

Book Review: “Anarchism & Socialism: Reformism or Revolution?”

by Wayne Price, Ed. Thought Crime Ink, 2010

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Thought Crime Ink Ed., have done a great job in putting this interesting and thought-provoking book together in a stylish and sober presentation. Most of the material in this book I have already read, although the versions finally published in the book have been polished and have some changes. A lot of them had previously been published as essays for www.anarkismo.net. But all of them put together gives a new dimension to the overall work: this is not a simple collection of “selected writings” on disparate subjects. All of these articles have themes in common and create a consistent unity, defining a particular approach to anarchism and to the problem of revolution, influenced by the author’s personal reflections and experiences.

The Politics of Revolutionary Anarchism

The whole point of the book is to make a case for a revolutionary anarchist communist alternative. This is no ABC of revolutionary anarchism, however: it deals with problematic issues in a way that leaves doors open and Wayne Price does not feel compelled to have all of the answers. But it argues a strong case for organisational class struggle anarchist communist to confront capitalism and help bring about a radical change of our civilisation in a libertarian and socialist direction—not only taking over the means of production and smashing the State, but adapting the existing technology to the needs of society rather than capitalist accumulation.

The first thing that strikes me of the book is Price’s ability to be very didactic and pedagogical in his way of posing problems and then developing his argument; you can easily see the skill of a teacher in this. It uses very down-to-earth, simple language, which can appeal to an audience that is not familiar with anarchism. But at the same time, he deals with important theoretical issues that make the reading relevant to experienced militants as well, such as the economic crisis, alienated-capitalistic technology or the interaction between exploitation and other forms of oppression – this is an issue of particular cause of concern, and Wayne Price has been consistent over the years in linking questions such as national liberation or the degradation of the environment to a class-struggle, revolutionary approach.

Another remarkable feature is that, while defending a revolutionary line of argument and explicitly rejecting reformism, he does not fall into the trap of “ideological extremism” that is so alluring to certain elements within the anarchist milieu. Wayne’s arguments are sensible, in the way that he defends the need to fight for reforms without renouncing revolution. Furthermore, he does not attempt to be as radical as can be, an elitist form of doing politics that appeals only to the “chosen ones”; instead, he puts forward the case that anarchism makes sense and is down to earth, that it is indeed desirable and possible, and that most people can grasp it and would prefer it, if properly explained, to capitalism. This no-nonsense approach is also very welcome.

Just as in his previous book, *The Abolition of the State*, I also think it is quite important the way he emphasises links within the revolutionary socialist family, if I may call it that way. Instead of taking the approach of stressing the differences, as if the points in common did not exist or indeed mattered little, he starts by defining the common elements, the similarities between different socialist currents and then moves to the differences. This approach has many values, one of them being the ability to tell the substantial from the superfluous differences, strategic from tactical differences – what are the real issues at stake behind the different socialist schools, something that is obscured by the often polarizing turns of debate in revolutionary circles. Subsequently, this approach enables us to see in what ways it is possible to cooperate with others, how to

build revolutionary unity without renouncing our programme or without making the case that we “leave the differences behind”, either. But it is also an important approach because we can indeed learn an awful lot from others, from their experience and ideas, from their successes and failures!

He deals extensively, for instance, with Hal Draper and Paul Goodman, two thinkers from diverging tendencies (critical Marxism and reformist anarchism) who, no matter how many differences we may have with them, have great contributions to make in order to re-think a revolutionary alternative to capitalism. He also deals, in lesser detail, with Parecon and some others, stating at all times that, without necessarily having to agree on every issue, we need to address seriously those attempts to subvert the system and learn whatever is useful in them. No one has all the answers and developing this culture of critical engagement is a good way to start getting at least some of them right.

Another touchy issue the book deals with is the issue of power, which is often treated in a metaphysical way in anarchist circles. Here Price tackles the issue from the perspective of class antagonism and from an explicitly anarchist perspective – how can the working class take away economic and political power from the bourgeoisie without confusing this with the conquest of the State, which is merely an exchange of one dominant class for another. Power and State are not synonymous as Wayne rightly points out, and even though the term can be confusing out of context, it is not so when explained in the crystal-clear terms Price employs. By the very nature of the proletariat (its economic and social position, as well as its majority condition) it is not possible for it to have power unless is in a direct democratic form: Price argues the case, explaining why there’s no middle ground here. One may decide to call it this or that – the important thing is not the label but the content. I think this issue is remarkable, particularly in times such as those we live in, when there is a deep crisis and a disempowered working class unaware of its potential. There is great merit, therefore in proving to the workers and the people that they have power, and that they should have, collectively, all power!

I particularly like the attempts to put the record straight on Marx, on his strengths and weaknesses. Without idealizing his thought as “infallible truths”, Wayne Price certainly makes a case for the importance of Marx’ thought for anarchism: I found particularly witty the quotes of Marx followed by “anarchist revolutionaries would agree with this” (unfortunately, so many of them are completely ignorant about Marx and often base their judgements on crude caricatures – and Marxists’ judgements of anarchism are equally ill-founded!). It is indeed underestimated how important Marx was for the development of early anarchist thought at the time of the International, particularly to Bakunin, in spite of the latter’s genuine quarrels with his authoritarian side. There is this mythology in anarchist tradition as if anarchism developed harmoniously, without outside influences and without any contradictions, from Proudhon to Bakunin, then to Kropotkin, then to Malatesta and then to us. In Bakunin’s thought, Marx was probably as important as Proudhon and in spite of this attempt to portray him uni-dimensionally as the quintessential arch-enemy of Marx, let us remember that the so-called Bakuninists opposed the Proudhonists within the International before they opposed the Marxists!

I don’t think it to be mere chance that anarchist revolutionaries owe to Marx and Engels at least three all-time favourite slogans: “down with the wage system”, “the emancipation of the working classes must be at the hands of the working classes themselves” and “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”.

Indeed, it is a late development that anarchists tried to get rid of “Marxist” baggage, rejecting materialism and class struggle and some (such as Diego Abad de Santillán), ultimately rejecting the very idea of revolution. Late Malatesta was key, to some extent, to this voluntaristic and idealistic turn as he complained at some point of the Marxist influences on anarchism (Vernon Richards, “Malatesta, Pensamiento y Acción Revolucionarios”, Ed. Utopía Libertaria, 2007, p.137 & p.200). He didn’t live long enough to see the implications of this line of argument, particularly during the Cold War, but others, such as Rocker, moved progressively from his book “Anarchism & Marxism”, where he voids anarchism of its class-struggle basis (as Marxist elements), to praising in another book the “Pioneers of American Freedom: Origin of Liberal and Radical Thought in America”, thus turning anarchism into a mere radical version of individualist liberalism (capitalism). By denying those elements common to Marxism and anarchism, these “revisionist” writers ended up draining anarchism of its revolutionary character.

While Wayne Price does justice to the enormous contributions of Marx in the struggle for a better world, he does not go to such painful lengths as to invent an “anarchist” Marx or as some critical Marxists (sometimes called libertarian Marxists) who hold a “revisionist” view in which Marx was right at all times, but everyone after him got it wrong somehow. Instead, Price explores the specific aspects of Marx thought that eventually became dominant in the socialist school founded by him that led to all forms of authoritarian deviations, in the face of what were, without a doubt, good revolutionary intentions. Moreover, he does not intend anarchism, either, to be immaculate: he rather argues that the “*divide between authoritarian and libertarian-democratic tendencies runs through (inside) Marxism as well as through anarchism*”, although “*overall, anarchism is more consistent with the development of a liberating socialism from below*”. (p.133)

The debate on “State Socialism (Capitalism)”

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to an issue that has been the subject of intensive debate within some Marxist circles, but that, oddly enough, remains elusive and little discussed among anarchists: the nature of the Soviet Union (and other regimes of the so-called “Socialist Bloc”). This is odd for anarchists because this experience should be central to proving our case, but unfortunately, the prevalent attitude has been to reduce the whole issue to self-evident statements such as “State socialism does not work” or “the dictatorship of the proletariat is the dictatorship of the party”, all of which may be quite true, but general slogans do not equal an understanding of reality or understanding of the specific mechanisms why these revolutionary experiences ended up the way they did (beyond slogans, condemnations and emotional accounts there is very little research – even though the *Delo Truda* group developed a theory of the USSR as State Socialism in the late ‘20s, those debates remain largely ignored and untranslated). “State socialism”, “Stalinism”, “Leninism” or even “State capitalism” can become a mantra that obscures rather than expands our understanding of reality. In the case of this book, there is a good conceptual framework to approach the subject and there is good (but insufficient, in my opinion) discussion of some socialist perspectives on the nature of the Soviet Union .

This issue deserves to be dealt in more depth. First, because of the extraordinary diversity among “State Socialisms”: in this book, we mainly face the debate around the Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union, in spite of having some common elements with the rest of the “Socialist Bloc”, is quite a different reality to, let’s say, Poland and then again to China, Angola, Korea, or Cuba. To

put blanket categories on these regimes can have the benefit of grouping together experiences that shared certain basic premises. But it can also obscure objective differences. By studying North Korea over the last while, I am increasingly persuaded that a term such as “Stalinist” has little or no explanatory potential to really understand the nature of that regime in particular.

Secondly, it is an important debate because as Price rightly puts it in his book, if we discuss the nature of these regimes, we are actually discussing our understanding of socialism as such! It is no coincidence that if there is one thing on which both the Neoliberal cheerleaders and the nostalgic comrades of the good old days of Stalin agree, i.e. that the Soviet Union **was socialist**, that that’s what socialism looks like! At this point it is important to enter into the debate, both to recover the meaning of socialism and to shout loud and clear that there is more to life than bureaucratic or market dictatorships. In fact, the thesis of “State Capitalism” that Wayne Price argues for and develops in this book, shows that, irrespective of what the elites want us to believe, there was far more in common between the Soviet Union and the Western type of Capitalism than most suspect. But before dealing with “State Capitalism”, let’s look again at the meaning of Socialism and how it became so distorted.

In another remarkable and thought-provoking book I recently read (“Humanitarian Imperialism –Using Human Right to Sell War”, Ed. Monthly Review, 2006), Jean Bricmont argues that there is a serious misunderstanding about the nature of “socialism” developing in the 20th Century, particularly after the Russian Revolution:

“Before 1914, all socialist movements, whether libertarian or statist, reformist or revolutionary, envisioned socialism, that is, the socialization of the means of production, as an historic stage that was supposed to succeed capitalism in relatively developed Western societies (...) All this disappeared with World War I and the Russian Revolution. After that, the libertarian aspects of socialism withered away, most of the European socialist movements became increasingly incorporated into the capitalist system and its main radical sector, the communists, identified socialism with whatever policies were adopted by the Soviet model. But that model had almost nothing to do with socialism as it was generally understood before the First World War. It should rather be understood as a (rather successful) attempt at rapid economic development of an underdeveloped country, an attempt to catch up, culturally, economically and militarily, by whatever means necessary, with the West (...) if one recognizes that aspect, the whole history of the 20th Century can be interpreted very differently from the dominant discourse about ‘socialism that was tried and failed everywhere’” (pp.12–13, my emphasis)

This quote, not only sheds light on the whole debate on socialism, it also sheds a very different light on the abominations of “socialism” over the past century, or at least on the “official” version of them.

Whatever we may think of these regimes, is intrinsically linked to what we think of our “Western Democratic” regimes. The way we make our criticism and what we criticise do have consequences in our politics, as Wayne rightly demonstrates with the Schachtmanites’ move from being critical of the Soviet Union (by insisting on its “totalitarian” nature as opposed to Western liberalism), to becoming enthusiastic supporters of US imperialism and its aggressions (such as Vietnam back in the days), with eventually some of them moving openly to Neo-conservatism. But, unfortunately, the Schachtmanites were not an exception, as today we have a myriad of

ex-far left-wingers who have become public apologists for the Iraqi and Afghan adventures on the grounds of opposing so-called “Islamofascism”. Numerous far-left groups and individuals, ranging from Maoism, Stalinism and Trotskyism to anarchism, have become veiled or open apologists of imperialism, which they often label as “Western” or “Liberal” Democracy, and in extreme cases, they have even become apologists of proto-fascist movements. To deal with one case, let us remember that during the Cold War some anarchists took their justified opposition to the Soviet model to unjustified endorsement of capitalist democracy (This was analyzed in detail in two great books, one by Jorge Solomonoff “El Liberalismo de Avanzada”, Ed. Proyección, 1973 and Frank Mintz “El Anarquismo Social” www.fondation-besnard.org). Let’s take for instance the following quotes from Gastón Leval in the ‘60s to have a clear example of what I’m saying:

“Today’s dictatorship in Russia is worse to those of Mussolini and Franco (...) In Russia, the system is the result of the conscious application of political and government principles. In the USA, and generally in the West, those principles do not constitute the philosophical and judicial bases of the system (...) We may criticize the imperfections of the capitalist and parliamentary systems (...) but it would be a mistake and a falsehood to concentrate all of our efforts in the criticism of capitalism, and not to denounce, at least with the same energy, the regime at the other side of the iron curtain.”

“It is so easy to pretend to be above the two contending blocks, under the pretext of being faithful to anarchist principles (...) the USSR since 1917 has been expanding its political empire (...) while the US has abandoned the Philipines, has given back Mexican oil to the Mexicans (...) our movement managed to grow in France, Italy, in Germany, wherever the Allied Armies triumphed (...) the dilemma of anarchism and that of all humanity is the election between freedom or slavery” (Mintz, op.cit., pp.3–4)

In fact, Western capitalism is keen on showing a “clean face” while pointing at the abominations of “socialist” totalitarianism, which are denounced as “evils”, alien to lofty capitalist liberalism. In fact, whatever happened in “State socialism” is no exception to this particular model of development, but also happened in a more or less protracted period of time under traditional capitalist development. Let me quote Bricmont at length on this issue because I do think he opens up good space for debate on the issue of “socialist” vs. capitalist development, which is not necessarily in contradiction with Wayne Price’s thesis, although he deals with it from a different angle:

“Just imagine a mafia godfather who, as he grows old, decides to defend law and order and starts attacking his lesser colleagues in crime, preaching brotherly love and the sanctity of human life –all this while holding on to his ill-gotten gains and the income they provide. Who would fail to denounce such flagrant hypocrisy? And yet, strangely enough, scarcely anyone seems to see the parallel with the West’s self-anointed role as defender of human rights, although the similarities are considerable (...) Wars, colonialism, child labour, autocracy and pillage are (...) very much part of the roots of our present civilization (...) To start with, our Mafioso would not be wrong, in the abstract, to defend respect for the law and brotherly love. But he would be hypocritical. The same reproach can be addressed to the Western discourse of human rights and for exactly the same reasons” (Bricmont, pp. 73–74)

“If the Russians have done with the Chechens what the white Americans did with the Amerindians, there would be no conflict in Chechnya today (...) If Yugoslavia or China had enjoyed a long period of modern economic development allowing them to reach a dominant position on a world scale, the situation of Kosovo or Tibet might well be similar to that of Brittany or Wales, or, at the worst, Corsica or the Basque country.

(...) If you really stop to think about all these aspects of the modern economic development of various countries, you cannot help but be struck by the quantity of suffering involved, and that the first countries to undertake that adventure have had the means to prevent those who came later from really following the same course. The first major industrialization, that of Britain, was linked to the conquest of a vast empire providing raw materials, markets, and space for its own population expansion. All the major European powers proceeded to carve out colonies as they industrialized, causing untold suffering to the conquered peoples. In the second wave of industrialization, the United States, Germany and Japan all practiced protectionism to build the strength of their industries. The United States had the further advantage of enormous territorial expansion, at the expense of the indigenous population, followed by a Monroe Doctrine ‘closed door’ policy in Latin America and ‘open door’ policy elsewhere in the world, ensuring the United States the advantages of imperialism beyond its actual colonies (the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii). As for Germany and Japan, the drive to catch up with the Atlantic powers by gaining their own colonial empires was a major factor leading to the two world wars. The next great power to industrialize was the Soviet Union. There, it was the internal population who bore the brunt, in the absence of tropical colonies to exploit. It was all the easier for Western intellectuals to stigmatize Soviet development in that they could compare the situation there with contemporary Britain and France, rather than with their colonies or with the conditions marking their own industrialization.” (Bricmont, pp.79–81)

Talking about the “death toll” of so-called “communism”, an all-time favourite subject of capitalism’s apologists and an issue which Wayne Price does not study in detail in this book, Jean Bricmont rightly states that Western obstruction to progressive measures in Third World countries (with its long-standing tradition of support to dictatorships, autocracies and neo-colonial puppets of all shapes and forms):

“has cost not millions but hundreds of millions of lives destroyed by hunger, disease and poverty. To give a simple example, in 1989 the economists Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen estimated that, starting from similar basic conditions, China and India followed different paths of development and that the difference between the social systems of the two countries (notably in regard to health care) resulted in 3.9 million more deaths annually in India. This means that India seems to manage to fill its cupboard with more skeletons every eight years than China put there in its years of shame, 1958 to 1961 [ie, the so-called Great Leap Forward] Of course, the Chinese famines are regularly blamed on communism, but it would not occur to anybody to blame extra Indian deaths on capitalism or democracy” (p.39)

That both during the Moscow Trials as well as during the period of purges opened by the Cultural Revolution in China many dozens of thousands were killed is a monstrosity. Yet, there are

dubious grounds to speak of millions executed around that time – most of the millions attributed to so-called State socialism are a result of their industrialization and economic development-related events of famines. Yet, this is the unavoidable result of capitalist development, whether in its liberal or statist variety, and the Western “democracies” are quick to hide their own skeletons in their closet by pointing out to Stalin’s or Mao’s victims. In those cases, neither China nor the USSR were exceptional but rather the rule, following the example set by Britain, the US and France among others, but over a shorter period of time and with their own populations carrying the bulk of the burden instead of distributing it to their colonies (the USSR would only have the benefit of doing so after the ‘50s, but at that point the bases of industry had already been laid). Let us remember: in today’s US-dominated world, 23,000 people die daily just of hunger (let alone preventable diseases, lack of safe access to water, etc.). They are no less victims of the system as those who died during the Great Leap Forward or the years of forced collectivisation and industrialisation in the USSR .

Finally, it is important to remark on the State Capitalism argument that the State not only became a cradle for a new ruling class, as Wayne Price rightly asserts, but also an asylum for elements of the former, pre-revolutionary, ruling class, who often made their way into the State apparatus as technicians, experts and bureaucrats where they managed to subsist with new privileges in the new circumstances and reproduce themselves as a distinctive class within the new bureaucratic ruling class. This is looked into in some detail, and from his own peculiar perspective, by Charles Bettelheim in his classic two-volume book, “Class Conflict in the USSR”. This, by the way, was nothing new to a revolution – from the times of the French Revolution, the old aristocracy found ways to hold key positions in the revolutionary state, even at the peak of the terror in 1794, and more so after Thermidor (for this experience, which gives a long-term perspective on the problem of the state divorcing the revolutionary power from the direct bodies of the people, there is nothing like Daniel Guerin’s classic book “Class Struggle in the First French Republic”).

This is a remarkable book and an excellent follow-up to *The Abolition of the State*, and I would argue it is mandatory reading for anarchist communists – this is a book that is both enjoyable reading and thought-provoking. At least it made me think a lot, particularly the last part, where I think there’s far more to be discussed; this is not, of course, up to Wayne Price alone but can only be the product of collective theoretical production, but he has done a big favour by kick starting this debate in the libertarian milieu.

It is welcome and refreshing to read a book presenting a clear and consistent theoretical framework for revolutionary anarchism in the 21st Century that can appeal to people outside our ranks with its simple, no non-sense approach.

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