

Libertarian Marxism?

Daniel Guérin

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“Be realistic, do the impossible”

A Libertarian Marx?

Marx’s famous address “The Civil War in France”, written in the name of the General Council of the International Working Mens Association two days after the crushing of the Paris Commune, is an inspiring text for Libertarians. Writing in the name of the International in which Bakunin had extensive influence, in it Marx revises some passages of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels had developed the notion of a proletarian evolution by stages. The first stage would be the conquest of political power, thanks to which the instruments of production, means of transport and credit system, would ‘by degrees’, be centralised in the hands of the State. Only after a long evolution, at a time when class antagonisms have disappeared and State power has lost its political nature, only then would all production be centered in the hands of ‘associated individuals’ instead of in the hands of the State. In this later libertarian type of association the free development of each would be the condition for the free development of all.

Bakunin, unlike French socialists, had been familiar with the Communist Manifesto in its original German since 1848 and didn’t miss a chance to criticise the way in which the revolution had been split into two stages – the first of which would be very strongly State controlled. He put it like this: “Once the State has installed itself as the only landowner... it will also be the only capitalist, banker, moneylender, organiser and director of all the nations work and distributor of its products. **This** is the ideal, the fundamental principle of modern communism.” What’s more: “This revolution will consist of the expropriation, either by stages or by violence, of the current landowners and capitalists, and of the appropriation of all land and capital by the State, which, so as to fulfil its great mission in both economic and political spheres, will necessarily have to be very powerful and highly centralised. With its hired engineers, and with disciplined armies of rural workers at its command, the State will administer and direct the cultivation of the land. At the same time it will set up in the ruins of all the existing banks, one single bank to oversee all production and every aspect of the nation’s commerce.” And again “We are told that in Marx’s people’s State there will be no privileged class. Everyone will be equal, not just legally and politically, but from the economic point of view. At least that’s the promise, although I doubt very much, considering the way they go about it and their proposed method, whether it’s a promise that can ever be kept. Apparently there will no longer be a privileged class, but there will be a government, and, note this well, an exceedingly complicated government, which would not simply govern and administer the masses in a political sense, as all present governments do, but which would also administer the economy, by concentrating in its own hands production, the fair distribution of wealth, the farming of the land, the establishment and development of trades, the organisation and control of commerce, and lastly the application of capital to production through the only banker, the State.”

Goaded by Bakunin’s criticisms, Marx and Engels felt the need to correct the overly statist ideas they had held in 1848. In a preface to a new edition of the *Manifesto*, dated 24 June 1872, they agreed that ‘in many respects’ they would give a ‘different wording’ to the passage in question of the 1848 text. They claimed support for this revision in (among others) “the practical experience gained first in the February Revolution (1848), and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, where the proletariat for the first time held political power for two whole months.” They

concluded that “This programme has in some details become antiquated.” One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purposes.” And the 1871 Address proclaims that the Commune is “the final discovery of the political form by which the economic emancipation of labour may be created.”

In his biography of Karl Marx, Franz Mehring also stresses that on this point ‘The Civil War in France’, to a certain extent, revises the Manifesto in which the dissolution of the State was certainly foreseen, but only as a long-term process. But later, after the death of Marx, Lehning assures us that Engels, struggling with Anarchist currents, had to drop this corrective and go back to the old ideas of the Manifesto.

The slightly over-rapid volte-face of the writer of the 1871 Address was always bound to arouse Bakunin’s scepticism; He wrote of the Commune: “It had such a great effect everywhere that even the Marxists, whose ideas had been proven wrong by the insurrection, found that they had to lift their hats respectfully to it. They did more; contrary to the simplest logic and to their own true feelings, they proclaimed that its programme and aim were theirs too. This was a farcical misrepresentation, but it was necessary. They had to do it — otherwise they would have been completely overwhelmed and abandoned, so powerful was the passion this revolution had stirred in everyone.”

Bakunin also observed: “It would appear that Engels, at the Hague Congress (Sept. 1872) was afraid of the terrible impression created by some pages of the Manifesto, and eagerly declared that this was an outdated document, whose ideas they (Marx & Engels) had personally abandoned. If he did say this, then he was lying, for just before the Congress the Marxists had been doing their best to spread this document into every country.”

James Guillaume, Bakunin’s disciple in the Jura Federation, reacted to reading the 1871 Address in similar terms: “This is an astonishing declaration of principle, in which Marx seems to have thrown over his own programme in favour of Federalist ideas. Has there been a genuine conversion of the author of *Capital*, or has he at any rate succumbed to a momentary enthusiasm under the force of events? Or was it a ploy, aimed at using apparent adherence to the programme of the Commune to gain the benefit of the prestige inseparable from that name?”

In our own day, Arthur Lehning, to whom we owe the learned edition of the Bakunin Archives — which are still being published — has also emphasised the contradiction between the ideas in the Address and those of all Marx’s other writings: “It is an irony of history that at the very moment when the struggle between the authoritarian and anti-authoritarian factions in the 1st International had reached its height, Marx, influenced by the enormous effect of the Parisian proletariat’s revolutionary uprising, had given voice to the ideas of that revolution, (which were the very opposite of those he represented) in such a way that one might call them the programme of the anti-authoritarian faction which (in the International) he was fighting by all means possible... There can be no doubt that the brilliant Address of the General Council... can find no place in the system of “scientific socialism”. The Civil War is extremely un-marxist... The Paris Commune had nothing in common with Marx’s State Socialism, but was much closer to Proudhon’s ideas and Bakunin’s federalist theories... According to Marx, the basic principle of the Commune was that the political centralism of the State had to be replaced with the workers governing themselves, and by the devolution of initiative onto a federation of small autonomous units, until such time as it was possible to put trust in the State... The Paris Commune did not aim at letting the State “wither away”, but at doing away with it immediately... The abolition of the State was no longer

to be the final, inevitable, outcome of a dialectical process of history, of a superior phase of social development, itself conditioned by a superior form of production.”

“The Paris Commune”, Lehning continues, “abolished the State without effecting a single one of the conditions previously laid down by Marx as a prelude to its abolition ... The defeat of the bourgeois State by the Commune was not with the aim of installing another State in its place... Its objective was not the founding of a new State machine, but the replacement of the State by social organisation on federalist economic bases... In ‘The Civil War’ it’s not a question of a ‘withering away’, but of an immediate and total abolition of the State.”

Likewise the marxologist Maximilien Rubel has admitted that: “It is undeniable that Marx’s idea of the proletariat’s conquest and suppression of the State found its definitive form in his Address on the Paris Commune, and that as such it differs from the idea given by the *Communist Manifesto*.”

Nevertheless there is disagreement between the two scholars: Lehning, who, for right or wrong, sees in Marx an ‘authoritarian’, asserts that the Address is a “foreign body in Marxist socialism, whereas Rubel, on the other hand, would like to see a ‘libertarian’ in Marx, and holds that Marxian thought found its ‘definitive form’ in the Address.

For all this the 1871 Address still has to be seen as a point of departure in the effort today to find a synthesis between anarchism and marxism, and as a first demonstration that it is possible to find a fertile conciliation of the two streams of thought. The Address is libertarian marxist.

Why Libertarian Marxism?

(This is the concluding essay appended to the book from which both the essays in this pamphlet have been taken, “Pour un Marxisme Libertaire”, published by Robert Laffont, 1969. Translations by D.R.)

To conclude this book I shall dare to sketch the rudiments of a programme — at the risk of being accused of drifting into ‘metapolitics’.

Today it is stupid to proceed to some sort of patching up of the ramshackle edifice of socialist doctrine, throwing together relevant fragments of traditional marxism and anarchism, making a show of marxist or bakuninist erudition, trying to trace, simply on paper, ingenious synthesis and tortuous reconciliations...

Modern libertarian marxism, which flowered in May 1968, transcends marxism and anarchism.

To call oneself a libertarian marxist today is not to look backwards but to be committed to the future. The libertarian marxist is not an academic but a militant. He is well aware that it is up to him to change the world — no more, no less. History throws him on the brink. Everywhere the hour of the socialist revolution has sounded. Revolution — like landing on the moon — has entered the realm of the immediate and possible. Precise definition of the forms of a socialist society is no longer a utopian scheme. The only utopians are those who close their eyes to these realities.

If this revolution is to be a success, and, as Gracchus Babeuf would say, the last, what guidelines are there for making it?

Firstly, before going into action, the libertarian marxist makes a careful assessment of the objective conditions, trying to sum up quickly and accurately the relations between the forces operating in each situation. For this the method Marx developed is not at all archaic — historical

and dialectical materialism is still the safest guide, and an inexhaustable mine of models and points of reference. Provided, however, it is treated in the way Marx did: that is, without doctrinal rigidity or mechanical inflexibility. Provided too that the shelter of Marx's wing does not lead to the endless invention of bad pretexts and pseudo-objective reasons for botching, missing and repeatedly failing to drive home the chance of revolution.

Libertarian marxism rejects determinism and fatalism, giving the greater place to individual will, intuition, imagination, reflex speeds, and to the deep instincts of the masses, which are more far-seeing in hours of crisis than the reasonings of the 'elites'; libertarian marxism thinks of the effects of surprise, provocation and boldness, refuses to be cluttered and paralysed by a heavy 'scientific' apparatus, doesn't equivocate or bluff, and guards itself from adventurism as much as from fear of the unknown.

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