and the French Bakuninists," George Woodcock notes, "had also [like the syndicalists] recognised before the Paris Commune the role of the trade unions in social struggle, and the general strike."⁸

Equally, Gluckstein considers Varlin's work in overthrowing the Empire as being in contradiction with Proudhon's apolitical stance. Yet he forgets that Proudhon built barricades and utilised the skills of his trade to print the first Republican proclamation in the 1848 revolution and, of

³ Cole, 140, 168.

⁴ quoted by Julian P. W. Archer, *The First International in France, 1864–1872: Its Origins, Theories, and Impact* (Lanham/Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997), 196.

⁵ Schulkind (ed.), 63–4.

⁶ "Another View: Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism," *Anarchist Studies* 20: 1 (Spring, 2012).

⁷ Archer, 186.

⁸ *Anarchism: A History of libertarian ideas and movements* (England: Penguin Books, 1986), 263

course, successfully stood for election a few months later (although the experience did, as noted, confirm his anti-parliamentarianism). Likewise, Anarchists are well aware that republics can offer more opportunity for activity than dictatorships, that the “most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy... The democratic system gradually educates the masses to public life”⁹ and so the “International does not reject politics of a general kind; it will be compelled to intervene in politics so long as it is forced to struggle against the bourgeoisie. It rejects only bourgeois politics.”¹⁰ Anarchists took part in the protests which overthrew the Tsar in February 1917¹¹ as well as in Spain, 1931 (for example). The key is that they participated in such events to push them further, to turn them into social revolutions rather than purely political ones.¹² This was the position of Kropotkin during the 1905 Russian Revolution: “Together with the whole Russian people we fight against autocracy. At the same time, we have to work in order to *broaden our struggle and fight simultaneously against capital and against the government.*”¹³ This was Varlin’s position as well when he noted that “for us political revolution and social revolution are interdependent” and “in view of all the obstacles we now meet we feel that it will be impossible for us to organise the social revolution so long as we live under a government as authoritarian as the present one.”¹⁴

For Engels in 1891, “the Commune was the grave of the Proudhon school of socialism.”¹⁵ Yet the evidence suggests otherwise – the “Proudhon school” had transformed long before March 1871 and continued to do so afterwards in the form of Collectivism. Varlin, in other words, was part of the general development on the libertarian movement from reformist mutualism towards revolutionary collectivism, from Proudhon to Bakunin (so to speak). For Bakunin, his ideas were “Proudhonism widely developed and pushed to these, its final consequences.”¹⁶ However, this is not to say that without Bakunin this would not have happened for Varlin “seems to have moved independently towards his collectivist position.”¹⁷ In other words, Bakunin became influential because he was part of a general development within Internationalist circles, ideas which he helped deepen but was also influenced by.

So, given Varlin’s links with Bakunin and the similarities in their politics, Gluckstein is right to state that “Varlin showed what could be achieved” (84) but not in the sense he meant it. It

⁹ Michael Bakunin, quoted by Guérin, 20.

¹⁰ Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), G.P. Maximov (ed.), 313.

¹¹ While, significantly, the local Bolsheviks opposed the initial protests (just as Marx opposed attempts to rise in insurrection during the Franco-Prussian war).

¹² Kropotkin once noted that any French revolution would start as a “political” one, as revolutions were “not made to order” but “however the revolution began, it would not stop with a mere change of government” and “attempts at expropriation” would start. (*The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 211)

¹³ Peter Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014), 461. Both Russian Marxist fractions viewed the events of 1905 as a “bourgeois” revolution and so limited their aims to purely political transformation and argued workers should seek social change once a republic had been achieved.

¹⁴ *The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), Eugene Schulkind (ed.), 32–3, 33.

¹⁵ Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, 31.

¹⁶ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), Arthur Lehning (ed.), 198.

¹⁷ Woodcock, 239.

was precisely the rise of the “collectivism” which Bakunin and Varlin subscribed to which finally forced Marx to move the General Council to America.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a good account of the rise of revolutionary anarchism within the International, see Robert Graham’s *We Do Not Fear Anarchy? We Invoke It: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015).

“the form at last discovered...”?

For Marx, the Commune was “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.” He praised such features as the Communal Council being made up of delegates who were “at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents,” that it was a “working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time” and that “the standing army was to be replaced by a national militia.”¹ Marx is paraphrased by Gluckstein: “What made the Parisian democratic structure so different?” Simply that its representatives “were ‘at all times revocable’ so delegates could not stray from the mandate of their electors.” (199) The creation of a militia is also praised as it meant that state “force was fundamentally different” and so “turned the very principles of the state upside down”. (51)

Yet while the Communards had applied these forms it is false to suggest, as Marx does, that they had come entirely out of the blue. In fact, the Paris Commune applied ideas which anarchists had been discussing for some time. Proudhon, for example, raised the idea of representatives with binding mandates being elected to executive and legislative assemblies during the 1848 revolution:

“It is up to the National Assembly, through organisation of its committees, to exercise executive power, just the way it exercises legislative power... Besides universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the binding mandate. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, do not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty! That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy.”²

The vision of a free society being a federation of communes was discussed by Proudhon in his 1863 book *The Federative Principle*. Bakunin repeated the same vision of a federal system of communes based on mandated and revocable delegates in 1868:

“the Alliance of all labour associations... will constitute the Commune... there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council... [made up of] delegates... invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times... all provinces, communes and associations... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all... invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces”³

¹ *On the Paris Commune*, 75, 72–3, 71, 72.

² Proudhon, 378–9 (also see Proudhon, 273, 279).

³ *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2005), Daniel Guérin (ed.), 182.

What of abolishing the army and replacing it with a militia? For Gluckstein, the idea of a militia “owed nothing to... Proudhon’s anarchist rejection of the state... The federation wanted to replace the permanent army with a workers’ militia... That completely subverted the idea of the state as something imposing its will upon society from above.” (114) This is not true, as Proudhon did suggest in 1848 that it was “necessary to disarm the powers that be” by ending military conscription and “organis[ing] a citizens’ army”. It “is the right of the citizens to appoint the hierarchy of their military chiefs, the simple soldiers and national guards appointing the lower ranks of officers, the officers appointing their superiors.” In this way “the army retains its civic feelings” while the People “organise its military in such a way as to simultaneously guarantee its defence and its liberties, while waiting for the nations to agree to terminate the armed peace.”⁴

As a reformist Proudhon did not address the issue of defence of a revolution but the revolutionary Bakunin built upon his call for a democratic militia:

“Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines... In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt... and to federate with them for common defence.”⁵

So the awkward fact is that anarchists had been advocating the organisational forms Gluckstein praises the Commune for implementing since Proudhon in the 1840s and developed by Bakunin in the 1860s. Nothing similar can be found in Marx until *after* the Commune. As K.J. Kenafick notes:

“the programme [the Commune] set out is... the system of Federalism, which Bakunin had been advocating for years, and which had first been enunciated by Proudhon. The Proudhonists... exercised considerable influence in the Commune. This ‘political form’ was therefore not ‘at last’ discovered; it had been discovered years ago; and now it was proven to be correct by the very fact that in the crisis the Paris workers adopted it almost automatically, under the pressure of circumstance, rather than as the result of theory, as being the form most suitable to express working class aspirations.”⁶

So, clearly, the major influence in terms of “political vision” of the Commune was anarchism. The “rough sketch of national organisation which the Commune had no time to develop”⁷ which Marx praises but does not quote was written by a follower of Proudhon and it expounded a clearly *federalist* and “bottom-up” organisational structure.⁸ Based on this libertarian revolt, it is unsurprising that Marx’s defence of it took on a libertarian twist.

⁴ Proudhon, 407, 443–4.

⁵ Bakunin, *No Gods, No Masters*, 164.

⁶ *Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx* (Melbourne: 1948), 212–3.

⁷ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 72.

⁸ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Vincent, 232; “[I]n reality,” Marxist Paul Thomas concedes, “the Commune owed precious little to Marxism and a great deal more, ironically enough, to the Proudhonists, who had proved themselves thorns in Marx’s side during the first four years of the International’s existence.” (*Karl Marx and the Anarchists* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1985], 194)

That the ideas generated by workers in struggle reflected Bakunin's predictions is not to suggest that the Internationalists influenced by him somehow injected these ideas into the struggle. Rather, both groups of people, subject to much the same experiences as well as theoretical discussions and influences, drew similar conclusions from them. So, indeed, "[b]y the end of 1870 the vision of a Commune as a complete alternative to the existing power was emerging from club discussions" (104) and these discussions were influenced by Internationalists just as they were influenced by them. Which disproves the Leninist assumption that the masses could not develop socialist consciousness on their own.

The Anarchist Critique

In his discussion of the champions of the Commune, Gluckstein does at least acknowledge that anarchists have analysed it and claimed it as expressing our ideas. He gives slightly less than two pages to the subject (what he terms the feminist critique is covered in more depth). It is, at best, perfunctory and superficial and, at worse, simply false and self-contradictory while, at the same time, he also unwittingly shows that it is correct.

The presentation of what Gluckstein terms the “anarchist interpretation” of the Commune starts badly, with the author asserting that “Anarchists believe that the Commune cannot be described as a workers’ government, because it abolished the very concept of government” (184) and quotes both Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s most famous essays on the Paris Commune as evidence. Yet, regardless of Gluckstein’s assertions, Anarchists believe no such thing – as these very essays prove.

Central to the anarchist critique is precisely that one of the key problems with the Commune was that it retained a government within Paris while proclaiming the free federation of communes outside it. This was Bakunin’s position, who while proclaiming that “revolutionary socialism has just attempted its first striking and practical demonstration in the Paris Commune” and “show[ed] to all enslaved peoples (and are there any masses that are not slaves?) the only road to emancipation” also noted that the Communards had “set up a revolutionary government” and so organised “themselves in a Jacobin manner, forgetting or sacrificing the first conditions of revolutionary socialism.”¹ Kropotkin repeated and extended this analysis as admitted by Gluckstein himself: “One of Kropotkin’s complaints against the Commune was precisely that the masses co-operated with the centralised power they had created at the Hotel de Ville.” (184–5) He even quotes Kropotkin arguing that “[t]here is no more reason for a government inside the commune than for a government outside.” (185) In spite of this, he does not ask the obvious question: if this is the case, how could Anarchists think that the commune “abolished” government?

As Gluckstein cannot bring himself to present the anarchist critique, it is useful to summarise it here by taking Kropotkin’s analysis as the starting point. It has two main aspects, which Kropotkin summarised in a few words: “the Commune was not *Communist enough*... the Commune was not *Anarchist enough*.”²

First, the Commune “treated the economic question as a secondary one, which would be attended to later on, *after* the triumph of the Commune” when “the triumph of a popular Commune was materially impossible without a parallel triumph of the people in the economic field.” Second, that while “proclaiming the free Commune, the people of Paris proclaimed an essential anarchist principle” but “they stopped mid-course” and gave “themselves a Communal Council copied from the old municipal councils.” The Commune did not “break with the tradition of the State, of representative government, and it did not attempt to achieve within the Commune that organisation from the simple to the complex it inaugurated by proclaiming the independence

¹ Michael Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), Sam Dolgoff (ed.), 263, 267.

² Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 453.

and free federation of the Communes.” This resulted in the revolutionaries being isolated from the masses in the town hall, “immobilised... by red tape” and losing “the sensitivity that comes from continued contact with the masses... Paralysed by their distancing from the revolutionary centre – the people – they themselves paralysed the popular initiative.”³

Totally missing the point of the anarchist critique, Gluckstein opines that “[i]f the Commune had only been a moment from below, the anarchist interpretation might have been correct” but the insurrection “founded a new focus of power.” (185) Quite – and anarchists argued that this power was simply not up to the task at hand. This can be seen when Gluckstein admits that the council was “overwhelmed” by suggestions from other bodies, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties”, it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices” (47–8) while reports, letters and motions “piled up” at the Town Hall and in the offices of the secretariat and were not discussed. (51) This bureaucratic inertia can be seen from the 16 April 1871 decree on turning closed workshops into co-operatives:

“Workers trade councils are convened to establish a commission of inquiry [...] To compile statistics on abandoned workshops, as well as an inventory [...] To present a report on the practical requisites for the prompt restarting of these workshops [...] by the co-operative association of the workers who were employed there [...] This commission of inquiry must send its report to the Communal Commission on Labour and Exchange, which will be required to present to the Commune [...] the draft of a decree [...]”⁴

Perhaps because the author of this decree which Gluckstein (30) praises was Leo Frankel (the only member of the Council who can be considered even remotely a Marxist), Gluckstein mentions it almost in passing, uncritically summarising it in less than a paragraph, before noting “[i]n practice there was little time to do very much.” (30) Given the process being implemented, this is hardly surprising. Little wonder Kropotkin concluded from this decree and others like it the following:

“the insurgent people will not wait for any old government in its marvellous wisdom to decree economic reforms. They will abolish individual property by themselves... They will not stop short at expropriating the owners of social capital by a decree that will remain a dead letter; they will take possession and establish their rights of usufruct immediately. They will organise the workshops so that they continue production.”⁵

That Gluckstein has so little to say on this issue is strange, as he obviously considers this decree a key example of the “new kind of society [that] can be fleetingly glimpsed in [the Commune’s] action.” (27) Given the central role this clearly played in the lessons anarchists drew from the Commune, the lack of discussion surely points to a political perspective rooted in governmental action rather than workers’ self-activity as the means of creating socialism.

³ Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), 74, 97, 93, 97.

⁴ Gustave Lefrançais, *Étude sur le mouvement communaliste à Paris en 1871* (Neuchâtel: Guillaume Fils, 1871), 171–2.

⁵ Kropotkin, 99.

In terms of mass participation, Gluckstein notes that “[r]elations between the Commune” and “the Clubs and the mass meetings” are “harder to measure” (50) which is a damning admission for someone claiming that the Commune implemented a new regime based on direct democracy and that the evidence that it was a “radically different from all previous states” was to be found here. (46) Even his conclusions against the “anarchist interpretation” are question begging:

“It was this combination of direct activity, plus an organised governmental structure (for all its inadequacies), that earned the Paris Commune its historic significance as the moment when an anti-capitalist movement was transformed into a power in its own right.” (185)

Yes, “for all its inadequacies”! Rather than address whether “an organised governmental structure” undermines the “direct activity” of the masses and is up to solving the many tasks facing a social revolution as Kropotkin and other anarchists did, Gluckstein simply ignores the issue. He notes, in passing, the difficulties facing the Council trying to handle the numerous problems facing the revolution but does not draw any conclusions from them. Anarchists, however, would note that they confirm Bakunin’s 1870 prediction that any revolutionary government “could not fail to severely constrict the scope of revolutionary action because it is impossible, even for the most energetic and enterprising authoritarian revolutionary, to understand and deal effectively with all the manifold problems generated by the Revolution. For every dictatorship, be it exercised by an individual or collectively by relatively few individuals, is necessarily very circumscribed, very short-sighted, and its limited perception cannot, therefore, penetrate the depth and encompass the whole complex range of popular life.”⁶

The people of Paris were also aware of this problem, namely the inability of the Commune to be effective. As the Council “appeared increasingly incompetent or insufficiently revolutionary, clubs and committees became the vehicles for the assertion of direct sovereignty by means of association... Had the Commune managed to last longer it is certain that Leftist factions of the clubs and committees and the National Guard would have posed serious, organised opposition to the Communal Council.”⁷ Before and during the Commune, there were attempts to federate various clubs and assemblies (such as the *Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements*). These would have, eventually, produced a federal structure within the commune itself as the limitations of the Council became clear. As Kropotkin argued:

“Back in 1871, Paris saw a vague anticipation of a better manner of acting. The revolutionaries among the people seemed to understand that that the ‘Council of the Commune’ had to be regarded as a mere backdrop, as a nod to past traditions; that the people should not only not disarm but should retain, together with the Council, *its own organisation, its federated groups*, and that the requisite measures to ensure the success of the revolution ought to come from these groups rather than from

⁶ Bakunin, 196.

⁷ Johnson, 162–3. Compare this to Bookchin’s comment that the Communal Council was “largely ignored... after it was installed. The insurrection, the actual management of the city’s affairs and finally the fighting against the Versailles, were undertaken mainly by popular clubs, the neighbourhood vigilance committees, and the battalions of the National Guard. Had the Paris Commune (the Municipal Council) survived, it is extremely doubtful that it could have avoided conflict with these loosely formed street and militia formations.” (*Post-Scarcity Anarchism* [Edinburgh: AK Press, 2004], 90)

the City Hall. Unfortunately, a certain modesty among the popular revolutionaries, underpinned also by authoritarian prejudices whose roots still ran deep at that time, prevented these federated groups from completely ignoring the Council, as if it were non-existent and acting so as to usher in a new age of social *construction*.⁸

Significantly, during the Commune, the Delegation “began or joined a series of initiatives designed to more effectively unite popular organisations. It started a Federation of Clubs... Had the Commune survived it is almost certain that these projects would have once again made the Delegation the centre of the revolutionary club and committee movement, as it had been during the siege and armistice.” In other words, it “returned to the idea of directing a central club in which delegates from all clubs and committees could meet... it would be open to the public and would unite delegates from popular clubs.”⁹

Gluckstein suggests that the Commune was a “new form of government based on mass active democracy,” and the “first workers’ state.” (7) The question is, if the so-called workers’ state is “an entirely new form of state, in its utterly novelty” (114) then why call it a state? Insofar as it was based on “mass active democracy” it was not a state as it was based on what states have evolved to stop – mass participation in social life (“The State is necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian—or it ceases to be the State”¹⁰). He is right to state that power “from above, acting on those below, was challenged and the very foundations of the conventional state were undermined” (205) however he shows the typical Marxist confusion when he calls the new social institutions formed “a new type of state which fused people and power.” (205) Which is understandable, given the false Marxist metaphysical notion that the state is simply “a system of domination by one class over another” (205) rather than a set of institutions marked by specific social relationships required to maintain minority class rule over society.¹¹ As Kropotkin argued:

“Developed in the course of history to establish and maintain the monopoly of land ownership in favour of one class – which, for that reason, became the ruling class par excellence – what means can the State provide to abolish this monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? Then perfected during the course of the nineteenth century to ensure the monopoly of industrial property, trade, and banking to new enriched classes, to which the State was supplying ‘arms’ cheaply by stripping the land from the village communes and crushing the cultivators by tax – what advantages could the State provide for abolishing these same privileges? Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in *their* unions, *their* federations, completely outside the State?”¹²

So, in the words of Gluckstein, “the reality was not simple.” (184) Sadly, this applies to his distortions of the “anarchist interpretation” rather than to the analysis he cannot bring himself to

⁸ Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 578.

⁹ Johnson, 197, 200.

¹⁰ Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2018), 227.

¹¹ The difference between the evolutionary anarchist analysis of the state and the Marxist metaphysical one is discussed in section H.3.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

¹² Kropotkin, 164.

present never mind discuss. Simply put, to assert “the anarchist belief that in 1871 the Commune had already abolished the state” (206) cannot be sustained by looking at what anarchists actually wrote about the Commune and how one of its failings was precisely that it had *not* abolished the state *within* Paris itself – as Gluckstein himself indicates in passing.

Perhaps this obvious unwillingness to address the actual anarchist position helps, in part, to explain Gluckstein’s repeating of an all too common Marxist contradiction about anarchism. Thus we find him asserting that Proudhon’s “disciple, Michael Bakunin, made the abolition of the state his central tenet” (74) while also it being a case of the state being “ignored” “anarchist style”. (50) Needless to say, you cannot “ignore” the state if your goal is its “abolition.” In addition, it should be stressed that Bakunin’s “central tenet” was not simply the abolition of the state but, rather, as Wayne Thorpe correctly summarises, “the simultaneous destruction of the state and of the capitalist system, accompanied by the organisation from below of a federalist system of administration based upon labour’s economic associations.”¹³

So, contra the Marxist tradition, it is *not* the case that the “originality of the Commune lay in its determination to found a new type of state.” (63) Rather, its decentralised and federal form showed how to replace the state with a new form of social organisation, one which is based upon, rather than designed to exclude, mass participation. One of the limitations of the Commune, as Bakunin and Kropotkin stressed, was that it combined aspects of this new social organism with aspects of the state and, as a consequence, hindered the social revolution.

¹³ Wayne Thorpe, *“The Workers Themselves”: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 6.

Centralisation and Federalism

For most Marxists, any form of co-operation or co-ordination is “centralisation” or “centralism” and, correspondingly, decentralisation implies isolation and atomisation of forces. The anarchist system of federalism simply does not fit into this stark dichotomy. This as can be seen when Lenin proclaimed the clearly federalist aim of the Commune an example “of voluntary centralism, of the voluntary fusion of the proletarian communes”. He seemed unaware that “to abolish the central authority” does not mean “to destroy national unity” for federalism postulates the need to co-ordinate joint activity.¹ In short, Marxists like all “[a]dversaries of federalism benevolently take it for granted that centralisation boasts all of the advantages that they deny federation.”²

Gluckstein does not disappoint and he confuses decentralisation with isolation, centralisation with co-ordination. He points to discussion within the Commune on “whether to emphasise centralised direction or local initiative, freedom or authority” (159) and states that “[e]ven leading anarchists, who opposed centralisation on principle,” (165) recognised the need for co-ordinated resistance to the central government and its forces. He contrasts the Communards’ distrust of central leadership with “Versailles’s unified command” (165) and notes that the debate about the *Committee of Public Safety* was, at its heart, “whether, given conditions of civil war, power could be decentralised immediately.” (52) He, of course, sides with the Blanquists as civil war showed “workers could not dispense with a concentrated authority of their own. Lenin, recalling Marx, called this authority a workers’ state.” (206)

Yet no anarchist has ever argued against the idea of co-ordination of struggle and have consistently advocated federalism as a means of doing so. Hence the commune “must break the State and replace it by the Federation.”³ As Proudhon argued, a federal body “only has a quite restricted part of the public administration, the one concerning federal services” and “subordinate and entrusted to an Assembly formed of delegates” who “exert over the federal assembly’s acts supervision all the more jealous and severe.” Thus communes and workplaces “confederate to jointly guarantee their territorial integrity or for the protection of their liberties” and from “an economic standpoint, one can federate for a mutual protection of commerce and industry... for the construction and maintenance of communication routes, roads, canals, railways, for the organisation of credit and insurance, etc.”⁴

In short, anarchist argue for federation precisely to co-ordinate joint activities and to provide services that are better organised or can only be organised by many groups working together. We reject centralisation because it does not do such co-ordination as well and, moreover, empowers and benefits the few at the expense of the many as “[t]here are no limits on the State besides those which it voluntarily imposes on itself.”⁵

¹ Lenin, *Collected Works* 25: 435.

² Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 755.

³ Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel*, 83.

⁴ Proudhon, 707, 711.

⁵ Proudhon, 769.

There were attempts to centralise power in the Commune, most notably the Communal Council itself which saw the “concentrating [of] power in fewer and fewer hands over the course of the Commune, centralising authority rather than broadening it”⁶ followed by the Blanquist/Jacobin inspired *Committee of Public Safety*. This, as Gluckstein notes, was a “proposal for [a] five-strong leadership [which] reflected widespread frustration with the existing arrangements”. (158) In the debate to form the latter, “the majority stressed the need for centralised decision-making at the expense of grass roots democracy” but he has to admit that it “performed no better than the Communal Council.” (160) If centralisation is considered as automatically ensuring the means of success in a revolution, this failure should give pause for thought but it does not and so the Commune shows that “discipline under a centralised command was absolutely vital to mould a fighting force out of the workers of Paris. This was not an optional extra.” (141)

The Marxist prejudice that centralisation is *always* more efficient and effective will not let mere evidence get in its way. Gluckstein notes how conflict over who should organise resistance saw Commune forces “receiving orders from no less than seven different sources,” (144) while “none of the War Delegates was ever able to bring the Commune’s artillery under one command, or even discover the exact number available.” (144) This “competition for control” between the National Guard Central Committee and the Commune Council resulted in “deadlock”. (145) As noted above, he presents enough evidence to show this was no isolated case, that the problems with bureaucracy existed within a single city. (47–51)

Unsurprisingly, then, when the affairs of a whole nation were centralised in 1917 bureaucracy and inefficiency correspondingly increased. As Emma Goldman experienced, “the newly fledged officialdom was as hard to cope with as the old bureaucracy,” manned by “bureaucratic officials [who] seemed to take particular delight in countermanding each other’s orders” and “how paralysing was the effect of the bureaucratic red tape which delayed and often frustrated the most earnest and energetic efforts... Materials were very scarce and it was most difficult to procure them owing to the unbelievably centralised Bolshevik methods. Thus to get a pound of nails one had to file applications in about ten or fifteen bureaus; to secure some bed linen or ordinary dishes one wasted days.”⁷

The same issues Gluckstein laments in the Commune also arose within the centralised Bolshevik regime he favours but magnified. Indeed, “in practice, hypercentralisation turned into infighting and scrambles for control among competing bureaucracies” and so “the not untypical example of a small condensed milk plant with fewer than 15 workers that became the object of a drawn-out competition among six organisations including the Supreme Council of National Economy, the Council of People’s Commissars of the Northern Region, the Vologda Council of People’s Commissars, and the Petrograd Food Commissariat.”⁸ Bolshevik centralisation was inefficient for other reasons, as “it seems apparent that many workers themselves... had now come to believe... that confusion and anarchy [*sic*] *at the top* were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic... Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council... issu[ed]

⁶ Johnson, 185–6.

⁷ Goldman, 45, 46, 40. Also see section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for more discussion.

⁸ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 73.

dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs.”⁹ The new centralised regime was “not only bureaucratically cumbersome, but [it] involved mountainous accounting problems” and with its “various offices... and commissariat structure literally swamped with ‘urgent’ delegations and submerged in paperwork.”¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the number of bureaucrats exploded – along with their power and privileges.

This does not mean that co-ordination is impossible, simply that it needs to be organised by those affected by their own organisations – by federal means, in other words. This would mean, as Bakunin had argued, a federation of barricades and militias rather than waiting for the central bodies to try to organise defence, for example. Similarly, for other aspects of social life – whether social, economic or political.

As well as the Commune showing that centralisation of power need not be as successful as Leninists assume, it also shows that representative bodies can easily give themselves more power at the expense of popular organisations. This can be seen from the *Committee of Public Safety* in the Commune, with a minority of council members (essentially those active in the International) arguing that “the Paris Commune has surrendered its authority to a dictatorship” and it was “hiding behind a dictatorship that the electorate have not authorised us to accept or to recognise.”¹¹ So this example shows that it is difficult for the masses to control those they give power to even in the confines of one city. Gluckstein notes that the Commune could be “viewed as the organ of solidarity giving collective control through a workers’ state” (184) Yet “collective control” is precisely what the state was designed to exclude:

“To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more.”¹²

Ironically, after quoting a Communard on the need for federalism, Gluckstein notes that this “would allow the population to be directly involved in accessible power structures.” (52) Indeed, that is why minority classes reject it as he himself admits when he notes that the victory of the French bourgeoisie in the Great French Revolution meant the “mass popular involvement and democratic structures of the earlier period were no longer essential”. (58) Unsurprisingly, our Marxist repeats the myth that the Girondins “disapproved of centralised state power” (57) when, in reality, they wished “to establish a strong government and to reduce the people to submission” and so “[i]nstead of federalising, everything done by the Girondins showed them to be as centralising and authoritarian as the [Jacobins], perhaps more so.”¹³ This was understood by many Communards and one is quoted by Gluckstein – without noting that this was echoing Proudhon – on how the Commune’s aim was to “break the alien system of centralisation and thus destroy the only weapon that the privileged classes possess.” (52) Sadly, he does not ponder why.

⁹ William G. Rosenberg, “Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power”, *The Workers Revolution in Russia: the view from below* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), D. Kaiser (ed.), 116.

¹⁰ William G. Rosenberg, “The Social Background to Tsektran,” *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989) Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), 357.

¹¹ Schulkind, 187.

¹² Kropotkin, 143.

¹³ Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution* (Montreal/New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 349, 366.

The question is: can the centralised social organisation which is the state be used by the many rather than the few? For Marxists, the answer is yes. For anarchists, the answer is no, for centralisation is *not* a neutral form of organisation and if the oppressed utilise it then they will simply empower a new few to rule over them. The question, as Kropotkin put it, is “how it is possible that the socialists of the second half of the nineteenth century adopted the ideal of the *Jacobin State* when this ideal had been designed from the viewpoint of the bourgeois, in direct opposition to the egalitarian and communist tendencies of the people which had arisen during the Revolution?”¹⁴

Gluckstein shows this confusion when he states that “[d]irect democracy was the basis of the communal movement, and it had created an embryonic workers’ state, without which the defeat of capitalism and creation of a new society could not have been attempted”. (148–9) Yet his own account shows how the creation of the “embryonic workers’ state” undermined the direct democracy which is required to ensure that capitalism is not replaced by state capitalism and that a genuinely new society is created rather than replacing the bosses. Equally, his sympathies are with the Blanquists and their seeking for *more* centralisation in spite of the fact he himself records its failures.

This shows how the Paris Commune brought the contradictions of Marxist attacks on anarchism to the surface. Thus we read Engels attacking anarchists for holding certain position yet praising the 1871 revolution when it implemented exactly the same ideas.

For example, in his inaccurate diatribe *The Bakuninists at Work*, Engels was keen to distort the federalist ideas of anarchism, dismissing “the so-called principle of anarchy, free federation of independent groups” for Bakunin “[a]s early as September 1870 (in his *Lettres à un français*)... had declared that the only way to drive the Prussians out of France by a revolutionary struggle was to do away with all forms of centralised leadership and leave each town, each village, each parish to wage war on its own.” For Engels anarchist federalism “consisted precisely in the fact that each town acted on its own, declaring that the important thing was not co-operation with other towns but separation from them, this precluding any possibility of a combined attack.” This meant “the fragmentation and isolation of the revolutionary forces which enabled the government troops to smash one revolt after the other.” According to Engels, the anarchists “proclaimed [this] a principle of supreme revolutionary wisdom.”¹⁵

Compare this to Engels praise for the Paris Commune which, he gushed, refuted the Blanquist notion of a revolution sprung by a vanguard which would create “the strictest, dictatorial centralisation of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.” Instead the Commune “appealed to [the provinces] to form a free federation of all French Communes... a national organisation which for the first time was really created by the nation itself. It was precisely the oppressing power of the former centralised government... which was to fall everywhere, just as it had fallen in Paris.”¹⁶

Clearly a “free federation” of Communes is bad when anarchists advocate it but excellent when workers in revolt do so. Why this was the case Engels failed to explain nor did he attempt to square this praise for “free federation” with his comments that only those who “have no idea of

¹⁴ Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, 366.

¹⁵ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 23: 592.

¹⁶ *Marx-Engels Selected Writings*, 256–7.

what revolution is or are revolutionaries only in word” talk of “authority and centralisation as of two things deserving condemnation whatever the circumstances.”¹⁷

There is an element of truth in all this, as Bakunin *did* reject “centralised leadership” as not up to the task but it is a falsehood to state that he denied the need for co-ordination of struggles and federal organisations from the bottom up. As he put it, the revolution must “foster the self-organisation of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upwards.” Rather than deny the need for co-ordination, Bakunin stressed it: “the peasants, like the industrial city workers, should unite by federating the fighting battalions, district by district, assuring a common coordinated defence against internal and external enemies.”¹⁸ In this he repeated his earlier arguments concerning social revolution – arguments that Engels was well aware of and so he deliberately misrepresented Bakunin’s ideas by means of an attack on federalism when, in Spain, federalism was *not* implemented.

Likewise, Engels quickly forgot Marx’s praise for the Commune implementing binding mandates by attacking anarchist use and support for them the following year. For the latter, it was a case of this being part of Bakunin’s nefarious plans to control the international “for a secret society... there is nothing more convenient than the imperative mandate” as all its members vote in one way, while the others will “contradict one another” (he did not explain how members of the “secret society” could all vote in one way unless... mandated to do so by the groups which elected them). Without these binding mandates, “the common sense of the independent delegates will swiftly unite them in a common party against the party of the secret society.” Obviously, the notion that delegates from a group should reflect the wishes of that group was lost on Engels as was the utility of this system for “if all electors gave their delegates imperative mandates concerning all points in the agenda, meetings and debates of the delegates would be superfluous.”¹⁹ Given this, it seems ironic to read Gluckstein lament on how politicians in the capitalist state “cannot be mandated or sacked, and so once elected are free to act as they wish until the next ballot.” (22) Which is why anarchists had supported the binding mandate since 1848, to ensure – to quote on *Commune* – that anyone elected remains a servant rather than the master of the electors: “We are here as representatives of the people and must how to obey its wishes.” (46)

Ultimately, this is the key ideological flaw in Marxism. While claiming to base itself on mass participation, direct democracy and so forth (“socialism from below”) it advocates a form of social organisation, centralisation, which is designed to exclude it.²⁰ They end up advocating party rule (“socialism from above”) and ensure the defeat of the revolution from within if not from without.

¹⁷ *On the Paris Commune*, 292.

¹⁸ Bakunin, 206, 190.

¹⁹ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 22: 281, 277. It should be noted that Trotsky shared Engels dislike of binding mandates forcing “representatives” to actually represent the views of their constituents within the party rather than their own opinions. (*In Defense of Marxism* [New York: Pathfinder, 1995], 80–1)

²⁰ The state being the most obvious example of this, but it is equally applicable *within* Leninist parties where power is explicitly entrusted to a few leaders at the top of the party hierarchy.

From below or above?

Which shows the limitations of Marxism and its confusions about the state. For Gluckstein, the Commune “inextricably linked change from below and the state” (50) and “Parisian direct democracy made the masses part of the state, and the state part of the masses.” (204) He suggests that Marx synthesised Proudhonism and Blanquism (83), that his contribution was to “synthesise their insights.” (206)

Yet during the 1905 Russian Revolution, Lenin mocked the Mensheviks for only wanting “pressure from below” which was “pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government.” Instead, he argued for “pressure... from above as well as from below,” where “pressure from above” was “pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.” Lenin invoked the authority of Engels, noting that against the anarchists that, as a “true Jacobin of Social-Democracy,” he had “appreciated the importance of action from above” and saw the need for “the utilisation of the revolutionary governmental power.” Lenin summarised his position (which he considered as being in line with orthodox Marxism): “Limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below and renunciation of pressure also from above is *anarchism*.”¹

Given that Lenin had rejected the idea of “only from below” as an anarchist principle (which it is), we need to bear in mind that Leninist calls for “democracy from below” are *always* placed in the context of a Leninist government for Lenin always stressed that the *Bolsheviks* would “take over full state power,” that they “can and *must* take state power into their own hands.”² Leninist “democracy from below” always means representative government, *not* popular power or self-management, of a “revolutionary” government exercising power “from above” onto the very class it claimed to represent. As Lenin summarised to his political police, the Cheka, in 1920:

“Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.”³

Or as Trotsky put it nearly 20 years later:

“The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed

¹ Lenin, *Collected Works* 8: 474–5, 478, 480, 481. This seems to have been a common Bolshevik position at the time, with Stalin stressing in the same year that “action only from ‘below’ was “an anarchist principle, which does, indeed, fundamentally contradict Social-Democratic tactics.” (*Collected Works* 1: 149)

² Lenin, *Collected Works* 26: 90, 19.

³ Lenin, *Collected Works* 42: 170.

with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.”⁴

If Gluckstein thinks that the Commune shows that the so-called workers’ state “was not there to oppress or exploit them” (25) then Bolshevism – in both theory and practice – proves that this is *not* the case. The vanguard party arms itself with the might of the state to put “pressure” on or coerce anyone it considered “wavering and unstable” or, to use Trotsky’s word, “backward” which is, by definition, *anyone* who disagrees with the vanguard party.

Compare the position of Lenin and Trotsky with that voiced in the Commune that the National Guard “gives to the city a national militia that defends the citizens against power, instead of an army which defends the state from the citizens”. (51) Bakunin, however, would not have been surprised for, based on the anarchist analysis of the State as “minority government, from the top downward, of a vast quantity of men,” he correctly predicted that even the so-called workers’ State “cannot be sure of its own self-preservation without an armed force to defend it against its own *internal enemies*, against the discontent of its people.”⁵

Which is precisely why anarchists reject socialism “from above” in favour of one created “from below.” In the state, it is always the leaders at the top who have power, not the masses. No revolutionary anarchist denies the need for self-discipline and the need to co-ordinate revolutionary struggle and defence: it is considered a truism that there was a need to federate revolutionary forces to defeat reaction. What we also recognised is that giving power to a few leaders is a fatal mistake, that they will implement what *they* consider as “socialism” and override the creative actions from below so necessary to the success of a revolution and the building of socialism. For example:

“On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the [factory] committees leaders sought to bring their model [of socialism based on workers’ self-management of the economy] into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The Bolshevik alternative was to vest both managerial *and* control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them.”⁶

This was in-line with pre-October Bolshevik notions on building “socialism” for, lest we forget, “the *postal service* [is] an example of the socialist economic system” and “Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organisations of a similar type... Once we have overthrown the capitalists... we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism.” Thus the “immediate aim” was to “organise the whole economy on the lines of the postal service” and “on the basis of what capitalism has already created.” Thus everyone is “transformed into hired employees of the state.”⁷ This simply ensured that the revolution developed in a state capitalist fashion – both in the sense Lenin desired and in the sense which anarchists warned would be the inevitable result of state socialism.

⁴ “The Moralists and Sycophants”, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 59. Compare this to his 1906 claim that “[t]he dictatorship of the proletariat in no way signifies the dictatorship of the revolutionary organisation over the proletariat”. (“Thirty-five Years After: 1871–1906,” *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970], 24)

⁵ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 265.

⁶ Thomas F. Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia: Ideology and Industrial Organisation 1917–1921* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 38.

⁷ Lenin, *Collected Works* 25: 431, 478.

The Bolshevik regime shows that “from below” and “from above” cannot be combined. The latter will always undermine the former simply because that was what it was designed to do.

“nothing could be more foreign...”

The main problem with Gluckstein’s work is that he tries to present Leninism (what he considers as “Marxism”) as the sole champion of the Commune. In reality, this is not the case and he shows this when he approvingly quotes, and paraphrases, Trotsky’s 1921 essay *Lessons of the Paris Commune* – although he does repeat its conclusions more tactfully than its author did. Needless to say, he is as selective in his use of that work as he is with the anarchist ones.

For Trotsky, the Commune was not problematic for “we will find in it one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed.” That is it. As for the Communards themselves “[w]hat they lacked was clarity in method and a centralized leading organization. That is why they were vanquished.”¹ Thus the Commune was a classic example of what *not* to do rather than a source of hope for a better society.

What about the Commune’s aim for mass participation and direct democracy? Nonsense, for the Commune “shows us the incapacity of the masses to choose their path, their indecision in the leadership of the movement, their fatal penchant to come to a halt after the first successes, thus permitting the enemy to regain its breath, to reestablish its position.” The party, not the class, is seen as the key as “it is the accumulated and organized experience of the proletariat” and “foresees theoretically the paths of development, all its stages.” With the “aid of the party” the proletariat “frees itself from the need of always recommencing its history: its hesitations, its lack of decision, its mistakes.” Or, more bluntly, the proletariat frees itself from the need to govern itself and society: that can be left to “[o]ur party” which “seized the power” in Russia.² The increased democracy Gluckstein praises is seen purely as a means of securing party power and, once state power is seized, the working class can get back to its traditional role of following orders.

In reality, of course, only the party leadership held effective power as Trotsky also acknowledged. He notes that one member of the Central Committee demanded in October in 1917 “the proclamation of the dictatorship of the Central Committee of the party” and indicated that this was simply “anticipating the logical development of the struggle”. He was against this only because the time was not right and so it “would have provoked great disorder at that moment”.³

Gluckstein approvingly quotes Communards arguing for “communal France in federal form” and that the “triumph of the communal idea is... the social revolution” (52) For Trotsky, such aspirations were simply wrong. The notion that “each town has its sacred right of self-government” was “idealistic chatter – of the same gender as mundane anarchism.” In fact, “more than any other” the French proletariat had been “duped” by the bourgeoisie for “autonomist formulae” are “nothing but impediments on the feet of the proletariat, hampering its forward movement.” Opposition to centralism was “a heritage of petty bourgeois localism and autonomism” and “is without a doubt the weak side of a certain section of the French proletariat.” Autonomy “is the supreme

¹ “Lessons of the Paris Commune,” *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune*, 61.

² Trotsky, 52, 53, 58.

³ Trotsky, 58.

guarantee of real activity and individual independence for certain revolutionists” but in reality it was “a great mistake which cost the French proletariat dearly.” So the “tendency towards particularism, whatever the form it may assume, is a heritage of the dead past. The sooner French communism – socialist communism and syndicalist communism – emancipates itself from it, the better it will be for the proletarian revolution.” “Passivity and indecision,” asserted Trotsky, “were supported in this case by the sacred principle of federation and autonomy... In sum, it was nothing but an attempt to replace the proletarian revolution, which was developing, by a petty bourgeois reform: communal autonomy.”⁴

So much for the Commune having “planted the seeds of a new social world”. (53)

For Marx in 1871, the Communards were “storming heaven,”⁵ for Trotsky they were nothing more than wrong-headed petit-bourgeois autonomist-anarchist federalists. Yet, to be fair to Trotsky, he could at least quote Marx to justify his dismissal of the Communards and their vision of a federal France. Lest we forget, for Gluckstein does not remind us, Marx had argued forcefully in 1850 during the German Revolution that “the workers must not only strive for one and indivisible German republic, but also... for the most decisive centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority. They should not let themselves be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government, etc. ... revolutionary activity... can only be developed with full efficiency from a central point.... As in France in 1793, it is the task of the genuinely revolutionary party in Germany to carry through the strictest centralisation.”⁶ Significantly, Engels in 1872 privately reiterated this vision by suggesting that it “was the want of centralisation and authority that cost the Paris Commune its life.”⁷ Needless to say, it were these writings and others like it from which the Bolsheviks drew inspiration and, in this, Trotsky in 1921 at least had the merit of honesty.

And what of the popular organisations Gluckstein praises so highly? For Trotsky, their role was simple, to provide a link by which the party can implement its decisions. Thus it “was indispensable to have an organization incarnating the political experience of the proletariat” and by means of “the Councils of Deputies... the party could have been in continual contact with the masses, known their state of mind; its leading centre could each day put forward a slogan which, through the medium of the party’s militants, would have penetrated into the masses, uniting their thought and their will.”⁸ The focus is at the top, and the decisions flow downwards – as it does in every class system – yet Gluckstein praises the “anti-hierarchical attitude of the insurgents” of 1871. (47)

Trotsky was also disparaging of the mass democracy in the National Guard, arguing that “[b]efore wide masses of soldiers acquire the experience of well choosing and selecting commanders, the revolution will be beaten by the enemy.” This meant that the “methods of shapeless democracy (simple electability) must be supplemented and to a certain extent replaced by measures of selection from above. The revolution must create an organ composed of experienced, reliable organizers, in which one⁹ can have absolute confidence, give it full powers to choose,

⁴ Trotsky, 55, 61, 55–6.

⁵ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 284.

⁶ Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 509–10.

⁷ Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, 292.

⁸ Trotsky, 54–5.

⁹ “Who is this anonymous and mysterious ‘one’? Who is to bestow ‘absolute confidence’ in the revolutionary organ and the revolutionary organisers? Is it the masses? Is it the Party ‘acting in the interests of the masses’? Is it the

designate and educate the command.”¹⁰ Yet Trotsky is being disingenuous here, for he was well aware that the Bolsheviks did *not* “supplement” internal democracy in the armed forces but had in fact completely replaced it with appointment from above for it had been he who abolished it – *before* the civil war started – in March 1918: “the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree”.¹¹

Gluckstein echoes this, suggesting that “[i]n time the Commune’s open, direct democracy would have selected more effective leaders from their midst, but it did not survive long enough for this to occur.” (141) Yet he also can be replaced by appointment from above without, apparently, affecting the nature of the “coercive force.” Gluckstein appears to agree – the military democracy he praises and seeks to associate his ideology with was not applied in the Bolsheviks’ new state and so clearly viewed as *not* essential: with the right people in power, then apparently democracy can be postponed to the distant future. Yet the Red Army itself showed the necessity of “internal democracy” – for in practice it “belonged” to the party rulers, not to the “mass of the people” and was regularly “used against it” to maintain Bolshevik rule by repressing strikes and other protests.¹² This goes unmentioned of course, but space is found to reference Trotsky on the need for a “Communist discipline” not based on “the rod” (141) when, in reality, the Red Army *was* based on that, with its appointed officers having numerous techniques to enforce obedience up to and including firing squads.

If democracy can be deferred for the armed forces, would this argument not be equally applicable in the mass organisations created by the revolution? Trotsky attacks the Central Committee of the National Guard organising elections “to transmit its powers to the representatives of the Commune” as it “was a great mistake in that period to play with elections”¹³ suggest so, along with his repeated defence of party dictatorship. For example:

“The Workers’ Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They place the workers’ right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.”¹⁴

Party leaders ‘acting in the interests of the Party’ as a whole? Is Trotsky’s ambiguity on this point entirely accidental?” (Maurice Brinton and Philippe Guillaume, “The Commune, Paris 1871,” *For Workers’ Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004), David Goodway (ed.), 60)

¹⁰ Trotsky, 60.

¹¹ *How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 1 (London: New Park Publications, 1979), 47.

¹² For an account of workers protest and its repression by the so-called workers’ State under Lenin and Trotsky, see section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

¹³ Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune*, 60–1.

¹⁴ Quoted by Farber, 209. It must be stressed that the Workers’ Opposition did not, in fact, oppose party dictatorship. Their support for “democratic principles” was limited to economic bodies, subject to party oversight, manipulation and veto. (see Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970], 182–83)

For Leninism, elections were a means to achieve the end of party power and not valued in themselves. “Electability, the democratic method,” Trotsky stressed, “*is but one of the instruments* in the hands of the proletariat and its party” and must not be considered as “a fetish, a remedy for all evils. The methods of electability must be combined with those of appointments.” The key, therefore, was “that at its head, above the wards, the districts, the groups, there is an apparatus which is centralized and bound together by an iron discipline.”¹⁵

It is by elections, mandates and recall that the masses express their “wavering” and so, ultimately, for Trotsky in 1921 mass participation was viewed as optional for it “reflects... the weak side of the masses... it manifests the spirit of indecision, of waiting, the tendency to be inactive after the first successes.”¹⁶ Can it be any wonder, then, that the Bolsheviks had concluded that the dictatorship of the proletariat could only be achieved by party dictatorship, i.e. the dictatorship *over* the proletariat that Bakunin had warned of? As Trotsky acknowledged in 1920:

“We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party... In this ‘substitution’ of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class.”¹⁷

Hence the glaring contradiction between the reality of the so-called workers’ state and Gluckstein’s assertion that a state “built from below needs to be grounded in direct democracy with representatives made accountable.” (22)

Then there is the issue of one-man management, imposed by Lenin in the spring of 1918, which also stands in stark contrast to Gluckstein’s praise for the experiments in workers’ control within Paris. (31) For Trotsky in 1920, it was “a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production... and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered.”¹⁸ This is impossible to square with Gluckstein’s claim that “the solutions” the Commune “began to sketch out” on workers’ control were “outstanding” (207) and that it had “planted the seeds of a new social world” with its ideas on “workers’ control of production.” (53) But, then, he fails to note how Bolshevism simply created state-capitalism in Russia and instead favours reporting their rhetoric rather than the reality of their regime.¹⁹

So if, as Gluckstein states, “the Proudhonists realised that mass popular involvement was essential for the creation of a new society” (206) the Leninists quickly came to realise that mass popular involvement was an optional extra, something which could be abolished as long as the party held power – particularly if that mass participation clashed with party interests. Given these opinions and the reality of Bolshevism in power, it seems incredible that Gluckstein can

¹⁵ Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune*, 61, 56.

¹⁶ Trotsky, 54.

¹⁷ *Terrorism and Communism: a reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 109.

¹⁸ Trotsky, 162.

¹⁹ The best account of the Bolshevik destruction of workers’ self-management during the Russian Revolution and its ideological roots remains Maurice Brinton’s *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution (For Workers’ Power, 293–378)*.

state that Leninism “stands for the direct democracy and liberating qualities so abundant in the Paris Commune.” (206)

Similarly, compare Marx’s favourable note that the Commune Council was “to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time”²⁰ with Gluckstein’s comment that this “created a real predicament for the Commune” due to the need to defend the revolution which requires secrecy which undermines public scrutiny. He suggests the solution was to “trust... those in charge of military and security measures” (151) which seems naïve and much at odds with his comments elsewhere, although, of course, he also concludes that the Commune “was right” to “silence saboteurs in its midst” by censoring the press. (152) Likewise, he fails to note the first act of the Bolshevik regime was to create an executive body *above* the national soviet congress then, a few weeks later, this executive simply decreed legislative power for itself. This was the exact opposite of the Commune and in direct contradiction to Lenin’s *State and Revolution*.²¹

If, as Marx stated, “nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchical investiture”²² then Leninism cannot be considered as anything but foreign to that spirit.

²⁰ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 71.

²¹ Farber, 20–1, 38.

²² Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 73.

Missing the Party?

It will, of course, be objected that it does not matter that the Bolsheviks implemented the opposite of what Gluckstein praises the Commune for. After all, while the Commune was drowned in blood, the Russian Revolution successfully repulsed the White and Imperialist forces. This allowed Trotsky to pontificate on the Commune's weaknesses while, say, Varlin was murdered by the counter-revolution after surrendering.

This misses the point for any genuine socialist – the military victory obscures the fact that *the revolution itself* was lost within six months of the Bolshevik seizure of power. The counter-revolution *was* victorious, but it was draped in the Red Flag and invoked the name of the Commune.¹ Gluckstein subscribes to the Bolshevik Myth and so this awkward fact is not addressed in any meaningful manner. Instead, the standard Leninist complaint about the Commune is stressed, namely that it lacked a vanguard party: “The problem was lack of ideological clarity and absence of good leadership”. (149) While few anarchists would deny the importance of theoretical clarity and of giving a lead, they reject the notion that such influence should be organised in the Leninist fashion simply because such parties undermine the very social revolution they proclaim to produce.²

This can be seen from the Commune itself. Gluckstein does admit that Marx recommended the French *not* to revolt after the defeat of the Empire, to “not allow themselves to be deluded by the national souvenirs of 1792”. (196) He suggests that this was Marx not being a “mindless sycophant [of the Commune]. He feared, for example, that the Parisian movement might be mesmerised by the Great Revolution.” (196) Ignoring the awkward fact he said this *before* the uprising, Gluckstein quotes a Communard urging the people to “form the Commune and save the Republic, as was done in 1793” (104) and fails to discuss the implications of this: that it was precisely the opposite of Marx's wishes, that Marx's call was clearly one urging French workers *not* to create a revolutionary commune – that is, not to do what they did on March 18th, 1871. Instead, he urged them to “perform their duties as citizens... Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of Republican liberty.”³ While Gluckstein quotes part of this passage (196) to show that Marx was not the “infallible” sage of Stalinist myth, he fails to note that this clearly meant organise a political party, vote in the next election and exercise “political action” – which was also his position shortly after the fall of the Commune for where “the way to show political power lies open to the working class” like Britain then “[i]nsurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more swiftly and surely do the work.”⁴

¹ One of the battleships whose sailors had initiated the Kronstadt Rebellion for soviet democracy, the *Sevastopol*, was renamed the *Paris Commune* once the city had been seized by the Red Army. (Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 244).

² See section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

³ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 47.

⁴ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 22: 602.

Which brings up a problem for the Leninist support for “democratic centralism.” Marx opposed any attempt at revolution in the name of the International, so if the Communards *had* accepted “democratic centralism” and had followed these comments then the Paris Commune would never have happened.⁵ What this says about the “efficiency” of centralised organisation is unexplored, yet we are expected to take his (and Trotsky’s) eulogy to the role of the party seriously.

Similarly, it was not “the Party” (i.e., Marx and Engels) who discovered the “political form” Marxists have paid lip-service to ever since, but rather the masses themselves. Undoubtedly, they were aided, but not dictated to, by revolutionaries within their midst – revolutionaries whose ideas were dismissed as nonsense by the German socialists – but they were *not* organised in a Leninist fashion. In short, if the vanguard party is so important, then “how can we explain that the Commune, with its petty-bourgeois leadership, was capable of introducing to the modern world the most advanced conceptions of proletarian democracy?”⁶

This does not, any more than the Bolsheviks opposing the strikes and protests that overthrew the Tsar, change the fact that the Russian Revolution succeeded while the Commune, like Spain in 1936, was defeated and so, as Trotsky continually stressed, the role of the party *must* have been the decisive factor. Yet the key fact is that the Bolshevik regime was hardly socialist and, consequently, cannot be considered a “success” – for, surely, the “success” of a socialist revolution is marked by whether it creates the initial foundations of socialism? Lenin and Trotsky at the head of a party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy is not a successful revolution, it is the prelude to Stalinism.

As would be expected, Gluckstein presents the standard Leninist account of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Revolution. Thus the “democratic Soviet system was eventually sapped by civil war and destroyed by internal counter-revolution” (201) by 1928 and so ignores the awkward fact that the Bolsheviks had effectively turned the soviets into irrelevant bodies by centralising state power into the hands of the Bolshevik executives from top to bottom and then packing and gerrymandering (or abolishing) any which threatened to be elected with (or achieved) a non-Bolshevik majority *before* the civil war started in May, 1918.⁷

Somewhat contradictorily, Gluckstein states that “the soviets overcame their initial weakness and won a civil war” (202) which is nonsense, as the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921 was crushed precisely *because* it called for genuine soviet democracy. And what was this “initial weakness” and how was it “overcome”? He states that “Trotsky believed the presence of the Bolshevik Party within the Soviets was crucial to their success,” (202) more precisely “the party helped overcome the ‘weak side’ of an inexperienced direct mass democracy, and made operative the ‘strong side’ – the ability to represent and move vast numbers into action, and lead them to victory” (202) If by “overcame” Gluckstein meant “abolished” then he would be closer to the truth. The ideological confusions are clear, though. The whole point of direct democracy is not to “represent” the masses and allow a few party leaders to “move” them but to allow the masses to govern and act for themselves and, by this process, revolutionise themselves as well as society. This is the “strong side” of mass democracy. In the Russian Revolution, “the party” eliminated “inexperienced direct mass democracy” and replaced it with rule by the party.

⁵ More likely, like the February revolution of 1917 in Russia, it would have happened anyway in the face of party opposition.

⁶ Brinton and Guillaume, 53.

⁷ For more details see section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

This was a key lesson drawn by leading Bolsheviks from the Russian Revolution and, retroactively, from the Commune. Trotsky argued quite explicitly that “the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard” and that “the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity.” Only with “support of the vanguard by the class” can there be the “conquest of power” and it was in “this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard.” Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the “vanguard” which takes power – “a revolutionary party, even after seizing power... is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.” Thus state power is required to *govern the masses*, who cannot exercise power themselves: “Those who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the Bolshevik leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.”⁸

The inevitable side effect of this was that it placed the people back into their customary role of governed, oppressed and exploited. In other words, it recreated the very class system which the Commune aimed to eliminate and mandat imperative, recall and federalism – two of which Engels mocked when anarchists urged them and the third, recall, fatally weakened by his prejudice for centralisation.

The replacement of working class power by party power flows logically both from the nature of the state and from the vanguardism at the heart of Leninism. The state, by its very nature, empowers those at its centre and so automatically replaces popular power with power in the hands of a few party leaders. And if the party is the decisive factor in a “successful” revolution than anything that weakens its hold on power cannot but harm the revolution, including working class democracy for, as Trotsky put it, the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is... an objective necessity” and the “revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution”⁹ This reflects his opinions in 1921, quoted above, when he was at the height of his power.

Compare this to Engels arguing that the Commune showed that the proletariat, “in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy,” would have “to safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment.”¹⁰ Not much room for mass direct democracy, instant recall and mandated delegates under Trotsky whose regime, by definition, requires an army apart from the people, requires a state in the usual sense of the word as a power existing apart from the general population and above them.

Ironically, Gluckstein states that today’s politicians “may pay lip-service to democracy but they seek to anaesthetise people with their words.” (46) Given Trotsky’s critique of the Commune, repeated more tactfully by Gluckstein, we could say the same about Leninism. All in all, Lenin’s 1905 judgment that the Commune “confused the tasks of fighting for a republic with those of fighting for socialism” and so “it was a government *such as ours should not be*”¹¹ seems more

⁸ *Writings 1936–37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002), 490, 488, 495.

⁹ Trotsky, *Writings 1936–37*, 513–4.

¹⁰ *On the Paris Commune*, 32. Which raises an obvious question, if the state *is* merely an instrument of class rule then what is there to “safeguard” against? If the possibility exists that the State, in the shape of its “deputies and officials,” can abuse their power then, clearly, it is not merely that – it has interests of its own. Giving this body even more power by handing over the economic affairs of society alongside the political ones may then not be the wisest plan, as the Bolshevik regime proved.

¹¹ Lenin, *Collected Works* 9: 81.

than applicable when comparing the Paris Commune to the Bolshevik revolution and the lessons Lenin and Trotsky drew from both.

Destroying the state or the “state machine”

Marx and Engels had been advocating a democratic republic since the 1840s. Engels, for example, argued in 1847 that the revolution would “establish a *democratic constitution* and thereby, directly or indirectly, the dominance of the proletariat”, the former where “the proletarians are already a majority of the people”.¹ Nearly 50 years later, he noted that the *Communist Manifesto* “had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat.”²

In between these dates, both Marx and Engels had urged working class people to create a republic as this would achieve, eventually, the political domination of the working class – that is, a working class government. For example, in 1881 Engels argued that in Britain, “where the industrial and agricultural working class forms the immense majority of the people, democracy means the dominion of the working class, neither more nor less. Let, then, that working class prepare itself for the task in store for it – the ruling of this great Empire... And the best way to do this is to use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess... to send to Parliament men of their own order.” He lamented that “[e]verywhere the labourer struggles for political power, for direct representation of his class in the legislature – everywhere but in Great Britain.”³

Yet, for most Marxists, Marxism stands for the destruction of the current state and its replacement with a new so-called “workers” state, as discussed in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. The source of Lenin’s reinterpretation of Marx lies in his defence of the Paris Commune and the conclusion that “[o]ne thing especially was proved by the Commune” was that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”⁴ Gluckstein, as a Trotskyist, repeats Lenin’s interpretation.

However, a close reading of Marx’s essay on the Commune shows that Lenin’s analysis is flawed. Marx reports how the Commune was “formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms.” Centrally, it was a case of “the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated.”⁵ So Lenin’s claims that “Marxism” stands for destroying the old state and replacing it with a new one based on workers’ councils cannot be supported by the Paris Commune for it was no such revolution. Rather it was an elected municipal council that made a series of reforms that abolished aspects of the old state while retaining its structure (complemented by direct democracy in popular clubs).

¹ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 6: 350.

² Marx and Engels, *The Socialist Revolution* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 50, 313.

³ Lenin, *Collected Works* 24: 405

⁴ This from the preface of the 1872 German edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, which in turn quoted Marx’s *The Civil War in France*. (*The Socialist Revolution*, 193)

⁵ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 71, 73.

Given this, there was a reason why mainstream Marxism (social democracy) took the view that revolution involved “political action” in which the party would take power and reform the state and introduce “socialism”, in other words repeat the Commune at a national level. This was the position of Marx and Engels as the latter confirmed in an 1884 letter when asked to clarify what the former had meant in 1871:

“It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes: whereas all bourgeois republicans since 1848 inveighed against this machinery so long as they were in the opposition, but once they were in the government they took it over without altering it and used it partly against the reaction but still more against the proletariat.”⁶

Engels was echoing one of Marx’s drafts of the *Civil War in France*:

“But the proletariat cannot, as the ruling classes and their different rival factions have done in the successive hours of their triumph, simply lay hold on the existent State body and wield this ready-made agency for their own purpose. The first condition for the holding of political power, is to transform its working machinery and destroy it as an instrument of class rule.”⁷

So the Commune did not smash the existing state and replace it with a new one. Rather, the workers took political power via elections and used their newly conquered political power to “refashion” or “transform” the existing state by smashing its bureaucracy or “working machinery.” Unsurprisingly, then, we find Trotsky repeating the orthodox Marxist position in 1906:

“International socialism considers that the republic is the only possible form of socialist emancipation – with this condition, that the proletariat tears it from the hands of the bourgeoisie and transforms it from ‘a machine for the oppression of one class by another’ into a weapon for the socialist emancipation of humanity.”⁸

This is recognised by Gluckstein, but not explored, when he mentions that the Commune was based on bourgeois electoral processes. He notes that the revolution used the “elections under the old voting system to choose a communal council” and while “revolutionary direct democracy had been built into the institutional framework” in the National Guard, in “the ‘legal’ election to the Communal Council such direct democracy could still be expressed, but it was not closely tied in to the structure.” (133) Therefore, “the council emerged from a conventional electoral system, where there is no organic link between elector and representative.” (134)

This perspective on revolution can be seen when Engels argued in 1886 that while he and Marx saw “the gradual dissolution and ultimate disappearance of that political organisation called *the State*” as “*one* of the final results of the future revolution,” they “at the same time... always held that... the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organised political force of the State and with its aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and re-organise society.”

⁶ Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 47: 74.

⁷ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 202.

⁸ Trotsky, “Thirty-five Years After: 1871–1906,” 14.

The idea that the proletariat needs to “possess” the existing state is made clear for while the anarchists “reverse the matter” by arguing that the revolution “has to *begin* by abolishing the political organisation of the State,” for Marxists “the only organisation the victorious working class finds ready-made for use, is that of the State. It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy that at such a moment, would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the working class can exert its newly conquered power.”⁹ Yet the only institution which the working class “finds ready-made for use” is the bourgeois state, although, as Engels stressed, it “may require adaptation.” Unsurprisingly, in 1894 it was the case that “the republic... is the *ready-made* political form for the future rule of the proletariat” which in France “is already in being.”¹⁰ In fact:

“If one thing is certain it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown.”¹¹

Unsurprisingly, when Lenin came to quote this passage in *State and Revolution* he immediately tried to obscure its meaning. “Engels,” he wrote, “repeated here in a particularly striking form the fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx’s work, namely, that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹² Yet Engels obviously did nothing of the kind but at least Lenin did not, like Hal Draper,¹³ suggest he was referring to the Paris Commune when he only mentions the period “1792 to 1799”, “the first French Republic”, “the American model” and how “the proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic” with “self-government” meaning “officials elected by universal suffrage”.¹⁴

Then there is Engels’ 1891 introduction to Marx’s *The Civil War in France*. Arguing that the state “is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another” he noted that it is “at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible.”¹⁵ Simply put, if the proletariat creates a *new* state system to replace the bourgeois one, then how can it be “an evil inherited” by it?

This explains why, at key points, Lenin had to clarify what Engels *really* meant.¹⁶

⁹ Engels, *The Socialist Revolution*, 262.

¹⁰ Engels, Marx, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 50: 276

¹¹ Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 27: 227

¹² Lenin, *Collected Works* 25: 450.

¹³ *The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 37.

¹⁴ Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 27: 227–9.

¹⁵ Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, 34.

¹⁶ The Menshevik Julius Martov usefully explores this issue in a series of articles which were collected in the book *The State and the Socialist Revolution* (London: Carl Slienger, 1977). This is essential reading to see how Lenin reinvented Marxism to distance it from the failures of Social Democracy, justify his own development away from what was mainstream Marxism and his actions during 1917. For a similar account but from a more-or-less orthodox Marxist perspective, see Binay Sarker and Adam Buick, *Marxism-Leninism – Poles Apart* (Memari: Avenel Press, 2012).

Political Action and its alternatives

So there *is* one aspect of the Commune which can be considered as Marxist, namely the participation of socialists in the elections to the municipal council for since the 1840s Marx and Engels had urged workers to support (and, where necessary, fight for) the creation of a bourgeois republic and to use “political action” (namely, standing in elections) within it.

Here, though, there is an ambiguity in Gluckstein’s position – as in Marx’s. He notes (and presumably agrees with him) that Trotsky (like Marx¹) was “critical of [the Central Committee of the National Guard’s] abdication of power shortly after the 18 March revolution” (201) It, he states, “divested itself of government responsibility and handed power to the Communal Council... One consequence of this decision was to reduce the direct influence of the working class in the communal movement. Federation elections [in the National Guard] had an uniquely democratic character, because battalions met daily, giving ample scope for rank and file guardsmen to scrutinise delegate’s activities and keep working class interests to the fore.” (133)

Yet, surely, the communal elections increased working class participation in the Commune by widening its social base (and daily popular assemblies could also have been organised as they had been in 1792). Giving power to the Central Committee would have, by definition, disenfranchised all people not in the National Guard (such as most women, the elderly, workers, and so forth).² The same can, of course, be said of the argument for basing communal institutions within the workplace. Gluckstein argues that in Paris this was “precluded by the minuscule size of most production units and the fact that many were closed anyway.” Which suggests a purely workplace system of councils would, by definition, exclude non-workers (i.e., the unemployed, the retired, housewives and so on).³

The key role played by the clubs in the movement is pointed to by Gluckstein, but he notes that in later revolutions “workplaces became the centres of mass debate.” (48) Echoing Trotsky, he argues that “[s]uch [small] units of production could not provide a collective focus for the working class. Instead that came from the National Guard and the clubs.” (70) Not that you would know it from this book, this is repeating one of Bakunin’s arguments that while the Marxists sought the “organisation of the political power of the working classes,” the anarchists urged the “organisation, not of the political but of the social power (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses” and so the “future social organisation must be made solely from

¹ “The Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune.” (Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 284)

² Gluckstein also compares the social composition of the Central Committee to the Communal Council when discussing the reduction of working class influence. If the social background of those who make up a government helps determine that influence, what does that mean for Lenin’s government?

³ This is not as applicable to Bakunin who stressed the need to organise a federation of geographical organisations as well as federations of workplace-based ones. Thus the importance of creating a “federation of the barricades” for workers “armed and organized by streets and *quartiers*, they will form the revolutionary federation of all the *quartiers*, the federative commune” while “the workers have joined into associations and made a clean sweep of all the instruments of labour and every kind of capital and building.” (*Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 170–1, 179).

the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.”⁴

It seems a strange form of logic to assert that increasing the popular base of a revolution means, in fact, reducing its working class influence. Also, like Marx and Trotsky, Gluckstein does not discuss the contradiction between asserting that the Central Committee should have retained power with the lavish praise for the Commune as the “form at last discovered” to achieve the emancipation of labour. It may be correct to say that the Commune “would pay dearly for not marching on Versailles and holding municipal elections instead” (132) but then why praise the outcome of those elections, particularly when you think that this “reduce[d] the direct influence of the working class in the communal movement”?

Marx’s reservations were private, publically the Communal Council would “serve as a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes.”⁵ This repeats the vision expounded in the *Communist Manifesto* which argued that “the first step in the revolution by the working class” is to “raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.” The proletariat “will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeois, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organised as the ruling class.”⁶ Gluckstein ignores this – presumably because the Communards rejected this Statist vision of socialism – and states that “the insurgents had no prior experiences of a successful anti-capitalist movement to draw upon. They were truly pioneering and cut a new path for others.” (8)

This is true in a sense, as that “new path” was social democracy and the domination of Marxism within the mainstream of the international socialist movement (before being replaced by the reformism it had generated by this very tactic). However, Engels’ assertion in 1891 that the Commune was “the grave of the *old*, specifically French socialism, while being the cradle of the international communism, which is new for France” was exaggerated.⁷ After his death, the descent of social democracy into opportunism, bureaucracy and reformism could not be avoided (although, for some, it took the outbreak of war in 1914 to see it fully) and radical workers increasingly looked to the federalist traditions in the First International which were kept alive by the anarchist movement and turned to syndicalism and industrial unionism. Only with the Russian Revolution (with the help of Fascism) did Marxism (in its Leninist form) become the predominant tendency in the revolutionary left. The path of federalism from below, as was predicted and developed by anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, lost ground before social democracy (in part, due to errors by anarchists themselves⁸).

In this “new path”, the Commune was relegated to an inspiration because there had been a democratically elected “workers’ government” but mainly used as a warning of what would happen if a revolt occurred before the party was ready to secure power nationally. By 1895, Engels was praising the legal successes of social democracy in elections and invoked the Commune only as the “one means by which the steady rise of the socialist fighting forces in Germany could be temporarily halted, and even thrown back for some time: a clash with the military, a blood-letting

⁴ Bakunin, *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 197, 206.

⁵ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 75.

⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 490.

⁷ Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, 294.

⁸ Such as leaving participation in the labour movement and other struggles for reforms in favour of an abstract revolutionary position which meant, in practice, isolation from the working class.

like that of 1871 in Paris.” Now it was a case of the “successful utilisation of universal suffrage” which had now (quoting Marx’s words) been “transformed by them from a means of deception... into an instrument of emancipation.”⁹ While insurrection was not totally dismissed, it was clear that Engels’ final article was a vindication of social democracy’s peaceful tactics, tactics that provoked the “revisionism” debates after his death (i.e., the attempt by its right-wing to bring the party’s rhetoric into line with its actual practice).

For anarchists, the commune does present an issue. After all, a key argument of anarchism is abstaining from “political action” as being irrelevant to creating socialism and opening up the possibility of reformism within the labour movement. As Kropotkin stressed:

“We have to organise the workers’ forces – not to make them into a fourth party in Parliament, but in order to make them a formidable MACHINE OF STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITAL. We have to group workers of all trades under this single purpose: ‘War on capitalist exploitation!’ And we must prosecute that war relentlessly, day by day, by the strike, by agitation, *by every revolutionary means...* once the workers of every land have seen that organisation at work, taking the workers’ interests into its hands, waging unrelenting war on capital... once the workers from every trade, from village and city alike, are united into a single union... crush[ing] the tyranny of Capital and State for good”¹⁰

Yet, here, surely is an example of “political action” which did produce a revolution (even one so limited in its initial acts as the Commune)? Libertarian members of the International, such as Varlin, did successfully stand for election. Does this mean, as Marx and Engels argued, that the general anarchist position of abstaining from elections is wrong?

Clearly, the circumstances of the Commune’s elections were atypical as they were conducted in a revolutionary situation (unlike the social-democratic strategy). However, given the limited nature of its reforms and the lack of dynamism of the Commune’s Council, Kropotkin concluded that any such “revolutionary government” should be avoided.¹¹ While supporting the initial revolution, anarchist action would then encourage the creation of popular self-organisation in the community and workplace rather than seeking to focus the struggle onto electing a few leaders to act on behalf of the working class. In other words, encourage workers to build their own *class* organisations to influence events towards socialist goals directly rather than waiting for representatives to act on their behalf from within bourgeois institutions.

In short, rather than “let themselves be hoisted into power, let themselves be locked into a government alongside” those “who were hostile toward a people’s economic revolution,” revolutionaries must “remain on the streets, in their own districts, with the people – as propagandists and organisers of the *de facto* equality that they all craved: joining in with the people as they looked to their food and their livelihoods and the city’s defences... [to] their interests, and rebuilding, in the sections, the life of society with them.”¹² This meant alongside “[c]omplete independence of the Commune, the Federation of free Communes, and the social revolution within the Commune, that is to say trade unions for production replacing the statist organisation of the society

⁹ Engels, *The Socialist Revolution*, 320, 314.

¹⁰ Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 294–5.

¹¹ See his “Revolutionary Government” in *Words of a Rebel* where he uses the Commune as an example of an elected government. Significantly, Gluckstein does not reference this article.

¹² Kropotkin, *Direct Action Against Capital*, 554.

that exists today” as only “groupings by trades and by professions in addition to groupings by neighbourhoods” would “bring to society co-ordination... and become the instrument of the liberation of the masses, without resorting to the submission of all to the pyramidal hierarchy of the State”.¹³

So rather than seek election, the course of action would be to remain amongst the people and strengthen (or create) alternative forms of social organisation which could (initially) complement and (ultimately) replace the elected municipal council. Such institutions did exist, with such bodies as the clubs and the *Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements*. The *Delegation*, which was an organisation that united many clubs and socialists, did argue that it “should be the revolutionary Commune arising from the clubs and committees of Paris, a decision reaffirmed in the revolutionary socialist Declaration of Principles of February 19.”¹⁴ However, desire to be inclusive with more moderate Republicans and present a common front against its enemies ensured that the elections to the municipal council were organised rather than popular assemblies. Yet there was support for such a radical solution. As Gluckstein notes, many “[p]rominent insurgents encouraged mass involvement in the life of the new government and saw themselves as mandated delegates.” (46) However, this was hindered by the bourgeois institutional arrangements they inherited. The only way forward would be to have created a federation of popular assemblies, in the words of one Communard: “People, govern yourself through public meetings.” (50)

Some communards did see this, with one pointing to “the Districts, the primary assemblies” of the Great French Revolution as the means to ensure the “permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs”. (47) This was the position of Kropotkin who later argued that these practised “Direct Self-Government” and “through this institution [the Revolution] gained... immense power” and “permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established.” These “mediums of popular administration... remained of the people, and this is what made the revolutionary power of these organisations,” expressing “the principles of anarchism” which, therefore, “had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the *deeds* of the Great French Revolution.”¹⁵ Likewise, Proudhon during the 1848 Revolution had argued that “organisation of popular societies was the pivot of democracy, the cornerstone of republican order” as “assemblies, popular societies... in a word, associations and meetings of all kinds and varieties” were “the organisation of universal suffrage in all its forms, of the very structure of Democracy itself.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, there seemed to be little popular support for such a radical solution immediately after the March 18th insurrection and Kropotkin lamented how rather than “acting on its own initiative... the people, confident of its rulers, delegated to them the power of taking initiatives. Here was the first consequence – and indeed the fatal result – of elections.”¹⁷ The various alternative groupings focused more on influencing the Council (and so increased its burden) than creating socialism directly. This shows the importance of libertarians being involved in social struggles and spreading their ideas in the masses of the general population during non-revolutionary times. As Bakunin noted, the libertarians “felt the lack of support from the great masses of the people of Paris, and... the organisation of the International Association, itself imperfect, compromised hardly a few thousand persons” as well as having “to keep up a daily struggle against the Ja-

¹³ Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, 161, 350–1.

¹⁴ Johnson, 91.

¹⁵ Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution*, 183, 180, 181, 184.

¹⁶ Proudhon, 407, 461.

¹⁷ Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel*, 168.

cobin majority” of the Commune Council.¹⁸ With a deeper influence in popular organisations, the result may have been different – but this does not change the Communal Council becoming a hindrance to the revolution rather than an aid and the need in future revolutions not to repeat the error.

¹⁸ Bakunin, *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 202.

Conclusions

The Paris Commune and its lessons are important for current revolutionaries, whether state socialists or anarchists. Its short existence raised all sorts of key issues for those seeking to change the world: should socialists take part in elections, how do we fight reaction, can a government be revolutionary...

Sadly, Gluckstein's work does not present an accurate account of the lessons learned from the Commune. Too much the Leninist, he simply does not understand the anarchist critique nor the libertarian position in general. As his nonsense about Proudhon shows, most Marxists have no shame in exposing their ignorance of anarchism to the world. He is far too willing to repeat the standard Marxist distortions about anarchist ideas and, in consequence, does not provide his readers with an obvious means of evaluating whether Kropotkin or Lenin were right. Ironically, for those who *do* know the anarchist critique of the Commune he does show – in passing – that it was the former who was, in fact, correct and the latter's regime simply reinforced that analysis.

Ultimately, this is not a scientific socialism for the aim is all too clear, namely to convert radicals – “the anti-capitalist movement today” (76) – to his own ideology. This marks almost all accounts Marxists provide of anarchism with Proudhon, for example, being associated with the left's *bête noir* of the day – for Hal Draper in the post-war period, fascism; for Gluckstein during the period of “anti-globalisation” protests, “the precursor of neo-liberal economics today”. (72) That the free market capitalists of his day combated him as a man of the left and he them, goes unmentioned. Nor does Gluckstein explain why Communards who “opposed state action on principle” had a “stance [which] was not an expression of neo-liberal or laissez-faire attitudes, [but] quite the opposite” (28) while Proudhon's was.

Gluckstein also fails to critically evaluate his own ideological leaders and so fails to discuss the obvious contradictions between Marxist accounts and what actually happened. Inconvenient arguments and conclusions are ignored, presenting a false picture of Leninism and its relation to the Commune. Significantly, he does not mention Marx's 1881 evaluation that the Commune was “merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be.”¹ As such, it is hard not to agree with Bakunin:

“Its general effect was so striking that the Marxists themselves, who saw their ideas upset by the uprising, found themselves compelled to take their hats off to it. They went further, and proclaimed that its programme and purpose were their own, in face of the simplest logic and own true sentiments. This was a truly farcical change of costume, but they were bound to make it, for fear of being overtaken and left behind in the wave of feeling which the rising produced throughout the world.”²

This can be seen from Gluckstein's repeated – albeit often muted – agreement with Blanquist positions on elections, centralisation, terror and so on. It is seen by his selective quoting of Trot-

¹ Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, 293.

² Bakunin, 261.

sky and the purging of any reference to party dictatorship. It can be seen from his inadequate understanding of the Russian Revolution and how the history of the Commune prefigured its evolution from popular revolt to popular state to party dictatorship.

In terms of presenting a general history of the Commune it is adequate. Ironically, it presents enough evidence to refute the predetermined conclusions it was written to bolster. In terms of learning its lessons and presenting an accurate account of the libertarian critique it is flawed (to the point of despair, at times). While Gluckstein states that “Marxism learns from mass struggles rather than preaching sermons,” (206) he seems unwilling to learn much from the Commune beyond the pressing need for a vanguard party to seize power.

Gluckstein’s work shows that the anarchist critique of the Commune, and of Marxism, remains valid. Anarchists should take heart that the ideas that we have been expounding since the 1840s were applied successfully, if in a limited fashion, in the Commune as in later revolutions. We should also stress that while Marxists subsequently have taken many of them up (at least in theory) we advocated them first. The Commune shows that these libertarian principles cannot, however, be combined with statism. Retaining a state structure, even one complemented by popular institutions, simply cannot handle the numerous problems facing a revolution, as Gluckstein himself has to admit even if he cannot bring himself to discuss these occasional passing brushes with reality. The Marxist notion that political action to secure a workers’ government, even in the unusual circumstances of post-insurrection Paris, simply isolates revolutionaries from the masses and puts barriers in the path of social change.

The Russian Revolution confirms this, for even though it was (in theory) based on workers’ organisations (soviets) it retained the essential characteristics of the bourgeois state (centralism, top-down unitarianism) which have evolved precisely to secure minority rule. As such, we should not be surprised it created a *new* class system based on the party, state and economic bureaucracies centralism inevitably produces. Free federations of self-managed groups can be the only basis for a successful revolution, as a revolution whose basis is the self-liberation of the working class needs to be based on *their* class organisations.

Some may question the wisdom of producing a lengthy critique of a flawed book by a member of an obscure Leninist party. However, we hope this shows that it is important to do so in order to, firstly, learn the lessons of the past and, secondly, correct the mistakes and distortions of those who try to appropriate revolts which are, at their core, libertarian in nature. The distorted Leninist account of the Commune, Anarchism and Marxism has been left unchallenged for so long that it has, for many honest revolutionaries, become the only analysis. As can be seen, this is not the case.

So, yes, we can agree with Gluckstein that the Commune “deserves to be more than an obscure, if inspiring, reference point” (7–8) but it also deserves more than to be used as a reference point for those whose practice and ideology are so directly at odds with it. All in all, it is hard not to conclude that he is like a fan of a murderer writing a biography of his victim’s mother.

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