

Maurice Brinton's "For Workers' Power"

Anarcho

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Maurice Brinton was the pseudonym under which Christopher Pallis (1923–2005) wrote and translated for the British libertarian socialist group **Solidarity** from 1960 until the early 1990s. He was its leading and most influential member, unsurprisingly given the quality and insightfulness of his work, and his ideas still influence many today across the world.

Brinton's translations of libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis work (under the pseudonym "Paul Cardan") contributed immensely to enriching libertarian politics in the English speaking world. Indeed, many of his translations were used as the basis of the essential three volume collection of Castoriadis' work entitled "**Political and Social Writings.**" However, Brinton's own work was just as important (and in many ways, wider in scope) than Castoriadis's as can be seen from this collection. The book has a diverse range of documents: as well as articles on numerous subjects, there are reviews, introductions to other people's works and his own pamphlets. The latter include the classics "*The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*" and "*The Irrational in Politics*"; the former a ground-breaking account of the Russian Revolution and the latter a popular introduction into the ideas of revolutionary psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich which explores the role of sexual repression and authoritarian conditioning in creating obedience to hierarchy and so the continuance of class society.

Especially noteworthy are his vivid eye-witness reports from upsurges of popular self-activity: the Belgian General Strike of 1960–61, France in May 1968, and Portugal in 1975 and 1976. These really are windows into what is possible once people start to shake off their chains and feel they have power over their own fates. Also of note is the short and clear summary of libertarian socialist ideas called "**As We See It**" and the subsequent commentary on that work required to combat some of the stranger interpretations it received ("**As We Don't See it**"). To quote a classic paragraph from the former document shows why:

*"**Meaningful action**, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the egalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. **Sterile and harmful action** is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others – even by those allegedly acting on their behalf." (**As We See it**)*

Freedom was at the core of Brinton's vision of (libertarian) socialism, as he stressed time and time again in the articles that make up this collection. He knew that genuinely libertarian politics had to be anti-capitalist, as both it and Stalinism *"both seek to subordinate the great majority to the needs of their ruling groups. The rulers attempt to stamp of obedience and conformity on every aspect of social life. Initiative, intellectual independence, creativeness are crushed and despised. Unless man can develop to the full these — his most precious qualities — he lives but half a live. Men want to be more than well-fed servants. The desire to be free is not a pious liberal phrase, but the most noble of man's desires. The pre-condition of this freedom is, of course, freedom in the field of production — workers' management. There can be no real freedom and no real future for humanity in an exploiting society. The path to freedom lies through the socialist revolution."* No serious anarchist could disagree.

A key part of his work was to study past revolutions, particularly the Russian, in order learn from the past and not repeat it. This meant critiquing Leninism. Brinton's work is important in that, while coming from a Leninist background, he quickly saw the limitations not only of that form of Marxism but Marxism as such (in this he was like his major influence, Castoriadis). While (rightly) not dismissing Marx out of hand, he was now free, again like Castoriadis, to explore ideas and current events without dragging the deadweight of having to justify his insights by quoting from the books of long dead Germans (or their approved followers). Having come through the Leninist myth, he was well placed to destroy it which he did in his most important and influential work, **"The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution."**

This is a seminal work and, like the work of Goldman, Berkman, Voline and Arshinov, Brinton's masterpiece on the Bolshevik counter-revolution has been confirmed by subsequent investigation and research. In great detail, Brinton documents the anti-worker economic policies of the Bolshevik regime and shows beyond any doubt their links with their pre-revolution ideas on what socialism, workers' control and self-management were. It is a very well-researched piece of history, chronicling the economic aspects of the Russian revolution and recounting the battles that occurred in the workplace between different visions of socialism and what they meant in practice. It utterly explodes the myth of Bolshevism, showing that claims to be building "workers' power" to be false. Far from creating a society based on socialism and freedom, the Bolshevik vision of socialism helped destroy their possibility. He traces the elimination of the Russian factory committees of 1917–18 and the role Bolshevik ideology and policy played in it. He shows that the standard claim that Bolshevik authoritarianism started as a result of the civil war is not supported by the facts.

He summarised his findings:

"there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practices of Stalinism. We know that many on the revolutionary left will find this statement hard to swallow. We are convinced however that any honest reading of the facts cannot but lead to this conclusion. The more one unearths about this period the more difficult it becomes to define — or even to see — the 'gulf' allegedly separating what happened in Lenin's time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept ... that the whole course of events was 'historically inevitable' and 'objectively determined'. Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every

critical stage of this critical period. Now that more facts are available self-mystification on these issues should no longer be possible. Should any who have read these pages remain 'confused' it will be because they want to remain in that state — or because (as the future beneficiaries of a society similar to the Russian one) it is their interest to remain so."

Brinton, quite rightly, argues that workers cannot be free as long as they are subjugated in production. Workers cannot have power in society without having complete power over production. As he put it, *"the basic question, who manages production after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie? should therefore now become the centre of any serious discussion about socialism. Today the old equation (liquidation of the bourgeoisie equals workers' state) popularised by countless Leninists, Stalinists and Trotskyists is just not good enough."* Consequently, socialism has to be based on self-management otherwise it would be state capitalism, nothing more.

It cannot be stressed enough how important and ground-breaking this work is. Brinton made clear the distinction of "workers' control" and "workers' self-management." The former is based on the workers having some say in the decisions others make on their behalf, the latter directly making the decisions that affect them in production. Obviously, only the latter is libertarian and while some anarchists have used the term "workers' control" they have always meant "self-management." Brinton shows that the Bolsheviks at no time supported workers' self-management and only took up the slogan "workers' control" to gain influence in the workplace. Rather than base the new socialist economy on the organs workers had created themselves, as anarchists argued, Bolshevism saw these (at best) playing a minor role within an economy structured around institutions created by and inherited from capitalism. As Brinton stressed, *"only the ignorant or those willing to be deceived can still kid themselves into believing that proletarian power at the point of production was ever a fundamental tenet or objective of Bolshevism."*

All this is not some academic point. As Brinton noted in **"The Malaise on the Left"**, while *"various strands of Bolshevism have sought posthumously to rehabilitate the concept of 'workers' control'"* the facts show that between 1917 and 1921 *"all attempts by the working class to assert real power over production — or to transcend the narrow role allocated by to it by the Party — were smashed by the Bolsheviks, after first having been denounced as anarchist or anarcho-sindicalist deviations. Today workers' control is presented as a sort of sugar coating to the pill of nationalisation of every Trotskyist or Leninist micro-bureaucrat on the make. Those who strangled the viable infant are now hawking the corpse around "*The same is happening today, with Leninists now proclaiming with a straight face that they stand for "self-management"! As such, reprinting Brinton's classic work will provide genuine revolutionaries with the necessary facts and ideas to combat what Brinton called the "tradleft" ("traditional left") who, then as now, infest social struggles and movements in order to use them to expand their party and, in the process, kill them off — while, ironically, alienating from socialism most of those they do manage to recruit.

Needless to say, what the Bolsheviks meant by "workers' control" and what the workers did was radically at odds. Initially, the Bolsheviks saw this as workers "controlling" their bosses within the context of general state control of the capitalist economy (for Lenin, "state capitalism" was an inevitable and essential stage towards socialism). Needless to say, this was significantly different from what the factory committee movement thought of as "workers' control" (or, for that matter, the casual observer today). Once in power, the Bolsheviks imposed their vision of

the term. As historian S.A. Smith correctly summarises in his in depth study of the revolution in Petrograd's workplaces, while the "factory committees launched the slogan of workers' control of production quite independently of the Bolshevik party. It was not until May that the party began to take it up" Lenin used "the term in a very different sense from that of the factory committees." His "proposals ... [were] thoroughly statist and centralist in character, whereas the practice of the factory committees was essentially local and autonomous." (**Red Petrograd**, p. 154)

It soon became a case of socialism being based on state appointed managers (who would be given, in Lenin's words, "dictatorial" powers) and all talk of workers' control was dropped in favour of state control and one-man management. The Bolsheviks, as Lenin had promised, built from the top-down their system of "unified administration" based on the Tsarist system of central bodies which governed and regulated certain industries during the war. So within six months of the October revolution, Lenin had replaced private capitalism with state capitalism. It is this process, and its ideological roots, which Brinton chronicles so ably.

Brinton's pamphlet was (and is) essentially ignored by the Leninist left, for obvious reasons. His reply to one attempt to refute his account is included in "**For Workers' Power.**" In the unlikely event of other Leninists trying to address Brinton's arguments rather than ignore them, the standard Leninist excuse will probably be trotted out, namely accusing him of ignoring the breakdown of Russian industry in the period in question. This is done presumably in the hope there would be a relationship between economic chaos and Bolshevik authoritarianism. However, the strength of Brinton's account is that he links the pre- and post- revolutionary ideas and policies in order to show their similarities. Consequently, the infamous "objective circumstances" excuse trotted out by Leninists fails to refute Brinton's work. As the Bolsheviks themselves stressed, the policies implemented were not emergency ones imposed by difficult circumstances. Moreover, Lenin (at least in early 1918, the last time it was discussed) made a point of arguing (against the left-communists) that his apparently new "state-capitalist" policies had already been expressed by him during 1917!

And the net result of Bolshevism's vision of a centralised economy structured around the institutions created under capitalism? Pretty much a disaster, as Silvana Malle's **The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918–1921** shows. Ironically, while the Bolsheviks (and their latter day followers) blamed workers' control (in part) for the terrible state of the economy (so necessitating Bolshevik policies of one-man management, *et al*) the opposite is the case. The Bolshevik system quickly demonstrated how to really mismanage an economy as they imposed a bureaucratic and unresponsive system which wasted the local knowledge in the grassroots in favour of orders from above which were issued in ignorance of local conditions. Unused stock coexisted with acute scarcity and the centre unable to determine the correct proportions required at the base. Unfinished products were transferred to other regions while local factories were shut down, wasted both time and resources (and given the state of the transport network, this was a doubly inefficient). The inefficiency of central financing seriously jeopardised local activity and the centre had displayed a great deal of conservatism and routine thinking. In spite of the complaints from below, the Communist leadership continued on its policy of centralisation (in fact, the ideology of centralisation was reinforced).

There are flaws with the book of course. While Brinton mentioned some political developments in his chronology, he failed to interlink the economic and political policies of Bolshevism as well as he could have. This, of course, would have increased the length of the book considerably but Bolshevik authoritarian policies were not limited to just undermining economic democracy. To

be fair, source material was not as available then as it is now (Israel Getzler's "**Martov**" and Leonard Schapiro's "**The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**" contained some relevant information on this matter). Today, Brinton's account can be supplemented by subsequent work which discusses the Bolshevik onslaught on soviet democracy in the spring of 1918, for example (Vladimir Brovkin's "**The Mensheviks After October**" provides a good summary). Similarly, at the time there was little source material on working class resistance to, and organisation against, Bolshevism. Today, that is not the case. There are many works available which account, in varying degrees of detail, workers resistance to the "workers" state and "revolutionary" government (Jonathan Aves' "**Workers Against Lenin**" being the best one). These show beyond doubt that the standard Leninist account of an "atomised" or "declassed" working class is false. Simply put, such a working class does not conduct general strikes nor need martial law to tame.

In summary, subsequent research has strengthened Brinton's analysis rather than refuted it. The same cannot be said of the various Leninist hagiographies written at around the same time (or since).

Then there is his obvious sympathy with such dissident Bolsheviks as the 1918 **Left Communists** (LC) and the 1920–1 **Workers Opposition** (WO). By concentrating on their economic ideas, Brinton fails to see how their political vision (particularly on the role of the party) undermined their socialist credentials. For the LC, like any Bolshevik, the party played the key role. As one Left Communist put it, the only true bastion of the interests of the proletariat was the party which "*is in every case and everywhere superior to the soviets ... The soviets represent labouring democracy in general; and its interest, and in particular the interests of the petty bourgeois peasantry, do not always coincide with the interests of the proletariat.*" (quoted by Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 182). Thus, according to the only in depth study of the LC, their "*call for a revived soviet democracy was becoming vitiated by the dominant role assigned, in the final analysis, to the party*" (Ronald I. Kowalski, **The Bolshevik Party in Conflict**, p. 136) Thus their politics were just as authoritarian as the mainstream Bolshevism they attacked on economic issues.

The same can be said of the WO. While Brinton states that they and the Kronstadt rebels had much in common, the facts are different — they did not share the same vision. True, the WO did see an increased role for trade unions within the Soviet regime but not at the expense of party power. Like their opponents within the CP, they stood for party dictatorship and the guiding role of the party in the unions and only differed in that they wanted increased democracy and freedom within the party and an increased role for the trade unions in production. (Leonard Schapiro, **The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 294) In contrast, the Kronstadt rebels stood for genuine workers' democracy in both economic and political spheres and had most in common with the SR-Maximalists, a political grouping popular in Kronstadt during 1917 whose politics were between the Left-SRs and the anarchists. As such, while Brinton was puzzled by members of the WO helping to storm Kronstadt, the contradiction is more apparent than real.

It would also have been useful for Brinton to link Bolshevik ideology and policy to the Marxist tradition. Looking at Lenin's pronouncements of early 1918, it is not difficult to see where he got them from — the same stupidities can be found in Engels' infamous diatribe against anarchism "**On Authority.**" Sadly, Brinton tended to distance himself from anarchism and the insights it offers to genuine revolutionaries. If he had been better acquainted with, say, Kropotkin he would have been aware that he had predicted many of the problems facing the Russian Revolution (such as isolation, economic disruption, mass unemployment) and had suggested solutions to

them (rooted in the mass participation and popular self-organisation Brinton's own politics are). While eschewing the anarchist label may have allowed him to avoid the petty and silly arguments that so frequent what passes for an anarchist movement in the UK, it also ensured that a rich source of realistic revolutionary ideas was effectively ignored. This ignorance still exists today as can be seen when Marxists claim that anarchists think that libertarian communism can be created overnight. In reality, Kropotkin ridiculed that notion and stressed the difficulties any revolt would face.

So while his politics were extremely close to communist-anarchism (editor David Goodway calls them "*fully anarchist*" in his excellent introduction), Brinton's perspectives on anarchism were too shaded by his Leninist background (and, unfortunately, the state of the UK anarchist movement in the 1960s and 70s did little to disabuse him of such opinions). This can be seen from his review of Paul Avrich's book "**The Russian Anarchists.**" While he is right to bemoan the anti-organisational and anti-theoretical tendencies of Russian anarchism (something all too commonly shared in the English speaking anarchist movement), he does get basic things wrong, like Kropotkin's ideas on the role of "*Mutual Aid*" in society (his comment on Kropotkin "*idealis[ing] the autonomous social units of a bygone age*" is equally ill-informed).

Brinton's dismissal of Kropotkin is based on Avrich's summary of his ideas rather than a reading of the source material. While Brinton quotes Avrich maintaining that, for Kropotkin, "*co-operation rather than conflict is at the root of the historical process*" the fact is Kropotkin said no such thing. In reality, Kropotkin stressed that mutual aid was a **factor** in evolution along with mutual struggle. At no time did he deny the role of struggle, in fact the opposite. In "**Mutual Aid**" itself he stressed that the book's examples concentrated on mutual aid simply because mutual struggle (between individuals of the same species) had been emphasised so much in biology that he felt no need to illustrate it. He did note that based on the findings he summarised the relative importance of each factor may have to be reviewed but at no stage did he deny either factor (unlike the bourgeois apologists he was refuting).

Equally, regardless of what Brinton thought "**Mutual Aid**" was not amongst Kropotkin's "*earlier*" writings. His actual earliest writings (as compiled in "**Words of a Rebel**", "**Conquest of Bread**" and, more recently, "**Act for Yourselves**") are clearly based on class struggle and only someone who had never read Kropotkin could claim, as Brinton did, that his "*aim is to convince and reason with (rather than to overthrow) those who oppress the masses*" and that he stood for "*a co-operation that clearly transcended the barriers of class.*" The reality is different. To quote one of Kropotkin's "*earlier*" works: "*What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits? Between the head of an army and the soldier? Between the governing and the governed?*" (**Words of a Rebel**, p. 30) Clearly Kropotkin was well aware that co-operation could not be applied between classes.

Even "**Mutual Aid**" (which was essentially a work of popular science rather than a book of revolutionary anarchist propaganda) was not blind to the importance of social struggle, highlighting as it did trade unions and strikes was examples of "*the workers' need of mutual support*" (one which developed in the face of extensive state repression). Nor was it blind to the fact that individuals struggle "*to attain personal or caste superiority*" but simply noted that these "*conflicts ... have been analysed, described, and glorified from time immemorial*" and so history, "*such as it has hitherto been written, is almost entirely a description of the ways and means by which theocracy, military power, autocracy, and ...the richer classes' rule have been promoted, established, and maintained.*" Social progress lay in the practices and organisations of the oppressed for "*in so*

far as” as new “*economical and social institutions*” were “*a creation of the masses*” they “*have all originated from the same source*” of mutual aid. (**Mutual Aid**, p. 213, p. 231, p. 180) These are hardly the comments of someone who ignored class conflict and the role it played in society!

Brinton does provide a quote from “**Mutual Aid**” to bolster his argument, but that is taken out of context. Rather than stress the need for inter-class solidarity, as Brinton claimed, Kropotkin was in fact explaining why members of the ruling and middle classes turn their back on capitalist morality and become philanthropists, reformers or (like Kropotkin and Brinton himself) revolutionaries. Thus, Kropotkin argued, feelings of human solidarity can surface in even the most unlikely of places, including those who have benefited from the current competitive system. However, the focus of his those parts of “**Mutual Aid**” which dealt with humanity was on popular organisation of solidarity and how it expressed itself at different times. As part of this, Kropotkin showed how these institutions changed in the face of changes in the society (i.e. due to the rise of classes and hierarchies and popular resistance to them).

While this may seem an incredibly trivial point, this misunderstanding (or ignorance) of Kropotkin’s arguments in “**Mutual Aid**” does seem to crop up whenever Leninists try to address anarchist ideas (a classic example would be the SWP’s Pat Stack and his embarrassingly inaccurate diatribe “*Anarchy in the UK?*” which appeared a few years back in “**Socialist Review**”). As such, clarifying the facts of the matter may help anarchists to counter such nonsense when it is repeated in the future (as it will be, regardless of how many times it is refuted). It is a shame that Brinton, like the Leninists he had so recently left, did not bother to acquaint himself with anarchist ideas before deciding to attack them.

Brinton, like Solidarity as a whole, was marked by his complete rejection of Leninism and the concept of the vanguard party. Instead, like his intellectual mentor Cornelias Castoriadis and the council communists, he advocated of workers councils as both the means to fight capitalism and the basic building blocks of a socialist society. In this, his ideas echo the best traditions of anarchism rather than Marxism (it was Bakunin and the libertarian wing of the First International who first raised this idea in the 1860s). It took Marxists until 1917 before a “councilist” interpretation of Marx’s ideas on the state became mainstream within it thanks, ironically, to Lenin’s “**State and Revolution**” (needless to say, that book’s libertarian rhetoric was quickly jettisoned once the Bolsheviks were in power). Before then, the dominant idea was that a workers’ party would be elected to power democratically and the state machine destroyed by decree (this interpretation, it should be said, has far more support in Marx and Engels than Lenin’s highly selective account would suggest).

Some have attacked this “councilist” vision of revolutionary transition as being “self-exploitation” or “self-managed capitalism.” Others have argued that self-management is not a key aspect of socialism because it is not inherently socialist. Brinton himself effectively answered the latter claim by noting that while one “*could conceive of self-management without socialism*” it was impossible to “*imagine any socialism worth living under without self-managed individuals, collectives and institutions... **Who**, if not those directly involved, would have the greatest say in the fundamental decisions? And **how** would such a non-self-managed ‘socialist’ society differ from all the monstrous societies we see around us today, societies in which minorities take all the fundamental decisions, and — through their access to information and power — perpetuate their own privileges?*”

As for the “self-exploitation” argument, this hardly makes sense from a socialist perspective. Yes, basing your ideas on transition on a market system with self-managed economic units may

result in unpleasant consequences (for example, competition resulting in longer and harder working hours or driving the accumulation of means of production) but it is hardly exploitative in the socialist sense. This is because workers are controlling both their labour and its product. As such, it is not capitalism which, as both Proudhon and Marx stressed, requires the replacement of self-employment with wage labour. Given that no revolution has succeeded in immediately abolishing money and that any future revolution will not be as perfect as some would like, Brinton's and Castoriadis's position was sensible as a starting point.

Brinton correctly stressed that working class people, due to their position in society, resisted hierarchy and, as a consequence of their experiences, could draw revolutionary conclusion (helped, of course, by those who had already made that journey). As a necessary consequence of this perspective, he rightly viewed a revolutionary organisation as an instrument that working class people could use to transform society rather than seeking to lead them. In other words, the basic anarchist idea of revolutionaries influencing the class struggle as equals rather than as repositories of the correct revolutionary ideology which others should follow (whether they want to or not). As Bolshevism showed, the latter mentality leads to the inevitable substitution of party power for workers power.

Similarly, he was correct to stress that any revolutionary organisation should try to prefigure as much as possible the future society we want in its structure and decision-making, in other words by practising "self-management." Again, the similarities with anarchism are clear. Finally, Brinton was right to argue that a genuinely libertarian organisation had to encourage people to rely on their own efforts rather than trust in leaders. As he put it, *"We consider irrational (and/or dishonest) that those who talk most of the masses (and of the capacity of the working class to create a new society) should have the least confidence in people's ability to dispense with leaders."* (**"As We Don't See It"**)

His dismissal of Leninist organisation in the essay **"Revolutionary Organisation"** is short but devastating. He notes that while Leninists argue that *"to fight the highly centralised forces of modern capitalism requires an equally centralised type of party"* this *"ignores the fact that capitalist centralisation is based on coercion and force and the exclusion of the overwhelming majority of the population from participating in any of its decisions."* Equally, while Leninists claim that such organisations are robust under state repression in reality they are *"particularly vulnerable to police persecution"* for when *"all power is concentrated in the hands of the leaders, their arrest immediately paralyses the whole organisation ...With their usual inconsistency, the Trotskyists even explain the demise of their Western European sections during World War II by telling people how their leaders were murdered by the Gestapo!"*

There are aspects of this book which show its age. For example, the assumption, so common before the 1980s, that Russian-style state capitalism was a more rational and advanced form of capitalism. Looking back, this was obviously not the case. Bureaucratic waste and inefficiency marked the Leninist/Stalinist system from the start (any serious account of Lenin's "War Communist" regime cannot but conclude that the Bolshevik dogma of centralisation made matters much worse). Of course, this was obscured by the rapid industrialisation of Russia under Stalin and anti-Soviet propaganda by Western states to justify their own spying and weapons budgets (an honest account of the failings of Stalinism would hardly provoke the fear required). Then there is the notion, again so common before 1974, that Keynesianism had ensured that major economic crises within capitalism had been solved. Brinton, to his credit, revised his views on this and by the early 1980s saw the limitations in Castoriadis's ideas which were based on this

perspective (in 1974 he denied that capitalism faced a crisis). Brinton did, however, keep the valid core of Castoriadis's economic analysis and continued to stress that class struggle was the real source of capitalism's problems and capitalist policies evolve to combat it (as can be seen, for example, from the rise and fall of Monetarism, for example).

Ultimately, these are minor issues. The core ideas of Brinton in terms of the importance of self-management, the need for revolutionary theory and practice to take into account all aspects of hierarchical society, his consistency and logic, remain as relevant today as when they were written. Anarchists have a lot to gain from reading this collection and AK Press should be applauded for making it available for a new generation of libertarian activists to read and, hopefully, apply.

Maurice Brinton, **For Workers' Power**, David Goodway (Ed.), AK Press, ISBN: 1904859070, 2004

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