

We Don't Agree on Capitalism

Demarcating the Red and Black

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Not A Good Century for Thinking

One curious thing about the history of anarchism and Marxism is despite the long history of rivalry and conflict between our respective traditions, there's an implicit acceptance of Marx by many anarchists. When anarchists are pushed about just what exactly capitalism is, what many describe is entirely copacetic with more libertarian forms of Marxism.

Some anarchists are happy to admit this overlap, that libertarian strands of Marxism like council communism or autonomism are close to if not outright anarchist. Others take a bad-faith approach and will fallaciously claim that Marxism necessarily implies a state-run economy or that Marxists could never acknowledge novel classes like managers or professionals while being defacto Marxists on economics.

But not every anarchist critic of Marxism is so shallow. Some have posited fairly sophisticated critiques that cut Marxism at a deeper level.

However, even these critics can be inconsistent in their relationship to Marxism. For example, the late David Graeber claimed that "*market competition is not, in fact, as essential to the nature of capitalism as Marx and Engels had assumed*" yet argued that there was "*no necessary contradiction between anarchism and Marxism*".

The lack of a serious alternative (that isn't primitivism) means that Marxism is the *null hypothesis* of anti-capitalism. Anarchists might seriously disagree with Marxism, but the lack of an alternative theory means they default to Marxism when called to answer just what capitalism is.

However, I don't think this inconsistency is a consequence of anarchism being incoherent. Rather the dominance of Marxism is a consequence of history. So before we get to an alternative let's briefly go over how Marxism became the default anti-capitalism.

In the 19th century, Marxism was just one strand of socialism among many. For an example of Marx's influence, Eric Hobsbawm in *How to Change the World* cites John Rae's *Contemporary Socialism*, published a year after Marx's death, which only devoted one of its nine chapters to Marx. Furthermore, its revolutionary cache was eroding in the early 20th century after mass social democratic parties across Europe moved in a reformist direction. The mass of the revolutionary left in the 1900s and early 1910s was associated with radical syndicalism, which *explicitly* emerged in response to the aforementioned conservatism of Marxian-dominated social democracy. And while some syndicalists took inspiration from Marx, the movement was incredibly diverse in its theoretical underpinnings.

It took the Russian Civil War to make Marxism the center of revolutionary anti-capitalism.

The most straightforward reason for Marxism's appeal was that the Bolsheviks *had seemingly pulled off a revolution*. While people immediately pushed back against the propaganda which overemphasized the role of Bolshevik discipline and Marxist theory, military success had an undeniable charisma for aspiring revolutionaries.

But the Soviet Union also had *philosophical* weight. This was a state that justified its existence by appealing to a systemic, modern philosophy that explicitly claimed global revolution was imminent and desirable. This was something genuinely novel on the world stage and meant that Marxism had to be taken seriously even by more conservative forces.

It also actively promulgated Marxist philosophy. It compiled, translated, and mass-produced Marxist literature to proselytize to the unconverted and to set the doctrine of communist parties and states that were aligned with Moscow.

A straightforward consequence of this was that Marxist literature was more *accessible* than that of other socialist traditions, which is part of why *The Communist Manifesto* is an all-time non-fiction bestseller comparable to the Bible and *Capital* is one of the most cited books in the social sciences.

However, it wasn't just top-down transmission. When it came to shaping anarchist ideas, bottom-up currents of Marxism were far more important in the long run.

Before the First World War, the majority of Marxist intellectuals were directly connected to a socialist party. They taught at party schools or did journalism and research for the party. The result was that their work was focused on pragmatic concerns of economic developments or strategy.

However, after the war, Marxist intellectuals increasingly began to expand their scope of inquiry, engaging in broader social criticism, cultural analysis, and philosophical speculation.

One motivation for this turn was the party line that the Soviet Union demanded. For communist parties to be recognized and see support from the Soviet Union meant accepting a particular line when it came to the particulars of economics and politics. Marxist intellectuals who were part of communist parties who wanted to be creative could not do so in these domains.

This came alongside the growth of more middle-class people from intellectual backgrounds becoming interested in Marxism following its legitimation and the broader radicalization that came with the First World War. It was possible to be a Marxist writer, artist, or academic and have a professional career disconnected from a party. Not involved in social movements, these figures focused on matters of culture and philosophy instead of practical questions related to social movements.

This trend was further enhanced by the growth of academia as funding increased during the Cold War. Many Marxists radicalized in the student movements went into academia to produce a body of knowledge that could counter the dominant paradigms and influence broader society, while also taking advantage of state funding.

Some positive developments came out of this. Unfortunately, academia came with various negative incentives that many leftists did not resist. The result is that they went along with creating academic fiefdoms, respecting disciplinary boundaries, endless meta-commentary, and the adoption of professional identities which discouraged meaningful activism.

While Marxism was ascendant, anarchism was in decline. The failure of the Spanish Civil War occurred alongside broader state persecution around the world. And so our numbers declined precipitously. Once vibrant anarchist communities were destroyed by raids and broader social upheaval, while our literature could only be found in isolated radical bookstores or second-hand copies.

By the 50s, many considered it a spent ideology. While anarchist communities in places like Italy, Greece, and Britain had survived repression and the dislocation brought about by the war, they were considered sideshows to the real struggle between state socialism and capitalism. In an era of (supposedly) rational centralized hierarchical states and corporations that bestowed the world, it was easy for Marxists to dismiss it as irrelevant given their assumption that anarchism was synonymous with economic backwardness and luddism.

As Eric Hobsbawm put it bluntly in his essay *Reflections on Anarchism*, anarchism was not just a revolutionary movement that had failed, it was (supposedly) "*almost designed for failure*".

Even those sympathetic to anarchism had their doubts about its prospects. For example, the historian George Woodcock, who wrote one of the most academically influential histories of anarchism in the early 60s, concludes his history of anarchism by declaring it a spent ideology.

Yet the anarchist movement proved to be more resilient than these assessments. It slowly recovered in the 60s and 70s, with a minority of activists in the US and Europe identifying as such.

The form of Marxism that was dominant among activists at the time was considerably different from the one that was dominant in the 30s. Official communist parties were delegitimized after various atrocities committed by the Soviet Union became undeniable. But many in the New Left stuck with Marxism. The problem with these states was that they had just applied theory *incorrectly*.

And so many New Left radicals adopted a fundamentalist form of Marxism, turning to Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, or some other revolutionary for clear answers for how to change the society they found themselves in. These organizations were highly sectarian and had trouble growing their numbers and were also ineffective at actually, society proving to be significantly more complicated than the simple narratives they embraced.

Which made them fragile in the face of broader social shifts. Many who turned to Marxism did so in a context of social upheaval that many believed meant revolutionary change was imminent. The wider conservative turn across the world in the 80s shattered this assumption and saw many give up on the project. Confidence was further undermined by the collapse or reform of socialist states in the late 80s and early 90s as many New Left Marxists had justified their aspirations by pointing to the “success” of Russia, China, or some other socialist state.

Given the dominance of Marxism, it was easy for anarchists who’d come up in this period to differentiate themselves against the worst aspects of the ideology that they had personal experience with.

However, more subtle influences in the realm of ideas remained.

To give a quick example of this legacy, I want to briefly focus on two major North American anarchists who were Marxists in their youth, were part of the New Left, and defined clear centers of gravity for anarchism in the 90s: John Zerzan, and Murray Bookchin.

After breaking with Marxism in the 50s, Bookchin was initially hostile towards it. His well-known polemic *Listen Marxist* was a denunciation of Marxism in an attempt to push back against a Marxist takeover of the Students for a Democratic Society in 1969 in which he called for a “*transcendence*” of Marxism and declared Marx and Engels “*centralists*”.

But later in life however he gained a more nuanced appreciation for Marxism, particularly after engaging with Frankfurt School Marxists and their critiques of instrumental rationality and modernity. After he broke with anarchism to articulate “communalism” he was explicit about it incorporating what he considered the “*best of anarchism and Marxism*”. His vision of a federation of directly democratic communities rationally operating in harmony with nature is clearly in line with various libertarian Marxist aspirations.

Zerzan is more complicated. At first glance primitivism seems the polar opposite of Marxism, openly rejecting the possibility of utilizing the fruits of capitalism to transcend to a more rational technological civilization to instead advocate for a return to an archaic form of freedom.

Yet in formulating their critique of civilization he and others drew on emphasized technologically determinist readings of Marx, as well as criticisms of rationality made by Marxists more broadly (again the Frankfurt School), to argue that the social requirements of complex technol-

ogy would *always* enslave humanity and despoil the environment (see this writeup of the Marxist influence on the key primitivist journal *Fifth Estate*).

My problem with these articulations of anarchism is not the Marxist influence. It's that they don't do a job of grappling with questions of *agency* which I think should sit at the center of anarchist theory.

Now I'm not the first anarchist to make this connection. Unfortunately, I seem to be the first to try and write up a theory of capitalism that has these concerns at its center.

This is a consequence of how knowledge works in anarchist spaces at present. Despite our diminutive size, various anarchists have seen significant conceptual developments since the 30s. Frustratingly a lot of this *just hasn't been made accessible*.

So much anarchist insight presently exists in an intersubjective, tacit fashion between people. To grasp it requires one to be involved with a scene or space to acquire enough background information to piece together information spread across various people, zines, blog posts, social media threads, texts by non-anarchists, etc. This makes becoming an anarchist unnecessarily challenging and even acts as a barrier to understanding for anarchists who come from different contexts and scenes!

Some of this results from a desire to hoard intellectual capital or preserve subcultural uniqueness, the anarchist equivalent to the Marxists who write in theoryese. But it's also a consequence of the reach of primitivist critiques of technological alienation which unfortunately discouraged many anarchists from engaging with or utilizing the internet in the 90s and 00s. A lot of stuff just never got put online!

These attitudes started to decline in the 10s thanks to the increasing ubiquity of the internet, generational turnover, and broader movements that took advantage of social media like Occupy. Unfortunately, the ongoing upheaval and broader radicalization of people to the Left since 2016 has meant that many have been busy putting out fires and onboarding people to do the work.

Thankfully such an emphasis on immediate, face-to-face communication is not at all essential to anarchism. Emma Goldman (to name but just one figure) wrote an estimated two hundred thousand letters throughout her life. Certainly, the dominant forms of communication on the internet are awful at facilitating productive discussion, but *they don't have to be like this*.

All this is to say that the (present) anarchist confusion about our relationship to Marxism is not evidence that the anarchist project is fundamentally flawed, incoherent, or secretly Marxist. Rather it's an indication of the philosophical and social gravity that Marxism exerted over anti-capitalism in the 20th century that we're still in the process of escaping from.

Hence.

A Long Overdue and Distinctly Anarchist Assessment of Capitalism

One thing that I wish more people grasped about anarchists is that we don't just think domination results in bad outcomes for the person being dominated, but that it frequently results in subpar outcomes *for the person with power over another*.

There are fairly deep reasons as to why this is the case.

If you have power over another such that you can control them, you must give them directions for what to do. A good way to understand why this doesn't work is through the lens of algorithms.

An algorithm is simply a step-by-step process to achieve a particular end given particular inputs. So if you want to control something, you want to be able to reduce its decision-making to an algorithm you have defined.

This immediately brings up problems. If the possible inputs for an algorithm can be known ahead of time, it is possible to prove that the algorithm works through evaluating all possibilities. But if the range of possible inputs vastly exceeds what we evaluate we can never know with certainty whether it will work.

Now even the most ardent defenders of hierarchy rarely claim that they need perfection. But even if we relax our aspirations significantly we still find the problem of mapping inputs to correct decisions to be considerable.

The reason why is tracing cause and effect. Simple objects have predictable reactions to inputs and so can be modeled far into the future. But this is because these objects have rigid, unchanging structures. Systems that are more capable of responding to the environment and self-regulating, that have characteristics we associate with “agency” – memory, goals, the ability to think things through, etc – are much harder to predict. This is because you need to model both their internal decision-making processes and the various inputs from the broader environment that influence them.

But it isn’t just messy complex systems that present problems for such approaches. Even seemingly simple objects contain immense possibilities precisely because they can potentially be used in novel ways by agents. For example, a single brick can be used in various obvious ways (build some sort of structure), but also countless non-obvious ways (grow flowers in its holes, throw through a window at a protest, use it as a prop in a theater performance, etc). Furthermore the constituent parts of an “object” can be potentially reconfigured in countless ways, the clay that makes up a brick contains silicon and aluminum which could be extracted for example.

Outside of the most impoverished contexts, before any agent lies an overwhelming set of options and possibilities that cannot be fully evaluated in an predefined algorithm that can perfectly guide the agent.

Thankfully this is a problem that people and organisms more broadly have been managing for a very long time. But it’s done through a bottom-up fashion, via constant engagement with the world wherein our models of reality are subject to constant feedback, not through the imposition of a set of directives from on high.

This doesn’t result in perfect outcomes. But perfect decision-making isn’t the point, the point is to simply do a good enough job that the *goals* of the agent are reached.

However, such a proactive way of engaging with the world is at odds with maintaining hierarchies of control. A system acting according to an algorithm is predictable and thus fragile in the face of unexpected or accounted-for phenomena. Hence there’s value in autonomy. But any agent with a degree of autonomy is liable to not just update its models, but also its goals and so can turn on those who’d try to direct it.

This is precisely what makes strict hierarchies structurally irrational. Organizational dictates will ignore or forbid solutions that are “obvious” to those directly engaged with problems because it’s intractable to evaluate them all.

It’s further amplified by the problem of communication. If you are talking to a person you can only send so much information to them. This is because the bandwidth of channels for information in and out of the human brain is a fraction of the informational content in the human brain.

This becomes even more of a constraint as the number of people involved increases. Anyone trying to manage others *must* limit or compress the flow of information up toward them to not become overwhelmed by it. Such compression is frequently highly lossy and loses important nuance along the way. This is an inherent consequence of the brain's internal complexity versus the carrying capacity of communication channels like language. While it's possible to do error correction, that requires the person who is confused to articulate their confusions and have them clarified which requires a sustained back-and-forth. This problem increases as the organization increases in scale since there is only so much time for correction.

So even in situations where the decision-making process laid out for a subordinate is insufficient but a superior could, in theory, give them the correct instructions it may be that the time required for the superior to understand the problem sufficiently to give the correct solution means that the moment where that information will be useful will have passed.

Indeed these limits to hierarchies mean that subordinates frequently carve out informal spaces of freedom for themselves in formal systems of control because their superiors are simply unaware it is happening. Furthermore these freedoms are frequently essential for the broader system precisely because they are how the system handles unexpected or unaccounted-for behavior.

And so those at the top of hierarchies face a balancing act of giving just enough freedom to subordinates so that the system is adaptable, but not enough that they can effectively overthrow the hierarchy. This is a perennial problem that every hierarchical society in history has had to deal with that remains an unappreciated source of resistance to this day (see the IWW pamphlet *How to Fire Your Boss* which succinctly details various ways that workers can leverage these systemic irrationalities in conflict with capitalists).

From this, you can get a straightforward argument for relational egalitarianism. Since controlling a subordinate is so demanding in many circumstances it is simply less costly to give them a degree of autonomy. But once you do this you introduce a degree of trust between the two parties which means that even if they differ significantly in capacities (wealth, power, intelligence, status, etc) the superior party still has reason to treat the other with respect because autonomy gives the inferior the capacity to impose subtle costs which add up over time.

This claim of the *efficacy of egalitarian relations* is at odds with Marx's claims about the *efficacy of hierarchical relations* that underpins his explanation of what capitalism is.

Central to Marx's conception of how capitalists extract surplus value, how class distinctions persist, and how capitalism came to dominate the world is the premise that *what individual capitalists do with their capital is rational toward the ends of exploiting labor*. In capitalism success in the market is achieved by making productive processes more efficient and winning out over competitors and less efficient configurations are eliminated.

One way this efficiency happens is through the rationalization of processes in such a way that the skill becomes embodied in the machine itself.

As he writes in *Capital*:

By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour-power. The separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour, is, as we have already shown, finally completed by modern industry erected on the foundation of machinery. **The special skill of**

each individual insignificant factory operative vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity before the science, the gigantic physical forces, and the mass of labour that are embodied in the factory mechanism and, together with that mechanism, constitute the power of the “master”.

This rationalization allows for more workers under the command of a single capitalist which increases overall efficiency:

The laws of this centralization of capitals, or of the attraction of capital by capital, cannot be developed here. A brief hint at a few facts must suffice. The battle of competition is fought by cheapening of commodities. **The cheapness of commodities demands, *caeteris[sic] paribus*, on the productiveness of labour, and this again on the scale of production.** Therefore, the larger capitals beat the smaller. [emphasis mine]

This efficiency is what enabled capitalism to dominate the world. Per *The Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves.

Now I do think that Marx is right about the drive towards simplicity. But it doesn't neatly result in efficiency. Marx's assertion that you can just rationally create productive processes is not just historically questionable (David Noble's *Forces of Production* is the classic text about the challenges 20th-century capitalists faced when it came to automation) but also is theoretically at odds with the aforementioned problems of perfect algorithms.

Certainly, such rigidity can be efficient *for particular ends*. But it comes at the expense of potentially reconfiguring the process in ways as well as denying tools that would allow for a broader scope of possible ways of working.

But this is kinda the point. Because what the broader capitalist system is optimizing for is *control* and then *efficiency*.

States and large, hierarchical firms have a symbiotic relationship with each other wherein both provide something of value that the other cannot when it comes to navigating an uncertain world.

Capitalists naturally pursue technology in a manner that reinforces power because it's how they make workers easier to direct and control which does unlock certain economies of scale and also allows them to drive down wages.

From the perspective of society broadly this is both inefficient and costly in the form of various negative externalities. But from the perspective of the state, this arrangement is preferable because economic centralization enables the state to better achieve its ends precisely because a smaller number of large firms can be more easily mobilized.

And so the state tips the scale in favor of large capitalists in a variety of ways. From the enforcement of property claims acquired through expropriation or conquest, to making forms of self-employment or cooperative enterprises more costly if not outright illegal, to subsidies for transportation infrastructure to name but a few, the state has constantly intervened to simplify the context that corporations operate within for centuries, as Kevin Carson has detailed.

But what's important is that such interventions are not a one-and-done thing. The entire point is that you want *some* degree of flexibility and redundancy in the system so it can adapt. There is no static arrangement of policy and firms that guarantee power, instead, the point is to constantly adapt to a changing world.

A primary virtue of capitalism is that capitalists *can be replaced*. While there is considerable latitude for capitalists and firms to make errors, if they do make big enough mistakes they will be removed and others will take their place.

Such autophagic processes occur with industries more broadly. Disruptive technologies can operate outside the state's regulatory framework and can upend not just existing industries but also potentially threaten power relations more broadly. However, those who commercialize the technology have good reason to integrate themselves with the state to continue to see profits once others grasp how to utilize the technology and so are naturally inclined to inform the state on how to impose barriers to broader utilization that might otherwise disrupt broader power structures.

Similar processes of churn are present in states with functioning democratic procedures that enable the bloodless replacement of leaders, parties, and even ideologies without descending into open civil conflict.

Liberal capitalism then *distributes* the problem of control among far more people and also enables the turnover of technologies and elites far more efficiently than in prior societies. The result is that capitalist societies are far more capable of adaptation than other social orders.

It's this capacity for adaptation that allowed capitalism to take over the world. Certainly, modern states were capable of leveraging novel technical and social arrangements to defeat more conservative counterparts. However, implementing such novel means came with considerable internal disruption. Less flexible orders found this challenging and frequently stalled out, collapsed, or underwent revolution.

(Admittedly, the simple model I've presented of capitalists directly relating to a single state is complicated by geopolitics wherein capitalists have relationships with political elites from multiple states competing against each other. While this requires further elaboration, I don't think it invalidates the basic symbiotic relationship I've outlined between the state and capital)

But for all its advantages relative to other macro systems of domination, capitalism is still *structurally conservative* precisely because a more dynamic and responsive social order would make the sort of control capitalist profit demands impossible.

The first conclusion to draw from this is that we can trivially say that *things can be better*. There are vast latent technical and organizational possibilities that *could exist* and would be *significantly* better on multiple metrics. That might seem obvious, but given how low the aspirations of the broader Left are at present, I want to make it explicit.

But this assessment of capitalism doesn't just give the promise of a meaningful alternative. You can also derive a general strategy for how to get there.

While few anarchists have articulated the problems of capitalism at such a high level, many are partially aware of these dynamics through a combination of hands-on practice and drawing

on other theoretical traditions. From this people have developed a wealth of ways to leverage these limits and downsides.

There are many ways you could frame these approaches, but I'm a personal fan of the strategic delineations that William Gillis makes:

- **Insurrection:** Compounding popular resistance via demonstrating effective actions that anyone can perform.
- **Exploitation:** Context-specific attacks that require specific knowledge, skills, and situat-edness to pull off
- **Development:** Investing in exploring alternative technical means and pathways that have gone ignored or been suppressed
- **Contestation:** Applying pressures to existing institutions to shift the balance in our favor
- **Prefiguration:** Testing through application alternative novel social and technical practices and popularizing them
- **Erosion:** Making the economy and society more decentralized and responsive

What all these have in common is leveraging or maintaining open-ended possibilities that power structures seek to deny us.

Which brings me to what people have long considered a distinction between Marxists and anarchists: our focus on the ethics that motivate and guide the action of individuals versus the Marxist emphasis on channeling the energy that comes about in response to structural oppres-sion.

There's a popular assumption that ethics and strategy are at odds. And it's not an unreasonable intuition. Ethics are commonly understood as commands *not* to do certain things. And so by limiting your options, you are at a disadvantage against someone less scrupulous, all else being equal.

Now in a trivial sense, this is correct. If you are in a straight-up fight with someone and commit yourself to not doing things they are perfectly willing to do, all else being equal they're more likely to win.

But if a conflict or struggle takes place over a longer time frame or in a more open-ended context, clarity around one's values and aspirations is a benefit. If you're trying to shift a com-plex system, it's really easy to take action that seems superficially efficacious but is ultimately counterproductive. To make meaningful progress you need to trace out the entangled flows of causality to find non-obvious points of leverage.

Clarity around your goals acts as a way to *filter* irrelevant information which allows you to make the problem space tractable which in turn allows you to more easily evaluate possible paths forward. While this isn't perfect, the point is to do better such that you seize opportunities that otherwise would have gone unnoticed or identify subtle traps to avoid.

Questions of values are also worth pursuing because trust in others allows for more dynamic cooperation with others. If you are confident that someone shares your goals, you can trust them to pursue more autonomous action toward your goals. This is *vital* when dealing with a landscape of open possibility. The informational constraints of centralized organizations mean

they can't effectively pursue multiple paths. A looser collection of individuals who don't have to go through a central committee can be far more effective at pursuing multiple paths through a changing landscape of open possibilities, but only if they're actually committed.

Now I agree with those who read an implicit ethic in Marx's work. But the main reason he became popular among socialists was the explicit *amorality* of his arguments. Socialist parties in the 19th century were attracted to Marx because he offered a solution to the problem of working-class *disunity*.

Marx's theory reassured socialists that these divisions would eventually pass thanks to economic forces. Capitalism, the story went, would deskill labor to the point where individual members of the working class would become interchangeable, would concentrate property to the point where it would become obvious who the enemy was while forcing workers into collective organizations to survive, which would also give them the strength to win a revolution. The diverse array of interests that marked the existing working class would be eroded by simple economic factors and all that would be left would be a majoritarian proletarian interest.

None of this came to pass. The 19th-century working class remained divided by skill, region, and industry. Nor did society sink into destitution – at the end of the 19th century in industrialized countries workers were getting paid more and the middle class had not shrunk as a percentage of the population. There was affinity between workers, but nothing like the broader class unity Marx claimed would emerge.

However, the failures of Marxism go beyond predictive errors about the course of capitalism. He also didn't see the emergence of novel power dynamics inside the socialist movement itself.

Within socialist parties and unions there developed a bureaucratic class with its interests. This emerged out of the aforementioned limits on communication. Despite claiming to operate in the "interests of the working class", by the end of the 19th-century socialist parties were increasingly moving away from more direct democratic means towards bureaucracy and representation to allow action at scale. They deliberately strove to constrain organic working-class radicalism so they could build an organization that could channel discontent in ways that made negotiation between union officials and capitalists more tractable.

Of course, the very same informational constraints meant that the ability of these officials to discipline workers was limited. Again a major reason that syndicalism emerged was workers being frustrated at not being able to take action that was blocked by union and party officials and engaging in direct action themselves.

Furthermore, the desire to maintain the legitimacy of the party (and their positions within it) meant that socialist politicians became increasingly open to collaborating with their respective states. This reached its apogee with the collaboration of socialist parties with their respective governments during the First World War. In major industrial powers like France and Germany, it took the consent of socialist politicians to approve wartime funding and to suppress broader popular resistance to the war despite their professed commitment to internationalism.

The tendency of Marxists to get blindsided by emergent class dynamics *within* their own movements that come as a consequence of centralization means that it is overwhelmingly likely that even under far more favorable conditions revolution would still lead to class differentials reemerging.

How we tackle these dynamics is a considerable conversation well beyond the scope of the essay. But there is no way towards meaningful freedom that does not involve us grappling with technology as it presently exists.

If we look at actually-existing egalitarian societies they are maintained via generalized practices which actively frustrate the emergence of permanent bonds of domination that go well beyond a central democratic committee where people can air their grievances. This entails both giving people more options with the tools they have access to, as well as the creation of a more polycentric institutional environment to give people meaningful *options*.

That entails not just changes in who has formal rights to utilize technology, but also the *reconfiguration of the technology itself*. We need to change if not outright dismantle much of what has been produced under capitalism and replace it with something else. While there is certainly a case for stop-gap utilization of existing infrastructure, we need to be proactive about moving beyond it.

This is a *much* harder task than what Marxism asks of us and it's unlikely to come about by straightforward resistance to what exists. Yes, people are going to fight domination, struggle for causes they believe in, and support those they care about. However, the history of popular movements shows that only a small minority involved in such struggles mature from immediate concerns into a broad opposition to domination *in general*.

Thankfully we don't have to change everything all at once.

Marxist critiques of incremental change usually focus on the fragility of socialist reforms, and the tendency of working-class institutions to become co-opted. Given the history of failure, many conclude that radical change needs to happen immediately, lest capitalism creep back in.

But the various co-options reflect not the infinite reach and adaptability of capitalism, but rather the fragility of the means that socialists employed.

Plenty of problems in socialism came from failing to recognize superficially positive changes being traps that constrained future progress. The aforementioned conservatism with the German Social Democratic party only emerged after the repeal of anti-socialist laws which made their party illegal. With that party and union officials became made up of professionals who regarded the party as an end in itself because it gave them a career rather than as a vehicle to bring about revolutionary change.

Furthermore, the changes wrought were fragile because they relied on continued electoral support. Socialists never had a monopoly on working-class votes, their outreach to other groups in society was also unstable and they relied on rates of economic growth to enact welfare and regulatory policies. The result was that as broad social and economic shifts occurred, their ability to win votes and deliver the goods were eroded and they lost significant vote share as the 20th century went on.

But there are other ways to make changes that don't rely on maintaining control of a centralized institution that is core to the functioning of capitalism.

A much better lens to analyze the durability of incremental shifts is not through the membership counts of organizations or the vote count of a socialist candidate, but rather how expensive those reforms are to reverse.

Again there are likely considerable efficiencies and/or capabilities that are presently restricted. If they were to proliferate and become part of the broader infrastructure, they'd be hard to undo simply because of how high the cost of ripping out critical parts of the world.

Such costs can be amplified by social factors that make rollback costly. Sometimes it can look like broad social acceptance or embrace of particular norms or innovations, such that any attempt to get rid of them would be incredibly expensive in terms of resources required and/or legitimacy

lost. But it can also involve mobilizing a sufficiently motivated minority who'll openly resist its rollback, inflicting significant costs on those who'd try to change things.

This is why success can sometimes look like existing structures *co-opting our developments*. Certainly, there's a history of co-option reinforcing power or neutralizing movements. But there are many examples where partial victories have been maintained precisely because they were partially co-opted (various feminist successes and developments like strong cryptography are clear examples here).

Furthermore, the degree of agency in society is something we can measure with some degree of fidelity. Hence we can meaningfully say that certain social configurations are closer to what we want than others.

A gradualist approach is also necessary because of the challenge of reaching any sort of broad consensus regarding motivations. Getting people mobilized to fight for something *specific and concrete* like overthrowing a government, resisting discrimination, or fighting an exploitative or destructive industry is already pretty difficult, but it's much easier than fighting for an *ethos*.

This is why basically every revolution and social movement in history stalls out or reverses after seeing success. You can get people to come to fight an obvious oppressor, but once the movement is successful, nobody can agree on what to do next. The moderates conclude that things have gone far enough and ally with whatever conservative forces remain, while the radicals can't agree on where things should go next and their energy dwindles. Out of this, a new equilibrium emerges.

But an overall expansion of capacity is still possible even in the face of retrenchments. The anarchist assessment of power gives us a strong case for *tempered optimism* about our prospects. Especially since there's almost certainly *considerable* low-hanging fruit because of how marginalized we were over the 20th century and because implicit Marxist assumptions have stopped anarchists from recognizing the full set of possibilities before them.

At the same time, we're also going to see defeats. The very algorithmic limits that hinder domination also limit our capacity to model the future and thus attempts at change or bringing about novel arrangements are just *inherently risky*. Ironically, the very unknowability that is our greatest strength means that success is never guaranteed.

Conclusion

Now this is very much a brief sketch of an anarchist conception of capitalism, designed only to highlight the most important differences between us and Marxists. One could and should go further, but this should be sufficient to get at our fundamental differences.

I also want to make explicit that this is not merely an academic debate over semantics or minor points of contention. Anarchism and Marxism prescribed dramatically different *vulnerabilities in capitalism* which in turn imply different *strategic orientations toward the world*.

If raw economies of scale are the deciding factor in struggle, then meaningful social change can only come through proletarian uprisings or movements of sufficient size. Hence anything that isn't building up working-class institutions and/or The Party is a waste of time.

But if capitalism is riddled with inefficiencies and potential exploits, then actively being able to search through them to find critical points of leverage is far more effective because it enables

force multipliers and attack vectors which can give you capacity on par if not exceeding mass movements.

However, such an approach requires one to sincerely care. Actively searching through the space of possibilities, weighing potential paths forward, and then taking action takes a lot of work and is potentially quite risky. People who don't care are unlikely to bother with that effort.

Hence a smaller number of people who are sincerely aligned on what they want can be far more effective at leveraging such weaknesses than a mass organization that is constantly spending energy shepherding unmotivated individuals to perform simple tasks.

Particularly because this is an approach that is not actually at odds with mass movements. They're going to happen anyway and we can better support them by developing and propagating tools, exploits, insights, and practices in a bottom-up fashion providing more capacity to the people and helping win them to our position, rather than seeking to occupy positions of influence in an attempt to steer it in a top-down fashion.

Certainly at present many anarchists and Marxists do not fit neatly into either category when it comes to theory or practice. But I think it behooves people to become *more coherent* in both. If you're serious about fighting capitalism in a remotely rational manner you are going to invest a *considerable* amount of time, energy, risk, etc and that means the strategy you adopt matters.

An immediate casualty of this divergence is the notion of some coherent "Left" defined by an opposition to capitalism (or any other opponent). While I still think there's value in "the Left" as a concept, it's as a historically contingent sociological/subcultural phenomenon, rather than a political bloc that could be potentially "unified" around any set of values or aspirations.

Now being explicit about rejecting "the Left" as something I think anarchists should positively identify with does not mean that there is no possibility for cooperation and dialogue between members of the various traditions that make up "the Left". Indeed widespread awareness of the differences should make for *more productive cooperation and dialogue* because we won't subsume essential differences through appeals to tradition or the perception of mass. Anarchists and Marxists don't agree on capitalism and we do ourselves a disservice by not making that clear.

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