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# A Case for Anarchist Class Analysis

Why it Works Better than the Marxist Approach and  
What it Means for Struggles

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the state. Rather than taking the shortcut of the DOP – a road to nowhere – or hoping capitalism will automatically or inevitably unite the working class, anarchism advocates careful organising and mass education, knowing that only a conscious people can replace elite rule.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Knowles, R. (2004). *Political Economy From Below: Economic Thought in Communitarian Anarchism, 1840- 1914*. Routledge. P. 7.

miss as “petty bourgeois” without any proof at all (and a lot of evidence to the contrary).

The anarchist theory retains Marxism’s valuable emphasis on class, as well as accepts a great deal of Marxist economics. But a distinctive contribution of the anarchist perspective on class and class analysis, and to the discourse on class, is the argument that class theory needs to be delinked from a reduction of class to economics, and the related argument that the state must be seen as an entity that, in itself, generates classes. It is a centralised apparatus, and while the elite at the top can be changed, it will only change the personnel, not the role of the state itself as a site of minority class rule. Those at the top of the state have class interests that are basically the same as private capitalist elites – and at odds with the mass of the people.

Politically this means that the state cannot be used to end the class system, as the misleading DOP idea claims, since it requires minority classes to exist. It cannot bring about emancipation: as Bakunin said, “No state – not even the reddest republic – can ever give the people what they really want.”<sup>31</sup> The state cannot be the guardian angel of the people against capitalism, since it is in essence allied to capitalism and identical to it, in that it is a structure of class rule.

Therefore for the anarchist, the aim is the complete removal of the state – rather than trying, pointlessly, to use it as a way to change society. The removal of the state is a prerequisite for creating a self-managed, libertarian, bottom-up socialist society without oppression and inequality i.e. an anarchist society. To create such a society requires organising new formations of working class counter-power outside and against the state, in place of creating parties to capture state power; it means organising democratically and from below, unlike the top-down, elitist organising of the capitalists, through their corporations, and the political elites, through

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in van der Walt (2013):54.

The purpose of this pamphlet is giving a coherent, comparative analysis on how anarchists and Marxists view the concept of “class,” and the political implications of each approach. Class is the nucleus of both Marxism and anarchism; however the conceptualisation of class is different for both. In pointing out these differences, it is my hope that I will convincingly show how and why the anarchist conceptualisation of class is more comprehensive and more useful, providing a more holistic analysis of many related aspects of class, and a more practical political guide. In particular, the anarchist approach – which stresses ownership and control of administration and coercion, not only means of production, as with Marxism – allows us to develop an effective analysis of why the state simply cannot be used to emancipate the popular classes i.e. the working class, the poor and the peasantry.

## Theory Matters

The use of theory within the Left has serious implications in our lived experiences and political praxis. Theory has been deployed for, and many times profoundly shaped, political action. Simply put, how we analyse the problem shapes what we see as the solution.

It is therefore essential that activists and the Left, in general, not only know and understand the differences between anarchists and Marxists, but remain cognisant of the implications these differing views have for day-to-day struggle. Like the Marxists, our theory as anarchists is, from the outset, not developed by arm-chair reasoning, or by intellectual work for the simple pleasure it brings, but as a means of change. Anarchism was designed by and by, the working class in its struggles, and so, it must be tested and regulated by everyday struggles. If we have bad theory, we have bad practice; we need theory to understand what we are fighting and to understand how it can change.

## The Marxists on Class

In the teachings of Marxism, class is defined as a social relationship built around differential possession and rights over the means of production i.e. raw materials, tools and equipment, including machinery, used in production.<sup>1</sup> It is the relationship to the means of production that defines class. Not all societies have classes. But in class-based societies there is, the argument goes, a small group (an upper, or ruling, class) that owns the means of production, which locates that group of people in a position of dominance over a much larger group (a producing class) that is marked by its lack of control and ownership over these means of production.

Classes are therefore a relation of production, and this relationship is characterised by exploitation: the class lacking control and ownership has to work for the owning class, and earns less in return than it produces, and is therefore exploited; since it is without ownership, it is dominated – ruled – by the owning class, and we have thereby a situation where the majority is both an exploited and a dominated class, suffering all sorts of oppressions, besides exploitation, as it, the lower class, is bled out for the benefit of the few. So, class relations are social relations, based on the different class positions of different individuals i.e. class differences in rights and powers over the forces of production.<sup>2</sup>

Marxist class analysis highlights conflict as intrinsic to class relations. The fact of exploitation means that in class societies, there is a structured relation of inequality between the main classes. The livelihood of the exploiters can only be secured by the constant, systematic exploitation of the oppressed lower class. Therefore within class societies, exploitation is structural – it's not just about bad conditions and bad attitudes, but built-in – and describes the core type of relationship that exist between the

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, E.O. (2005). *Foundations of a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis*. In E.O. Wright (ed.). *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 4–30.

<sup>2</sup> Wright (2005).

The more holistic conceptualisation of the state is important in the anarchist approach, and explains how *the state itself* is a part of the class systems, creating and giving space to a minority system of rulership that inevitably concentrates power and wealth in the hands of a few. The state's hierarchical structure is in the very DNA of the state; it centralises power in the hands of a small elite, and does so by no means accidentally.

## Conclusion: Counter-Power, Not State Power

When comparing anarchism and Marxism, it becomes clear from the very beginning that one is speaking of “warring brothers.” Marxism, although interesting, complex and investigative, as well as an important influence on anarchism itself, is outdone by anarchism for the simple reason that Marxism has some fundamental errors in its analysis – and therefore in its strategy.

Marxist theory has a strong economically reductionist and teleological thread, which insists on trying to force everything into an explanation in which the economy is the prime mover – even when this is clearly false. This is one of the main reasons that the Marxist perspective simply fails to properly understand the state – despite the fact that the state is central to society, and despite the fact that the Marxist theory for transition is all about getting state power through a DOP. Related to this, Marxism has a surprisingly weak theory of class.

Sadly Marxism has tended to be quite impervious to criticism. This is partly because of a tendency to assume that Marxism is a science, while not scientifically testing key claims, such as economic reductionism, and while insisting on ideas that cannot be scientific, such as a teleological theory of history. The view that Marxism is the one true working class theory has also led to a ready dismissal of criticism by labelling critics as “anti-working class,” as has long been done with the anarchists, who many Marxists dis-

of everything. Since the state is seen as simply a shadow thrown by the class society, once that class society ends – when the DOP has done its job – the state will somehow “wither away,” in Engels’ words.<sup>30</sup>

This does make sense in Marxist terms: remove the cause (class-divided base) then you remove the effect (class-state). But what if, as argued earlier, the state is not just an effect, not just a shadow, but *itself* a site of class power, based not on elite control of means of production as such, but on elite control of means of administration and coercion?

That would mean the Marxist party running the DOP would be part of the ruling class, ruling *over* the working class, distinct from it, dominating it and requiring it to be exploited. Now if that same political elite also became the economic elite – by using its administrative and coercive powers to nationalise (capture) the means of production and suppress any private economic elite – then obviously it would also exploit the working class directly. It would have its own class interests and it would crack down on workers resistance, strike and dissent. And this is precisely what happened in the USSR and similar states where the working class was systematically crushed by self-described Marxist states.

The blindness of Marxism towards other aspects of class and the its weak theory of the state that results for historical materialism led Marxists to create DOPs – but in doing so, to simply end up as new ruling classes, oppressing the very people they set out to emancipate.

This is exactly what the anarchists had in mind when they argued (like Kropotkin) that “state... and capitalism are inseparable concepts,” and insisted (like Bakunin) that revolutionary Marxist states would end up as a type of brutal “state capitalism,” not socialism at all.

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<sup>30</sup> van der Walt (2013).

classes. What this also means is that class societies are based on a core *contradiction*: there are fundamentally opposed class interests, since the oppressed class is harmed by exploitation and resists it, while the oppressor class needs exploitation and imposes it.<sup>3</sup>

The silver lining in this structural darkness is that exploitation means dependence: the upper class has to rely on the low class for its incomes and so, its very survival; its very existence as a class is inevitably linked to the existence of the class system. However, this creates a pressure point, massive structural leverage that the lower classes can use against the upper class to win reforms. In short, the lower class can disrupt production, and therefore force concessions from the upper class, and the upper class cannot exterminate, replace or remove the lower class.

For Marxism, it is important to note here, the owning class also controls the state – the army, the administration, the government – due to its economic dominance of society, which then acts as a machine to keep this unjust system going. Since the two main classes have different interests, they are involved in a class struggle, and this struggle, the existing state is aligned to the owning class. This is why, for example, police kill strikers not bankers.

## The Marxist Idea of “Historical Materialism”

Why the focus on the *means of production*? Marxist theory views society as basically structured around the *mode of production*, which is a mixture of a specific set of forces of production (means of production plus labour) and specific relations of production (specific class system), each mode operating on specific historic laws. For example, capitalism has machine-based forces of production, and is a society based on a wage-earning lower class (working class/ proletariat) exploited by capitalist class

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<sup>3</sup> Wright (2005): 28.

(bourgeoisie) compelled to make profits by selling goods and services.

Beyond this, Marxism tends to see history moving through a series of ever-more advanced modes of production until we are in a position in which a classless mode of production can emerge through a socialist transition. In this sense, Marxism can be generally understood as explaining the history of the economy in order to explain the history of society.<sup>4</sup>

For Marxism, society's laws, ideas, politics and culture are all a superstructure that rests on an economic base. These "superstructural" elements are very real, very solid, but they are basically seen as a *product* of something deeper and even more solid, the "base." In Marxism the economic base is the determiner of what type of society will exist, and what type of class relations will occur, and how power will be produced and used.<sup>5</sup>

In Marxist reasoning, the base leads to everything else. It is the prime mover. This is exactly why each type of society is defined in terms of a mode of *production*, why the historical laws of each mode are basically about the dynamics in the *economy*, and why the core social relations are the relation to the means of *production*, why in fact class is itself seen as a relation of *production*,<sup>6</sup> and why there is the Marxist idea that the state serves the *economically* dominant class.

Marxism also believes its model of society to be scientific, and thus its political programme is not just a programme, but truth, not just a prophecy about change, but a set of scientific predictions. Obviously this claim to science is easily translated into the idea

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<sup>4</sup> De Vroey, M. (1980). *Managers and Class Relations: a Marxist View of Ownership and Control*. In T. Nichols (ed.), *Capital and Labour: A Marxist Primer*. London: Fontana.

<sup>5</sup> Wright (2005): 29.

<sup>6</sup> van der Walt, Lucien. (2017), "Anarchism and Marxism", in N. Jun (ed.), *The Brill Companion to Anarchist Philosophy*. Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden. Pp. 505–550.

I also argued that both Marxists and anarchists see class as the central fact of capitalist society, and maintain that a class struggle – ending in the victory of the oppressed, exploited classes – is the key means of breaking out of capitalism and ending its state. I have also argued that anarchists agree with a great amount of the Marxist analyses of capitalism, although not everything.

The theories differ in some important ways, as I have shown. The Marxist model centres on the idea of historical materialism, with its base/ superstructure model, while the anarchists have insisted that while economic factors are very important, ideas, politics, the state and other factors all play their own role, and this cannot be reduced to the economy. One expression of this is that, while Marxists reduce "class" to ownership of the means of production, anarchists see "class" in terms of ownership or control of the means of administration, or coercion, or production, or any combination of these.

But what does this really mean in practical terms? It had huge implications for political strategy. Marxists have historically insisted that the DOP is the road to socialism – essentially you need state power to defeat capitalism. Anarchists have disagreed, arguing this would in fact create a new elite.

When we unpack the different theories at play – including the different understanding of class – this difference makes perfect sense, and I would say also shows the anarchist scepticism of the DOP is well-founded and far more realistic than the Marxists' faith.

In the classical Marxist tradition, the state is conceptualised as a "body of armed men" serving the dominant class, to use Lenin's paraphrase of Marx.<sup>29</sup> Here the state is not really theorised, except as something generated by the needs of something outside of itself: the economically dominant class. The possibility that the state has its own dynamics and interests is ruled out by the historical materialist theory, where the real action is in the base, the prime cause

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<sup>29</sup> van der Walt (2013).

growing its power of coercion, and in the second, because capitalist innovations also enable the development of the forces of administration and coercion.<sup>25</sup> For example, a large and efficient capitalist steel industry is key to the production of weapons, while capitalist software used to monitor workers in the private sector is also very useful for state surveillance.

So, the anarchist theory distinguishes between economic power and state power, but unlike the Marxist narrow conception where the state “serves” the interests of the capitalists in some way, where in effect the capitalists are the top dog and the state is basically subordinate, the anarchist theory argues that both camps share generally common *interests*, but neither of them use the other as a means to an end.<sup>26</sup> The state elite needs capital accumulation to fund and arm itself; the private elite needs the state’s power to maintain capital accumulation.<sup>27</sup>

The anarchist perspective views the typical ruling class under capitalism as having “two wings: private capitalists centred on means of production in corporations, and state managers, centred on means of administration and coercion in the state,”<sup>28</sup> although these can merge, as was the case in the USSR

## What this Means for Revolutionary Change

In the beginning of this paper I argued that Marxism, and anarchism, as a theories aiming to fundamentally change society, must be tested in struggles – and are theories that are meant to be used in struggles. This means that we need to consider carefully the theories in terms of their usefulness and in terms of their political implications.

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<sup>25</sup> van der Walt (2013).

<sup>26</sup> van der Walt (2013).

<sup>27</sup> van der Walt (2013).

<sup>28</sup> van der Walt (2013).

that the “truth” of Marxism is non-debatable – can you “debate” gravity? – and, as such, there is no room for competing ideologies. Since Marxism claims to be scientific, and that its view is the one, true working class ideology, all other approaches are at best unscientific, and at worst represent the views of other classes e.g. the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, feudalists, lumpen-proletariat etc.

This act of grand-standing by Marxism gets taken to the point where Marxism is presented as created by history – as a merely a “discovery” of reality – and not as a set of ideas initially devised by a few men in a specific context: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the 1840s. In this depiction Marx is becomes merely a scientist describing the facts, and the description (Marxism) an all-knowing model that is never wrong, and which explains where we come from and where we are going: a History with a final destination (teleology), that just happens to correspond precisely to what Marx and Engels believed should happen.

So, Marx believed the working class was duty-bound by History to move into a certain direction, and to end up with a revolutionary state, a Dictatorship of the Proletariat (DOP), and since the proletariat’s “real” ideology is supposedly Marxism that meant a DOP run by the Marxists. It was not about what the working class wanted or needed, but rather, about what the working class supposedly was, and was consequently compelled to do i.e. it was all about the historical purpose bestowed on them from the very beginning of time.<sup>7</sup>

## The Marxists’ Valuable Contributions

As this paper continues to unfold it should be made clear that Marxism cannot be taken as scientific, but that one can certainly use parts of it and benefit from this, for there are many parts that help generate scientific knowledge. Marxism is not a “science,” but

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<sup>7</sup> van der Walt (2017).

is rather than ideology that mixes some scientific elements (like a profound analysis of capitalism: Marxist economics) with unprovable and unscientific claims (like teleology, the necessity of the DOP, the claim to be the one, true working class theory and so on).

If we put aside the criticisms of the political agenda and the grandstanding claims of Marxism, great credit must go to Marxism for its powerful analysis of capitalism, the precision and attention to detail it brings to bear, its ability to highlight and name many things, which, now conceptualised, can be debated and contested.

If nothing else, Marxism is a powerful and challenging set of ideas that have undoubtedly contributed to the development of scientific ideas – even if just as an object of critique. Anarchism itself emerged through debates over Marxism in the 1860s and 1870s, and remains deeply influenced by Marxist economics.<sup>8</sup> However, anarchism is not Marxism and breaks with it in key ways – and one of the breaks is over the issue of how we understand “class.”

Marxist class analysis builds on the concepts of exploitation and domination, and when this applied to modern capitalism, it is a profound criticism of (the dominant) liberal economic theory, which sees capitalism as a benevolent system based on the choices of free individuals. Marxism locates individuals in classes, stresses the unequal relations between the classes, and the exploited and dominated nature of the working class, and the contradictions in capitalism. In doing so it explodes the liberal myths of free markets and free choice, with a picture of inequality, crisis and oppression.

While the liberals focus on exchange – choices within markets – Marxism unpacks the relationship between exchange and production in capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Marxists use class analysis to emphasise the close links between the ways in which social relations are organised within exchange and within production: for example, working

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<sup>8</sup> van der Walt (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Wright (2005).

most means of administration and coercion are in the state, so here we have the ruling class structured into two wings. In many post-colonial African countries, the state elite tended to be comprised of a local elite, mostly from indigenous races, and merging from the educated “middle” class, which rode to power through the nationalist movements that captured state power at independence, while private capital tended to be foreign, usually owned by large multinational companies. Here we have two wings, but while in the USA the two wings tended to both be mainly American, in these African cases, the one wing was local, the other foreign.

In all cases there are tussles between different sections of the elite – based in different pillars, as well as conflicts between those in different pillars – but there is a common class interest in keeping the system going which usually helps keep it together.

Coming closer to home in demonstrating a comprehensive analysis using anarchism, van der Walt’s piece on *Who Rules South Africa* gives a close look at the South African ruling class, and does so in an intricate detail showing of the strength of anarchist approach. His analysis argues that in post-apartheid South Africa, there exist two main ruling class camps: one that is made up of mostly black individuals, who are the core of the state elite, and the second camp is largely of white individuals, in the private corporate elite. These two ruling class camps have clashes – for example, the state elite wants more tax, the private elite, less – but these contradictions are secondary; they share a common enemy, the South African working class.<sup>24</sup>

## Rivals or Allies or Instruments?

In explaining the class relations one can see that the state ruling class requires capital accumulation” to take place, first to generate tax so it is able to keep spending on arming its military and

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<sup>24</sup> van der Walt (2013).

## Applying the Anarchist Approach: The Soviet and South African Cases

Using anarchist theory provides a more comprehensive analysis at what is happened within complex modern society. The anarchist, unlike the Marxist, uses a more holistic term: a “ruling class” rather than, for example, a “capitalist class.” The term “capitalist class” which Marxists use for capitalist society’s ruling group just does not accurately capture the ruling group in the state. It continues the economic focus, reducing the ruling class to the *economically* dominant class. But *political* domination through the state is essential for the survival of the economically dominant group – through armed forces and state control – and it involves means of power not reducible to economic power – coercion and administration.

By saying “ruling class,” we are speaking in detail of what is happening in the penthouse layer of society: within the ruling class we are acknowledging that there exist different types of elites, the *economic elite*, or capitalists, and the *political elite*, or state managers, and we are positing that “State + Capital = Ruling Class.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore when conceptualising class relations, anarchists look at three pillars that can be used to help locate which class an individual can be found in. The first one is production which is neatly covered by Marxism the second one is administration and the last one is coercion.<sup>22</sup> Fatton called such elements “class powers.”<sup>23</sup>

Obviously the exact way a given ruling class is structured – how the pillars fit together, and who is in each – can vary. In the USSR, all means of administration, coercion and production were centralised into a single state. In the United States of America, most means of production tend to be in the hands of private capitalists, and

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<sup>21</sup> van der Walt (2013).

<sup>22</sup> van der Walt (2016).

<sup>23</sup> Fatton (1988): 255.

class people are not just consumers, but also people who have to sell themselves for wages in order to survive. This is an example of how differences of ownership and non-ownership of the means of production play out. There is structured variation in how individuals can exercise choices, and these come down to different rights and powers over productive forces i.e. the prearranged class relations.<sup>10</sup>

## Where does Anarchist Class Analysis Differ from Marxism?

Anarchists aim to separate all the good of Marxism from the bad, and build on that good, to develop something different. In this sense, anarchists critically appropriate Marxist theory, but shear it of its economic reductionism, teleology, DOP doctrine and associated party-building focus, while developing a much larger critique of society that opposes all forms of hierarchy.

## Class Analysis without Base / Superstructure

In the first place, the anarchists do not agree with the Marxist model of historical materialism. Anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin and Rudolph Rocker completely accepted the Marxist claim that economic factors were enormously important. For example, it is a fact that many wars are waged to get access to cheap labour and cheap raw materials. However, they rejected the idea that everything can be derived from or reduced to the base.<sup>11</sup> Ideas, laws, politics and culture – and the dynamics of the state itself – cannot always be read off the economy. For example, a state based on an ideology of nationalism will often engage in activities like deporting

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<sup>10</sup> Wright (2005).

<sup>11</sup> van der Walt (2017).

undocumented immigrants because they are foreign, even though this limits the supply of cheap labor to many capitalists. War, too, can be due to rivalries in the state system – rather than economic issues, as Bakunin argued. The apartheid state definitely benefited capitalism by providing cheap, unfree black African labour, but it's very difficult to see what laws – strictly imposed – that banned sex across the race line had to do with capitalism or the economic “base.”

The whole idea that history is going in a definite direction is also, as Piotr Kropotkin argued, a completely unscientific “meta-physical” view – and many of Marxism’s specific predictions have proved false.<sup>12</sup>

For example, Marshall Berman in his book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* noted that Marx’s stress on the incredibly disruptive nature of capitalism undermined Marx’s prediction that capitalist society would polarise into a small, unified capitalist class facing a vast, increasingly united and conscious working class, set on creating the DOP.<sup>13</sup> If working classes were continually disrupted, uprooted, and disintegrated, argued Berman, how would the conscious global working class get a chance to form itself into a coherent agent that can unite and overthrow the system?

Marx believed that divisions of age, gender and nationality would be eroded by capitalist development, but it could equally be argued that the endless disruptions of capitalism would continually inflame these divisions. Post-apartheid South Africa, which has an official ideology of non-racialism, non-sexism and African belonging typifies this analysis, having the working class fractured by divides of women/ men, black/ coloured/ Indian/ white, and South African/ foreign. If the working class is continuously put in a blender and chopped up – as Marx predicted – how can

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<sup>12</sup> van der Walt (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Berman, Marshall. (1988). *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. Penguin.

Serbia in the 1800s, the USSR in the 1920s, or independent Kenya in the 1960s economic power? *It was the “means” – the resources – built into the state itself.* These are the *means of coercion* (the military, police, courts, and jails, in short armed force) and *means of administration* (the governing apparatus, including bureaucratic systems, government departments, parliament, and so on, in short the bodies that enable making and administering law).

It is these, which allow those who control the state to extract taxes, to nationalise means of production, to employ workers, to evict people, decide at the stroke of a pen whether a Zimbabwean living and working in South Africa is “legal” or must be repatriated. Using these resources, the new elites we spoke about earlier were able to take over property, award themselves lucrative contracts and jobs, appoint themselves senior posts in state and private sector, and otherwise act as a ruling group.

For the anarchists, anyone with control or ownership of *any* of these three means – administration, coercion or production – that is any one of these three pillars, is part of the *ruling class*. Not only this, access to any one pillar allows relatively easy movement between the other pillars.

This is why the anarchist conceptualisation of class is quite superior to the Marxist one, as it can easily map out the class position of, say, the President of a country, who is not strictly a capitalist and has no means of production but is surely not a proletarian. He or she has means of administration and coercion who has his or her own interests and agendas. He or she can mobilise armed forces, and legislate. Generally he or she will do so in ways that keep capitalism going, since this generates tax, and tax helps pay for means of administration and coercion. But by having his or her own independent power base – in the state apparatus itself – he or she is no simple tool of the capitalists, and can make demands upon them, even disrupt them in major ways including in some cases by nationalising means of production.

with a fair amount of Marxism. The pure Marxist model – base determines superstructure, rising bourgeoisie wins state power – might apply to some Western countries. But even there it surely does not apply to Germany or Japan, long the second and third most powerful capitalist economies. And surely a neat, textbook Marxism might be a reasonable theory on paper, but it struggles to explain cases like most postcolonial African states.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, Soviet Union), which was the world's first Marxist state, fits into this problem well. In making a revolution in economically backward Russia – which had a mainly feudal, rural society, much poorer than Egypt, India or South Africa today – Marxists like V.I. Lenin did not read the Marxist textbook. But the fact that under Joseph Stalin, and later, in China, under Mao Zedong, it was the state that industrialised the country, again refutes the historical materialist view.

Marxists have tried to dodge this, by saying that this shows how well “socialism” works etc., or a “workers’ state” works, but those argument only makes sense if we accept the DOP theory, but that means throwing out historical materialism – and taking the state seriously as a power in its own right. But then where is Marxism?

Indeed, the USSR and similar states were anything but the actual rule of the actual working class, the proletariat. The state, as noted by writers like Alec Nove, created a new, top-down system: “...one could, without too much exaggeration, fit Soviet society into a universal civil and military service model.”<sup>20</sup>

In such a model, orders come from above, and go down; power is centralised. In the USSR, for example, all means of production were effectively controlled by a small group that controlled the state. In this way, the small elite was a ruling class in the Marxist sense.

But what gave it power over means of production, how did it come to “own” these means? What was it that allowed states like

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<sup>20</sup> Nove, Alec. (1975). Is There A Ruling Class in the USSR? *Soviet Studies*. 27 (4): 616

it be united by the very process of capitalism – as Marx also predicted?<sup>14</sup>

What this means is that there is no real basis for a base/ superstructure model, a serious problem with teleological views, and strong grounds to be highly sceptical of Marxism's claims to be a science.

## The DOP as Contradiction in Marxist Theory

It is worth noting here that there is a contradiction within the Marxist theory itself on these same issues. The materialist conception of history argues that society moves fundamentally in a way that can be extrapolated from the economic base, this applying to everything we see and do, including the world of ideas; in this view the state itself is a superstructure, emerging as the *product* of the rise of class society, with class society, of course, seen basically in terms of a society becoming fractured between owners and non-owners of means of production, and the owners needing a state to defend themselves.

But the Marxist theory of transition from capitalism to communism centres in the idea of a DOP. This is a revolutionary *state*, which is supposed to create socialism by suppressing the capitalist class, taking over the means of production, and supposedly representing the working class. It goes without saying that for Marxists the DOP will be a Marxist state, since Marxism claims to be the one true working class ideology and the DOP is supposed to be the one true working class state.

Marx and Engels always insisted against Bakunin and Kropotkin that a working class revolution could only take place through a Marxist state, a DOP, and that the DOP was essential to expropriate the capitalists of the means of production, suppress their violent resistance and start to construct a new planned economy. The DOP

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<sup>14</sup> Berman (1988).

enables the socialist mode of production, in which the formerly oppressed working class suppresses the formerly exploiting capitalist class. When it has done its job, there are no classes, and we come into a classless communist mode of production, which is the end of the story.

But if when looking at the nature of the DOP, one can see that it is a *state*, and so, a superstructure. But now, suddenly, the state is no longer a reflection of the base as the theory prescribes and in fact its ideology – Marxism – also does not clearly come from that base. The DOP emerges within the capitalist mode of production but it is not determined by it. It is a *superstructure* that is used to then revolutionise the base and change society. But if the superstructure can change the base, then either the Marxist theory of historical materialism is wrong or the DOP theory is wrong. In either case, this is an incoherent jump in the Marxist system that questions its reliability and highlights its non-scientific nature.<sup>15</sup>

If it is the DOP that will begin to create a better society using state power, and this means in the first place creating a new base – a new set of social relations of production – how can this be reconciled with the Marxist insistence that everything originally comes from and reflects the base, even the state? That would mean the DOP reflects the base, and if so, the DOP cannot emerge under capitalism, but if it does not emerge under capitalism it is pointless. Or we have a situation where the DOP does emerge, but this means suddenly the opposite happens: superstructure determines base. So which is it?

## Class Analysis beyond Means of Production

But then, second, if the historical materialist theory of society falls away, and we have to take the state, ideas, culture and politics seriously in their own right – as *irreducible* phenomena, which are

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<sup>15</sup> van der Walt (2017).

linked to economic issues but also distinct<sup>16</sup> – what is the basis for insisting with the Marxists that class must be reduced to a relation of production, or defined by ownership / non-ownership of the means of production? Economic issues are essential but are they enough?

If the economy is no longer the determining factor in society, is there any specific reason to insist that class is basically, and only, about a relation to the means of production, or even to insist that the state is controlled by an economically dominant group? If the state has its own dynamics, what does this mean for understanding class?

Bakunin noted in the 1870s that new ruling elites could emerge from within the state, as former nationalist leaders used state power to become exploiting, dominating elites: he gave the example of Serbia in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> Lucien van der Walt noted how, in the late industrialising powers of Germany and Japan, states led by modernising feudal lords created capitalist industry for military purposes.<sup>18</sup> The work of Robert Fatton highlighted how postcolonial African states enabled elite accumulation and the formation of new ruling classes, which some have called a “bureaucratic bourgeoisie.”<sup>19</sup>

These examples go against the economic determinism found in Marxism: here we see political (state) power generate economic (capitalist) power, which is the opposite of historical materialism argues. It is important to look at such cases seriously and to avoid the arm chair reasoning that skips empirical tests, as is the case

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<sup>16</sup> van der Walt (2017).

<sup>17</sup> See van der Walt, Lucien. (2016). *Back to the Future: Revival, Relevance and Route of an Anarchist/ Syndicalist Approach for Twenty-First-Century Left, Labour and National Liberation Movements*. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 34 (3): 348–367.

<sup>18</sup> van der Walt (2016).

<sup>19</sup> Fatton, Robert. (1988). *Bringing the Ruling Class Back in: Class, State and Hegemony in Africa*. *Comparative Politics*. 20 (3): 253–264.