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Marxism and Anarchism

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That this is the case can be seen from the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine. Operating in the same objective circumstances as the Bolsheviks, they showed what was possible. They called soviet congresses, defended freedom of speech, assembly, election and so on while the Bolsheviks destroyed them. They urged workers to organise themselves to solve their own problems while Trotsky proclaimed and started to implement the militarisation of labour.³⁸

This shows that theory matters.

To conclude

It is hard not to conclude that Marxism in practice has simply proven the anarchist critique right. As Bakunin argued, Marxists are “*champions of the social order built from the top down, always in the name of universal suffrage and the sovereignty of the masses upon whom they bestow the honour of obeying their leaders.*”

It also showed how right Kropotkin was to stress that “*new social forms can only be the collective work of the masses.*” A socialism built from above, by the state, will only be state capitalism – as the Bolshevik regime proved.

Ultimately, Marxism is just a form of the utopian socialism Proudhon critiqued in 1846. It has the same support for hierarchy and centralisation as the utopians did. Sure, it does not have the detailed plans of the utopians. Rather it is based on Marx’s few scattered comments on communism but in Russia these helped replace self-management with bureaucracy.

So the key questions for revolutionary socialists are will we change society or just our masters? Will we make history or just repeat it?

Our choice is simple. Anarchism – genuine socialism – **not** Marxism!

³⁸ See the appendix “*Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?*” of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see “*On the Bolshevik Myth*”

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Ideas and social relationships matter

This analysis is NOT based on the Bolsheviks being nasty people. Rather ideology and social relationships matter.

Ideology played its role, particularly when we are discussing the ideas of the ruling party.

Vanguardism privileges party. The arguments of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* logically imply party power.³⁶

The Bolshevik notion that party power equals workers power, that if the Bolsheviks held power then the workers did, helped undermine real workers power and produce nonsense like Trotsky's claim that "*there is no substitution*" when party dictatorship replaces soviet democracy.

The Marxist notion that the state as only an instrument of economic class meant that party rule was considered unproblematic and blinded the Bolsheviks to the dangers of a new ruling class developing, the state bureaucracy.³⁷

An ideology prejudice for centralisation and top-down structures simply disempowered the masses and produced bureaucracy.

The vision of socialism as centralised planning and nationalisation helped undermine workers' self-management of production **and** helped produce economic disruption and mismanagement on an epic scale.

Moreover, social relationships played their role. Hierarchical power corrupts those who exercise it while centralisation simply empowers the few, not the many. Both produce isolation from masses. Ultimately, can we expect the Bolsheviks to act other than their actual social position implies? To do so implies philosophical idealism at its worse.

In short, bad ideology mad a bad situation worse – and destroyed the socialistic tendencies within the revolution.

³⁶ See section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

³⁷ See section H.3.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

This is not in *State and Revolution* and the key problem is that it is vanguard gets to determines what is “wavering” – and “wavering” seems to be defined as disagreeing with the vanguard. Worse, **by definition**, everyone is “backward” compared to vanguard and this gives party the right, **nay the duty**, to destroy workers liberty.

This, by necessity, requires a state in the normal sense of the word. To quote Bakunin: “a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.”³³

But they had to do it...

I’m sure many Marxists will be thinking “ah, typical anarchist, not mentioning the civil war.” True, I have not mentioned the civil war and for a good reason – the authoritarian policies of the Bolsheviks (disbanding soviets, one-man management, and so on) began **before** the civil war started in late May 1918. Moreover, Lenin and Trotsky both stressed policies **not** driven by it.³⁴

Then there is the typical Leninist argument that the working class had become “declassed”, atomised and had disappeared so necessitating Bolshevik rule on the workers behalf. This was first postulated by Lenin in response to upsurge workers protest and collective action, **not** its absence. And while the working class was smaller post-1917 there were still strikes, strike waves, general strikes in 1918, 1919, 1920 and 1921. Simply put, a “disappeared” class does not need martial law to break its revolt.³⁵

In response, Marxists tend to push start of civil war back to the seizure of power in 1917. Fine, do so, but please rip up *State and Revolution*... You cannot have it both ways.

³³ See section H.3.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

³⁴ See section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

³⁵ See section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

On the 9th of July 2011, I debated “Marxism and Anarchism” with the Leninist group *Alliance for Workers Liberty* at their conference “Ideas for Freedom.” This article is based on the notes I used and reproduces the content of my contribution.

Obviously writing my notes up will make them more polished than my actual talk. While this article is not identical to what I said on the day, it is close enough – although I am sure better in parts (particularly the bits I had to skim because of the time being cut by 5 minutes). It does, as I said, produce the content of what I said even if not the exact words. I have also taken the liberty of end-noting my claims with links to appropriate references (usually, *An Anarchist FAQ* but not always).

I produced a leaflet for the event entitled “*The AWL Versus Anarchism*” which contrasted what the AWL said about anarchism and what anarchists actually advocate.

I had previously debated with them in 2003 under the title *Marxism or Anarchism*. My thoughts on the experience of attending the conference can be found here. Most, but not all, quotes can be found in *An Anarchist FAQ* – the others will be in references provided.

Thanks for inviting me. It is nice to have a debate – unlike the SWP who lecture for 40 minutes on what *they* think anarchism is, here you get an anarchist explaining it.¹

However, it is fair to say that regardless of Marx’s contributions to the socialist project (and there are many, such as his analysis of capitalism) Marxism has failed. Worse, it has been disaster for socialism and has done more to put people off it than anything else. Yet, fair enough, Marxists *are* keeping Marx’s comment alive: “history repeats itself, first time as tragedy, second time as farce.”

¹ See “*Through the Looking Glass: Anarchist Adventures at Marxism 2001*”; also see “*The Dead Dogma Sketch*” and “*The SWP Versus Anarchism*”

And the first time *was* tragedy! As predicted by Bakunin, Social Democracy became reformist while Bolshevism was dictatorship *over* the proletariat.²

Sadly, Marxists seem keen to repeat all that. They are simply not learning from history. Unsurprisingly, the state of the left in Britain is truly farcical.

What is Anarchism?

First off, I need to state that there are different kinds of Marxism, some (like the council communists) are closer to anarchism. I also must note that it is not the 19th century any more, something which seems to be lost on many Marxists when they write about anarchism. Also, we are NOT Proudhonists, Bakuninists, whoeverists. However, I will need to quote them to prove standard anarchist positions which Marxists seem unaware of.

So what is anarchism? Well, anarchist from the start has been Anti-Statist *and* Anti-Capitalist. Since 1840, with the publication of *What is Property?*, anarchists have argued that capital/wage-labour is inherently oppressive and exploitative. Hence Proudhon's argument that "*property is theft*" (exploitation) and "*property is despotism*" (oppressive/authoritarian).³

Not that Marxists seem to be aware, with Engels proclaiming (against Bakunin) that anarchism "*does not regard capital ... but the **state** as the main enemy.*" Strange, given he had read Proudhon's *What is Property?* Moreover, he must have been aware that Bakunin argued repeatedly that anarchists pursue "*simultaneously ... economic and political revolution*", namely "*complete destruction*

² See section H.1.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

³ As discussed in the introduction of *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (AK Press, 2011); also see "*I am an Anarchist: 170 Years of Anarchism*"

bureaucrats (5 million plus by 1920, which was 5 times more than industrial workers) and imprisoned workers, peasants, anarchists and other socialists.

Worse, by start of 1919 party dictatorship was a publicly stated ideological truism. This was help by Trotsky to his death. In 1937, for example, he proclaimed that the "*dictatorship of a party*" is an "*objective necessity.*" The "*revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.*"³²

Who rules in the workers state?

Which raises the question, was the working class the ruling class in the workers' state? Obviously not!

Ironically, in 1933, Trotsky proclaimed in all seriousness that in Stalinist Russia "*[s]o long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.*" This is understandable, as the workers' social position was same as in 1918 when *he* was in charge.

As Bakunin argued, the state is top-down rule by a minority. This was confirmed by Lenin in 1905 when he argued for "*pressure from above,*" which was "*pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.*" Fifteen years later he repeated this to the Cheka, stating that "*revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.*" The same year saw him proclaim that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.*" It could be exercised "*only by a vanguard.*" Trotsky, in the late 1930s, argued that the vanguard holds state power and has to use it against "*backward layers of the proletariat.*"

³² See section H.1.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see "*Did Trotsky keep alive Leninism's 'democratic essence'?*"

Unsurprisingly, these politics, policies and structures made a bad situation much, much worse.²⁹

The Bolsheviks became isolated from the masses (as they themselves admitted) while soviet executives accrued more power. The economy collapsed as bureaucracy mismanaged it. As an anarchist predicted, the economy had been disrupted by revolution. As we also predicted, to quote Kropotkin, a “*strongly centralised Government*” running the economy **WAS** “*undesirable*” and “*wildly Utopian*.” For example, the central economic body did not even know how many workplaces it was managing!³⁰

In short, the regime experienced the problems of the Commune but on a far bigger scale.

Unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks started to lose public support. In April 1918, Trotsky had proclaimed that workers can “*dismiss that government and appoint another*.” Yet when they tried the Bolsheviks gerrymandered soviets and disbanded any elected with non-Bolshevik majorities. They even gerrymandered the 5th All-Russian Congress of soviets, denying the Left-SRs their rightful majority (so a lesson for all Leninists there, make sure you control the credentials committee!). Needless to say, they repressed the strikes and protests which broke out in response to these and other actions.³¹

So within a year of seizing power there was a *de facto* dictatorship of one party and the soviets were fig-leaf for party power. This, incidentally, reflected Lenin’s 1907 comment that the Bolsheviks should “*utilise*” the soviets “*for the purpose of developing*” the party and once successful then the soviets “*may actually become superfluous*.”

It was a centralised, top-down, bureaucratic state capitalist regime with a non-democratic military and a political police, the Cheka. The only things the system seemed able to produce were

²⁹ See section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

³⁰ See section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see section I.1.2

³¹ See section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see section H.6.3

of the State” and “[a]ll productive capital and instruments of labour ... confiscated” by workers associations.⁴

Moreover, we are anti-state because we recognise it as an instrument of the owning class. To quote Bakunin: “*The State is authority, domination, and force, organised by the property-owning ... classes against the masses*.”⁵

To ensure this task, the state has evolved a specific structure – centralised, top-down, hierarchical – to exclude the masses from participation in social life. Thus states, to again quote Bakunin, are “*machines governing the masses from above*.”⁶

Revolutionary anarchism stands for class struggle, class organisation and class power.⁷

We reject “political action”, what Marx imposed on the First International, so splitting it, namely forming political parties and standing candidates in elections in order to seize “political power.” In contrast, we are in favour of unions, **direct** action (strikes, occupations, etc.), solidarity.⁸

I could quote Bakunin and Kropotkin on unions, class struggle, and so on, but I won’t (you can find more than enough quotes in my leaflet). Instead I’ll quote someone you may have read, Marx. Marx wrote that Bakunin argued workers “*must only organise themselves by trades-unions*” and “*the International ... will supplant ... all existing states*.” Which summarises Bakunin’s syndicalist ideas well, ideas that Marxists usually deny Bakunin had.⁹

Bakunin himself argued that strikes “*create, organise, and form a workers’ army*” which will “*break*” the “*bourgeoisie and the State*,”

⁴ See section H.2.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

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

⁶ See section H.3.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

⁷ See section H.2.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

⁸ See section J.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

⁹ See section H.2.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see “*Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism*”

and lay the ground for a new world.” And this notion of building the new world in the old is an important one in anarchism.¹⁰

This position seems common-sense to me. As a union member, I want a union run on **socialist** principles, not capitalist ones. I want workers and strikers assemblies. I want mandated and recallable delegates. I want my union run from the bottom-up by its members, not top-down by a few leaders/bureaucrats.¹¹ I want One Big Union not only because we have one boss and so need one union to fight them but also because, after revolution, I want my workplace run by an association of **all** workers.¹²

Ultimately, how do people become able to manage society if they do not directly manage their own organisations and struggles today?

In short, the anarchist position was produced by the class struggle itself.

Obviously, if spontaneity was enough by itself otherwise we would be living in a free society. So we also argue for anarchists to organise **as anarchists**. These organisations encourage/support movements **within** but **against** capitalism and work within these as equals, providing a leadership of ideas. We aim to **influence** the class struggle and organise to win the battle of ideas.¹³

Social Revolution

We organise in order to transform society and so we see revolutionary unions or workers councils as the means to both fight **and** replace capitalism. As Bakunin argued, “*the new social order*” will be created by “*the social ... organisation and power of the working masses.*”¹⁴

¹⁰ See section H.1.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see section I.2.3

¹¹ See section J.5.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

¹² See section I.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

¹³ See section J.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

¹⁴ See section I.2.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

an executive power **above** the soviets. So much for *State and Revolution* – it did not last the night!²⁶

Still, after 4 days the government simply decreed **itself** legislative power – the Bolshevik regime was like the anti-Commune. This, however, fitted in with Lenin’s 1905 statement that “*the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy*” was “*to proceed from the top downward.*”²⁷

This top-down perspective can also be seen when Trotsky, in April 1918, argued that the government can appoint people from above as it “*better able to judge in the matter than you*” (i.e., the masses). He asked the question of whether government act “*against the interests of the ... masses?*” His answer was incredulous: “*there can be no antagonism between the government and ... the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and ... its members.*”

As a union member, I have to wonder what he was smoking when he proclaimed that gem! Suffice to say, look at your own papers for evidence to refute that claim!

All in all, the Bolshevik regime proved Bakunin right: “*By popular government [Marxists] mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people.*”

Economically, Lenin publicly called for “*state capitalism.*” He ignored the factory committees’ suggestions and instead utilised Tsarist structures as the framework for socialism. In workplace he he urged and imposed “*dictatorial*” one-man management.²⁸

Trotsky proclaimed in the spring of 1918 elections “*politically purposeless and technically inexpedient*” and “*abolished by decree*” in the army.

²⁶ See section H.1.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

²⁷ See section H.3.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

²⁸ See section H.3.13 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see “*Anti-Capitalism or State-Capitalism?*”

at economic transformation, specifically the expropriation of property.²²

And I must note, if Marx *did* conclude state had to be smashed this was quickly forgotten. Within a few months he was arguing that a democratic state **could** be seized and reformed by voting. Indeed, for Engels the “*democratic republic*” was “*the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat.*”²³

So unlike Bakunin, there is no call for workers organisations (whether unions or councils) to be the framework of a socialist society in Marx and Engels. We would need to wait **5 decades** for Marxists to draw that conclusion.

The Russian Revolution

It was Lenin’s *State and Revolution* which proclaimed the importance of workers councils. Suffice to say, that work distorts anarchism (and Marxism, but that is another story!) Indeed most of what it argues is “Marxism” was expounded **first** by Bakunin!

But that is the election manifesto, anarchists are interested in Bolshevism in power.²⁴

It is fair to state that the overarching aim of the Bolsheviks was party power and that the soviets seen as the means to that end. Thus we find Lenin arguing in 1917 that the Bolsheviks must “*take over full state power alone.*”²⁵

Which is precisely what they did do. Immediately after the seizure of power, the Bolshevik Central Committee publicly argued that “*a purely Bolshevik government*” was “*impossible to refuse*” since “*a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets*” had “*handed power over to this government.*” In short,

²² As discussed in “*The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism*”

²³ See section H.3.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

²⁴ See section A.5.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; also see the appendix “*The Russian Revolution*”

²⁵ See section H.3.11 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

Kropotkin, for example, argued that unions are “*natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future social order.*” Bakunin, as well as supporting unions, also argued for workers councils. Thus “*the Alliance of all labour associations*” will “*constitute the Commune*” based on delegates “*with binding mandates*” and are “*accountable and revocable.*”

Which makes a mockery of Lenin’s claim that anarchists “*absolutely no idea of what the proletariat will put in [the state’s] place.*” Obviously another Marxist who has not read any anarchist books!¹⁵

We have always argued for a federation of communes/councils to co-ordinate struggle and activity during a revolution. Not to mention to defend it. Hence we find Bakunin arguing for “*a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation*” and so communes must “*federate ... for common defence.*” Anarchist opposition to the Marxists “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” had nothing to do with the issue of defending a revolution.¹⁶

This new social structure would not be a state because it is organised from the bottom-up, decentralised, federal. It based on the mass participation the state has evolved to exclude. And this fact is dimly recognised by Marxists, as can be seen by their comments on the so-called workers’ state being a “*semi-state*” and “*not a state in the normal sense of the word.*”¹⁷

Socialism from Below or Marxism?

Anarchists sum this up as revolution “*from below*” or the “*bottom up*” – or, these days, *socialism from below*.

This can be traced back to Proudhon’s comments in 1846 that utopian socialism makes “*social life descend from above, and social-*

¹⁵ See section H.1.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

¹⁶ See section H.2.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; Also see section I.5.5

¹⁷ See section H.3.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

ism maintains that it springs up and grows from below.” He turned to this theme in 1848 revolution, arguing that from above “signifies power” while “**from below** signifies the people” and “the initiative of the masses.” He argued for a “revolution **from below**”, one “by the experience of the workers” and by “means of liberty.”

He argued that the “organisation of popular societies was the fulcrum of democracy” and urged the creation of proletarian committees in opposition to bourgeois state: “a new society be founded in the heart of the old society” The aim was a “vast federation” of “democratically organised workers’ associations” based on “social ownership” of land and industry. He rightly called nationalisation “wage-labour” – state capitalism, in other words.¹⁸

Revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin echoed this. Thus “popular revolution” Bakunin argued would “create its own organisation from the bottom upwards and from the circumference inwards ... not from the top downwards and from the centre outwards, as in the way of authority.”

Compared this to Marx. In 1850: he argued for “the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority ... the strictest centralisation.” He stressed that “revolutionary activity” must “proceed with full force from the centre” and that we must “not ... be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government.” There was no mention of workers self-management, rather he argued for “the concentration of ... productive forces ... in the hands of the state.”¹⁹

In short, the kind of “from above” revolution and state capitalism Proudhon denounced two years previously.²⁰

¹⁸ As discussed in the introduction of *Property is Theft!*; also see section B.3.5 and section I.3.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

¹⁹ See section H.1.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

²⁰ See section H.3.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

The Paris Commune

Still, in 1871 and the Paris Commune Marx changed his tune and apparently came to the conclusion that Proudhon had been right after all.

And it is important to remember that Marx sounded very libertarian in *The Civil War in France* because he was reporting on a **libertarian** influenced revolt. The Paris section of the First International and the minority in Council were mutualists. Indeed, the Commune’s *Declaration to the French People* which Marx referenced was written by a follower of Proudhon.²¹

Unsurprisingly, then, we discover the features of the Commune Marx praised in 1871 were first expounded by anarchists beforehand. Mandating and recalling delegates? Proudhon argued for that in 1848; while Bakunin did so in the 1860s. Creating “working bodies”? Proudhon again in 1848, Bakunin in the 1860s. A bottom-up federation of Communes? Proudhon, Bakunin. A federation of workers associations? Proudhon, Bakunin.

So the revolt had significant libertarian elements. However, Anarchist analysis argued it did not go far enough. The Commune showed the pressing need for federalism outwith **AND** within the commune.

Obviously the Commune was isolated in France and needed others to revolt and federate with. However, the Commune’s Council also became isolated from masses. According to one Marxist it was “overwhelmed” by suggestions, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.” From this, anarchists concluded that a revolution needed mass participation/initiative – not waiting for a few leaders – to succeed. Hence the need for federalism within the Commune. Moreover, there had been no real attempt

²¹ See section A.5.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*; see also the introduction of *Property is Theft!*