

Detailed reply to ‘International Socialism’

**Debating power and revolution in anarchism, ‘Black Flame,’ and historical
Marxism**

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The growth of a significant anarchist and syndicalist¹ presence in unions, in the larger anti-capitalist milieu, and in semi-industrial countries, has increasingly drawn the attention of the Marxist press. *International Socialism* carried several interesting pieces on the subject in 2010: Paul Blackledge's "Marxism and Anarchism" (issue 125), Ian Birchall's "Another Side of Anarchism" (issue 127), and Leo Zeilig's review of Michael Schmidt and my book *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism* (also issue 127).² In *Black Flame*, besides a wealth of historical material and historiographical debate, we provide probably the most systematic overview to date of the anarchist and syndicalist tradition's internal debates and varying positions on a wide range of questions, including trade unionism, anti-imperialism and national liberation, gender and race, Bolshevism and the Soviet Union, post-revolutionary economic and social reconstruction, and the role of specifically anarchist political organisations.

Paul's discussion of what Marxists view as anarchism's flaws is written in a comradely tone. He also notes, quite correctly, that too often our traditions engage in a "caricatured non-debate" rather than a useful discussion.³ Ian stresses that in practice the "lines between anarchism and Marxism are often blurred."⁴ Leo praises *Black Flame* as "a fascinating account of the often obscured history of anarchists, their organisations and history."⁵ In this regard, I found Paul and Ian's commentary refreshingly open.

This goodwill is to be commended, and I will try in my response to attain the same tone. Many misunderstandings have arisen between our two traditions, but there are also real divergences in perspective and analysis; our entangled history has had both its good and bad sides. This calls for a comradely but also frank debate on the principles and strategies needed to usher the contemporary world into a radically democratic, post-capitalist era. It also requires some discussion of historical experiences, since these are an essential reference point for current struggle. In addition, I agree with Leo that we always need to speak in a precise manner, given that neither anarchism nor Marxism is homogenous; each tradition is contested, and some criticisms that apply to one tendency cannot fairly be applied to others.

¹ I use the term "syndicalist" in its correct (as opposed to its pejorative) sense to refer to the revolutionary trade unionism that seeks to combine daily struggles with a revolutionary project i.e., in which unions are to play a decisive role in the overthrow of capitalism and the state by organizing the seizure and self-management of the means of production. These ideas emerged from the anarchist wing of the First International, and the works of Bakunin, and the first examples were anarchist-led unions in Spain (1870), Mexico (1876), the United States (1884), and Cuba (1885). A discussion of these issues falls outside this paper; the key point is that syndicalism is an anarchist *strategy*. "Anarcho-syndicalism" and "revolutionary syndicalism" are variants of syndicalism, and are thus both covered by that term. I use the term "broad anarchist tradition" to include both anarchism and syndicalism.

² *Black Flame* is volume one of our "Counter Power: new perspectives on global anarchism and syndicalism" series. Volume two will be *Global Fire: 150 fighting years of international anarchism and syndicalism*. More at black-flame-anarchism.blogspot.com/

³ Paul Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism," *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 125 (2010), p. 132

⁴ I.H. Birchall, "Another Side of Anarchism," *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 127 (2010), p. 177

⁵ Leo Zeilig, "Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition," *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 127 (2009), pp. 221–222

Marxism and anarchism/ syndicalism: convergence and blurred lines

Some basic areas we can, I think, agree on from the start. I gather that the comrades are attracted to Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky precisely because they view these figures as champions of socialism-from-below. Paul writes that the “essence” of their work is “working class self-emancipation.”⁶ Leo speaks of the importance of working class people undertaking “the democratic defence of working class power” through “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.”⁷ The International Socialist Tradition (IST) is one of the only Marxist currents that stresses its commitment to “socialism from below.”

“Working class self-emancipation,” “self-organisation” and “the democratic defence of working class power” – we do not disagree at all on these basic issues. For Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin, social revolution required a movement for self-emancipation “by the only two classes capable of so mighty an insurrection,” “*the workers and the peasants*”⁸ – the popular classes. The “new social order” would be attained “through the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages,” “from the bottom up” and “in the name of revolutionary Socialism.”⁹ With “a widespread popular movement” in “every town and village,” the masses would “take upon themselves the task of rebuilding society,” through associations operating on directly democratic and anti-hierarchical principles.¹⁰ This would be a movement of counter-power and counter-culture, *outside and against* the ruling class, the state and capital. It aims at “a revolutionary power directed against all the established principles of the bourgeoisie,” and opposed to all forms of social and economic inequality.¹¹ (Unsurprisingly, Lenin said “the principle, ‘only from below’ is an *anarchist* principle” – one, I must add, he called “utterly reactionary”).¹²

Presence: the historical impact of anarchism and syndicalism

As Leo points out, this history has been “often obscured.” But what has been obscured? A vast part of class struggle and left thought, and of popular history, not least in the colonial and post-colonial world.

It is easily forgotten that well into the 1950s, anarchism and syndicalism were mass popular class movements, hardly the marginal forces usually presented in Marxist writing. Today, anarchists are again central to the “most determined and combative of the movements” fighting

⁶ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 132

⁷ Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” pp. 221–222

⁸ Mikhail Bakunin, “Letters to a Frenchman on the Current Crisis,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1870] 1971). pp. 185, 189, emphasis in the original

⁹ G.P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* (Glencoe / London: The Free Press / Collier-Macmillan, 1953), pp. 300, 319, 378

¹⁰ Pyotr Kropotkin, “Modern Science and Anarchism,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*, ed. R.N. Baldwin (New York: Dover Publications, [1912] 1970). p. 188

¹¹ Mikhail Bakunin, “Political Action and the Workers,” in *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, ed. K.J. Kenafick (London: Freedom Press, [n.d.] 1990), p. 60

¹² V.I. Lenin, “On the Provisional Revolutionary Government,” in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1905] 1962), p. 477, emphasis in original

capitalist globalisation,¹³ the main pole of attraction for many activists,¹⁴ not least in the recent Greek uprisings of 2008. There is a pervasive spread globally of the anarchist values of bottom-up organising, direct action and refusal to participate in the official political system.¹⁵

Benedict Anderson reminds us that the broad anarchist tradition was long the “dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left”, “the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism”.¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm admits that before 1917, “the revolutionary movement” was predominantly “anarcho-syndicalist”.¹⁷ “Between Marx’s death and Lenin’s sudden rise to power in 1917, orthodox Marxism was in the minority as far as leftist opposition to capitalism and imperialism was concerned – successful mainly in the more advanced industrial and Protestant states of Western and Central Europe, and generally pacific in its political positions.”¹⁸

The notion that anarchism “became a mass movement in Spain to an extent that it never did elsewhere”¹⁹ – that is, of Spanish exceptionalism – is widely held. It is, however, incorrect. Mass movements in the broad anarchist tradition developed in many countries, and the Spanish movement was by no means the largest. Latin America and Asia, for example, provide many examples of powerful and influential anarchist and syndicalist movements, some of which rivalled that of Spain in importance, and anarchism and syndicalism predominated for many years in the colonial and postcolonial world: Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe and Ireland.²⁰

If we use influence in the labour movement as an imperfect although useful measure, the enormous role played by anarchism and syndicalism becomes clear. The Spanish syndicalist unions of the 20th century, representing around half of organised Spanish labour were (considered in relation to the size of the working class and organised labour movement) actually rather *smaller* than the movements in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, France, Mexico, Peru, Portugal and Uruguay, where the broad anarchist tradition dominated almost the entire labour movement.²¹ This is not to dispute the importance of the Spanish experience, but to place it in its correct perspective.

There is revolutionary continuity from then until now, even lasting through anarchism’s dark years, the 1950s to the 1970s, and into the present revival. Thus, the movement maintained a sub-

¹³ Gerald Meyer, “Anarchism, Marxism and the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *Science and Society* 67, no. 2 (2003). p. 218

¹⁴ Barbara Epstein, “Anarchism and the Anti-Globalisation Movement,” *Monthly Review* 53, no. 4 (2001).

¹⁵ Karen Goaman, “The Anarchist Travelling Circus: Reflections on Contemporary Anarchism, Anti-Capitalism and the International Scene,” in *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*, ed. Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 173–174; Uri Gordon, “Anarchism Reloaded,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 1 (2007). Pp. 29–30

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso, 2006), pp. 2,54

¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Abacus, 1993). pp. 72–3. The unusual spelling of “marxism” appears in Hobsbawm’s text.

¹⁸ B. Anderson, “Preface,” in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism and Social Revolution*, ed. Steven J. Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), p. xiv; also see Lucien van der Walt and Steven J. Hirsch, “Rethinking Anarchism and Syndicalism: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience, 1870–1940,” in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism and Social Revolution* ed. Steven J. Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), p. xxxv

¹⁹ James Joll, *The Anarchists* (London: Methuen and Co., 1964). p. 224

²⁰ Van der Walt and Hirsch, “Rethinking Anarchism and Syndicalism: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Experience, 1870–1940.”

²¹ Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (San Francisco, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009), pp. 14–15

stantial union presence from the 1940s until the present, especially in southern Europe and Latin America.²² Anarchists also have a significant record of participation in armed struggles in these years, in Argentina, China, Cuba, Iran, Spain, Uruguay and elsewhere.²³ Anarchists and syndicalists played a role in the Russian underground of the 1950s, including the 1953 gulag uprisings at Karaganda, Norilsk and Vorkuta.²⁴ Russian anarchism then revived during the 1980s, with a significant union presence being established in Baikal and Siberia from the 1990s onwards.²⁵ A revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalist union summit organized in Paris, France, 2007, drew 250 delegates worldwide, the Africans constituting the biggest single continental grouping.²⁶

The point is simple: as a mass movement with a sophisticated theory, anarchism and syndicalism, anarchism and syndicalism deserves more than the deep ignorance on the subject common amongst Marxists.

I think it is rather a pity, then, that Leo's review of *Black Flame* concentrates on what the book said about Marxism— a rather small part of the book's concerns. He feels the book is unfair on Marxism, not least because of the "glaring absence" of a discussion of the "Trotskyist" theory of Soviet state-capitalism,²⁷

The point of *Black Flame* (and of the larger "Counter Power" project) is not, however, to provide a detailed examination of Trotskyism or other Marxist brands. It is to recapture the history and politics of anarchism and syndicalism. An examination of that history must obviously report that anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Maximoff developed theories of state-capitalism decades before Trotskyism even existed.

On sources: avoiding misreadings

The history of the broad anarchist tradition and its debates is complicated one, and cannot be assessed properly without serious study of the literature. It is a fact, a regrettable one, that most of the Marxist press is profoundly ignorant about that history and therefore tends to debate straw-men. Many Marxist analyses of anarchism are self-referential, relying on yet *other*

²² For Latin America from the 1940s to the 1970s, for instance, see Sam Dolgoff, *The Cuban Revolution: a Critical Perspective*, Montréal: Black Rose, 1976, 51–61.; Geoffroy de Laforcade, "A Laboratory of Argentine Labour Movements: Dockworkers, Mariners, and the Contours of Class Identity in the Port of Buenos Aires, 1900–1950" (Yale University, 2001)., 12–17, 311–354; Donald C. Hodges, *Mexican Anarchism after the Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Juan Carlos Mechoso, *Acción Directa Anarquista: Una Historia De Fau* (Montevideo: Recortes, 2002); A. Souchy, *Beware! Anarchist! A Life for Freedom: The Autobiography of Augustin Souchy*, trans. T. Waldinger (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1992)., pp. 142–150, 154. On some recent developments, see *inter alia* Lester Golden, "The Libertarian Movement in Contemporary Spanish Politics," *Antipode: a radical journal of geography* 10/ 3 and 11/ 1 (1979); *Alternative Libertaire*, "Spain: Cgt Is Now the Third Biggest Union," *Alternative Libertaire*, November 2004 2004. ; Dan Jakapovich, "Revolutionary Unionism: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow," *New Politics* 11, no. 3 (2007).

²³ See *inter alia*: interview with H. L. Wei in Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988)., pp. 214 *et seq.*; Verónica Diz and Fernando López-Trujillo, *Resistencia Libertaria* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Madreselva, 2007).; Mechoso, *Acción Directa Anarquista: Una Historia De Fau.*; María Eugenia Jung and Universindo Rodríguez Díaz, *Juan Carlos Mechoso: Anarquista* (Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce, 2006).

²⁴ P. Ruff, *Anarchy in the USSR: A New Beginning* (London: ASP, 1991).pp. 8–10

²⁵ See *inter alia* Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-Syndicalism in the Twentieth Century*, English edition ed. (Edmonton: Black Cat Oress, 2009)., pp. 203–205

²⁶ "i07: Consolidate international solidarity," www.cnt-f.org, accessed 15 November 2008; "Conférences Internationales Syndicales – I07," www.anarkismo.net, accessed 15 November 2008.

²⁷ Leo Zeilig, "Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition," *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 127 (2010)., p. 222

Marxist and pro-Marxist accounts. In many cases, these accounts are demonstrably unreliable, with flawed claims, judgements and generalisations. This approach means that discussions of anarchism and syndicalism by Marxists are often self-referential, anecdotal, narrow, and a series of misunderstandings.

I am not, of course, claiming that this is a universal, let alone uniquely, Marxist fault. It is a mode of writing that, of course, is regrettably shared by some anarchists and syndicalists, as Paul notes with reference to some recent anarchist-identified books.²⁸ I agree with Paul and Leo that anarchists have often caricatured Marxists, but the reverse is true too, and is nothing new. Lenin himself suggested that many Marxists had a merely “philistine” understanding of anarchism—yet he demonstrably misrepresented anarchism in this same text.²⁹ Obviously, this situation perpetuates the problem of “caricatured non-debate” between Marxists and anarchists, from both sides.

Ian commendably distances himself from Hal Draper’s bizarre charge that anarchism was a form of “socialism from above,” stating that Draper was perhaps too “sectarian.”³⁰ But it is this “sectarian” approach that is too often the problem. Draper’s arguments are based on systematically distorting the views of Bakunin and others, in order to suggest that Proudhon was akin to Hitler, and Bakunin to Stalin.³¹ His method is hardly different from Stalin’s smearing of Trotsky as a “fascist agent” – and about as accurate and honest. A full critique of Draper’s method, claims and conclusions take us beyond the scope of this paper; I merely implore Marxist comrades to read his, and similar, claims on anarchism with caution. Anyone using Draper as a guide to understanding anarchism will soon find Draper’s claims are at odds with pretty much any standard anarchist text, not to mention the aims and actions of pretty much any anarchist or syndicalist movements.

Ian cites Serge on the small number of so-called “Soviet anarchists” who supported the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, joining the party and taking senior state positions.³² Some, including Serge, became overt apologists for party dictatorship. Yet if Serge was a talented writer, he was not a good historian, and his accounts of anarchism and syndicalism are often unreliable. This is partly because he was a marginal figure in that movement. According to Ian, Serge said that “the comrades of the anarchosyndicalist group *Golos Truda* (Moscow and Petrograd) have in practice made common cause” with the Bolsheviks, “going so far as to approve of the militarisation of labour.”

This is illustrative of Serge’s inaccuracies. Firstly, even “Soviet anarchists” were routinely arrested.³³ Secondly, while the *Golos Truda* (“Voice of Labour”) group, a significant minority current, supported the October Revolution, it was not “Soviet anarchist.” It wanted “free” i.e. democratic, multi-tendency *soviets* as means of self-management and direct democracy. It criticised the Bolsheviks’ emerging one-party dictatorship, its “state-capitalism” and attacks on the

²⁸ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” pp. 143–144, 151 note 88

²⁹ V.I. Lenin, “The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution,” in *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1917] 1975), pp. 270, 275, 283, 313–314. On Lenin’s text, see Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 1.3 onwards, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

³⁰ Birchall, “Another Side of Anarchism,” pp. 179–180

³¹ See, for instance, Tom Keffer, “Marxism, Anarchism and the Genealogy of “Socialism from Below,”” *Upping the Anti: a journal of theory and action*, no. 2 (2005).

³² Birchall, “Another Side of Anarchism,” p., 178, notably Serge’s *Revolution in Danger*.

³³ : Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 222, 231

peasantry.³⁴ This outlook was, in fact, largely shared by most Russian anarchists and syndicalists. Mindful of the Civil War, the group confined itself to ideological struggle, specifically, to work in the factory committees and *soviets*. And, contrary to Serge's "common cause," the Bolsheviks responded with harassment, then banning its papers in early 1918, then mass arrests of the Confederation of Russian Anarcho-syndicalists (KRAS), which it helped found. G.P. Maximoff, the leading figure in the group, was jailed 6 times, narrowly escaped a death sentence after workers went on strike in solidarity, and was eventually deported.³⁵

In short, we will remain in a "caricatured non-debate" if we rely on caricatures. The materials of the anarchist movement itself – particularly its mainstream rather than its marginal elements, or those who use the anarchist label with no link to *anarchism* – also deserve more thorough and open-minded engagement in Marxist discussions.

Some misunderstandings: anarchism and the armed defence of the revolution

Paul makes three main arguments against anarchism. Firstly he suggests that anarchism is fundamentally flawed by its "anti-political" approach, by which he means its supposed failure to understand the need for a "centralized military force" to defend revolution. Secondly, he asserts that anarchism denies the need for a specific political organisation that can intervene in the class struggle.³⁶ Paul links these two charges to the assertion that anarchism denies "the possibility of real democracy" (presumably unlike Marxism), which is why it is (he asserts) simply unable to understand that there is no contradiction between coordinated action and working class emancipation.³⁷

Thirdly, Paul suggests that anarchists have a "massive misunderstanding of Marxism," neglecting its "essence as *the* theory of working class self-emancipation" (my emphasis). This is a view Leo evidently shares, claiming that *Black Flame* is riddled with "clichés" that would "raise the eyebrows of even right-wing critics" of Marxism.³⁸ Rather than necessarily implying one party-dictatorship and statism, he insists, for the Marxists:

Dictatorship of the proletariat is a term for the democratic defence of working class power. It is regarded as a necessary and temporary form of political control by the working class through their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.

³⁴ G. Lapot' [G.P. Maximoff], "Paths of Revolution," in *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Paul Avrich (London: Thames and Hudson, [22 December 1917] 1973), pp. 104–105; First All-Russian Conference of Anarcho-syndicalists, "Three Resolutions," in *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Paul Avrich (London: Thames and Hudson, [August 1918] 1973), pp. 117–120; on this theory of "state capitalism," see also M. Sergven [G.P. Maximoff], "Paths of Revolution," in *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Paul Avrich (London: Thames and Hudson, [16 September 1918] 1973), pp. 122–125

³⁵ Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour 1913–23* (Dordrecht, Boston, London/ Amsterdam: Kulwer Academic Publishers/ International Institute of Social History, 1989), pp. 96, 98, 100, 164, 179, 197, 200. Maximoff's account of the fate of the Russian Revolution, which includes many useful documents and interviews, is G.P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia: The Leninist Counter Revolution*, (Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, [1940] 1979).

³⁶ Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism," pp. 136, 139, 142

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–134

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132; Zeilig, "Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition," pp. 221–222

“Centralised military force,” for Leo (and, I presume, *International Socialism*), seems to simply mean the coordinated self-defence power of the working class. (Leo adds that the anarchists misrepresent Marxism as economically reductionist and historically determinist).

Let us focus first on the question of armed revolutionary self-defence i.e. on whether, as Paul suggests, anarchists ignore the need for the popular classes to be “organised ideologically, politically and militarily” to defend the revolution.³⁹ This lacuna will not, in fact, be found in the works of Bakunin or Kropotkin – a point that Leo’s review of *Black Flame* in fact concedes.

With the “dissolution of the army, the judicial system ... the police” of the current order, Bakunin argued, “permanent barricades” would be established relying on coordination through deputies with “always responsible, and always revocable mandates,” as well as the “extension of the revolutionary force” within and between the “rebel countries.”⁴⁰ The aim was make a “world-wide revolution” by the “popular masses everywhere,” that will not “put up its sword” until victory with libertarian, socialist “world-wide federation of nations”.⁴¹

Obviously, this meant a measure of legitimate coercion against the defenders of the old order. This would be undertaken by the organs of popular power, but not by a party or military elite. Coercion merely means forcing another party to act in an involuntary manner, diminishing its freedom of choice. It can hardly be expected that capitalists or landowners will voluntarily cede the means of production, or state elites the means of coercion. Nor can it be expected that the “rebel countries” should tolerate coercion by counterrevolutionary armies. As opposed to the use of force and violence to perpetuate hierarchical power and exploitation for a minority, they will use force and violence if necessary, to *defend* a libertarian, socialist order, and central to the *emancipatory* direct action of the majority classes.⁴²

The notion of a peaceful revolution was, stated Errico Malatesta (perhaps the most influential anarchist after Bakunin and Kropotkin), “pure utopia”: revolution is resolved through “main force,” with “victory ... to the strongest.”⁴³ From “the economic struggle one must pass to the political struggle, that is to the struggle against government.”⁴⁴ This position was held by most (although not all – see below) anarchists, revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists, and was therefore a key part of most programmes, and also underlay the formation of anarchist and syndicalist militias and battalions in countries like China, Cuba, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Spain, Russia, the Ukraine and the United States.⁴⁵ The movement usually argued for a combination of

³⁹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 136

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakunin, “The Programme of the International Brotherhood,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1869] 1971). pp. 152–154; also see Bakunin, “Letters to a Frenchman on the Current Crisis.” p. 190

⁴¹ Mikhail Bakunin, “The International Revolutionary Society or Brotherhood,” in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism, Book One*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Edinburgh, San Francisco: AK Press, [1865] 1998)., pp. 135, 137

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 137

⁴³ Errico Malatesta, “Syndicalism: An Anarchist Critique [Sic],” in *The Anarchist Reader*, ed. George Woodcock (Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, [1907] 1977). p. 224. Woodcock’s title caricatures the contents.

⁴⁴ Errico Malatesta, “An Anarchist Programme,” in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, [1920] 1965)., p. 193

⁴⁵ For instance: W.S. Albro, *To Die on Your Feet: The Life, Times and Writings of Praxedis G. Guerrero* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1996).; A. Berkman, *The ABC of Anarchism*, third English ed. (London: Freedom Press, [1929] 1964).; Shin Chae-ho, “Declaration of the Korean Revolution,” in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume 1: From Anarchy to Anarchism, 300 CE to 1939*, ed. R. Graham (Montréal: Black Rose, [1923] 2005)., pp. 374–6; E. C. Ford and W. Z. Foster, *Syndicalism*, facsimile copy with new introduction by J.R. Barrett ed. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, [1912] 1990). pp. 9–13, 29–30; The Friends of Durruti, *Towards a Fresh Revolution* (Durban:

subverting the armed forces of the state, arming the people in coordinated forces, and internationalising any revolutionary eruption.

The need to forcibly defend revolution was recognised by most key figures. In fact, this need was clearly articulated by key anarchist figures, Bakunin and Kropotkin, and Malatesta, but also Pyotr Arshinov, Alexander Berkman, Camillo Berneri, Buenaventura Durruti, Emma Goldman, Praxedis Guerrero, Li Pei Kan (“Ba Jin”), Liu Sifu (“Shifu”), Ricardo Flores Magón, Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, José Oiticica, Albert Parsons, Domingos Passos, Rudolph Rocker, Shin Ch’aeho, Kim Jao-jin and many others.

It was also the official position of the major anarchist organisations, including internationals like the anarchist majority wing of the post-1872 First International, the International Workers’ Association (1922), and the Eastern Anarchist League (1927). It was widely held by the anarchists and syndicalists engaged in revolutionary strikes and uprisings, such as took place in Macedonia/ Thrace (1903), Mexico (1867, 1878, 1911, 1916), Italy (1914, 1920), Portugal (1918), Brazil (1918), Argentina (1919, 1922), Bulgaria (1923), and Spain (1909, 1917, 1932/3). Armed defence of revolution was the explicit position of mass movements like the Korean People’s Association in Manchuria (*Hanjok Chongryong Haphoi*) and Spain’s National Confederation of Labour (CNT). While necessary as a means of preventing brutal counter-revolution, the defence of revolution by force was still generally regarded as, in Bakunin’s words “always an evil” that needed to be minimised so that it did not destroy the “purity and perfection of the purpose.”⁴⁶

We are talking here, in short, of the mainstream position of the anarchist / syndicalist movement. Its rejection of the Marxist notion of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” was *never* based on rejecting the need to defend a revolution. These two issues should not be conflated, as is common in the Marxist literature. Anarchists and syndicalists maintain (as we will see below) that every actually-existing Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat” has been a “dictatorship *over* the proletariat” by brutal ruling classes. This does not mean anarchists and syndicalists reject *revolution*, or the armed *defence* of revolution – they just insist *these* regimes were counter-revolutionary.

Setting the record straight: the Spanish anarchists versus the Popular Front

Paul presents the CNT’s admittedly disastrous decision to join the Popular Front government in Spain in September 1936 as evidence that it had no alternative means of “coordinating the military opposition to Franco’s fascists ...under a unified structure.”⁴⁷

Zabalaza Books, [1938, 1978] n.d.). p. 25; International Working People’s Association, “The Pittsburgh Proclamation,” in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume 1: From Anarchy to Anarchism, 300 CE to 1939*, ed. R. Graham (Montréal: Black Rose, [1883] 2005). p. 192; G.P. Maximoff, *The Programme of Anarcho-Syndicalism* (Sydney: Monty Miller, [1927] 1985). pp. 49–52; E. Pataud and E. Pouget, *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution: Syndicalism and the Co-Operative Commonwealth* (London: Pluto Press, [1909] 1990). p. 156–165; R. Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Chapter 5* (first published by Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, [1938], accessed 12 November 2000); available from www.spunk.org; Philip Samson, *Syndicalism: The Workers’ Next Step* (London: Freedom Press, 1951), pp. 32–35; “Declaration of the Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism,” in Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour 1913–23*. appendix d, p. 324

⁴⁶ Quoted in Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism: Exponents of the Anarchist Philosophy* (London: Freedom Press, [1900] 1960), p. 89

⁴⁷ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism.”, p. 139

These claims are incorrect. Since the 1870s, the Spanish anarchists explicitly set out to “annihilate the power of the state” through class struggle and “superior firing power.”⁴⁸ Victor Serge is often quoted in *International Socialism*, so it is worth mentioning that his semi-autobiographical *Birth of Our Power* includes a discussion of the CNT’s moves towards armed insurrection in 1917.⁴⁹

With the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI), the main anarchist political group in Spain, the CNT coordinated a cycle of insurrections from 1932 onwards. The programme and discussions included careful consideration of the “internal and external defence of the revolution,” the subversion of the army, and raising a popular armed force.⁵⁰ In the December 1933 insurrection, Durruti chaired the anarchists’ National Revolutionary Council, formed to provide a “unified structure” to coordinate class struggle and “superior firing power.” He insisted revolution could “only be resolved in the street with arms in hand.”⁵¹

The January-February 1936 FAI congress resolved on “resort to insurrection for the conquest of social wealth,” and crushing fascism. A Revolutionary Preparedness Committee was formed to organise the revolutionary armed forces.⁵² In May 1936, the CNT’s national congress resolved to take the “necessary steps” to defend a revolutionary Spain against “the perils of foreign invasion ... or against counter-revolution at home.”⁵³ This entailed the “people armed,” ready for “large-scale battles” with “modern military techniques,” and “effectively organised nationwide.” (None of this can be reconciled with the IST claim that Spanish anarchists and syndicalists reduced armed defence to a day of street-fighting).⁵⁴

The FAI/ CNT conception was still being defended in August 1936, and was in fact implemented in some areas through the anarchists’ Council of Aragon.⁵⁵ In 1937, the Friends of Durruti called for withdrawal from the Popular Front, and the formation of a National Defence Council (or “*junta*”).⁵⁶ Contrary to the claim made by the Trotskyite Felix Morrow,⁵⁷ this position was a *re-statement* of – rather than “a conscious break” with – “the anti-statism of traditional anarchism”.

In short, the CNT’s decision to enter the state did not arise from a *lack* of a programme, or an *inherent* anarchist refusal to consider issues like coordinated military defence. Why exactly the Spanish CNT decided to “dismantle its autonomous and revolutionary power apparatus,”⁵⁸ bears

⁴⁸ J. Romero Maura, “The Spanish Case,” in *Anarchism Today*, ed. D. Apter and J. Joll (London, Basingtoke: Macmillan, 1971). pp. 66, 68, 72, 80–83

⁴⁹ V. Serge, *Birth of Our Power* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, [1931] 1977), p. 31.

⁵⁰ Juan Gómez Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1986), pp. 137, 144, also pp. 157–157

⁵¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 154

⁵² Resolutions, quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 173–175

⁵³ National Confederation of Labour (CNT), *Resolution on Libertarian Communism as Adopted by the Confederation Nacional Del Trabajo, Zaragoza, 1 May 1936* (Durban: Zabalaza Books, [1 May 1936] n.d.). pp. 10–11

⁵⁴ Cf. Charlie Hore, *Spain 1936: Popular Front or Workers’ Power?* (London: Socialist Workers Party, 1986), p. 17

⁵⁵ A. Paz, *Durruti: The People Armed* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1987). p. 247; An important review of the debate over taking power, or joining the Popular Front, is provided by T. Wetzell, *Looking Back after 70 Years: Workers Power and the Spanish Revolution* (n.d., accessed 15 June 2005); available from www.workersolidarity.org.

⁵⁶ The Friends of Durruti, *Towards a Fresh Revolution*. p. 25

⁵⁷ F. Morrow, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Spain, Chapter 17* (published by New Park Publications Limited, [1938] 1963 (accessed 30 June 2006); available from www.marxists.org).

⁵⁸ A. Bar, “The CNT: The Glory and Tragedy of Spanish Anarchosyndicalism,” in *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (Otterup/ Aldershot: Scolar / Gower Publishing Company, 1990). p. 131

close examination. However, the basic causes lie in flawed strategic decisions, taken in a difficult context.

Finally, it is also important to understand what the anarchist and syndicalist vision of the “people armed” entailed. The FAI and CNT (and later the Friends of Durruti) all insisted that the armed forces of the revolution must be controlled by “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” Thus, the Friends stated that the National Defence Council would deal with “the management of the war” and the “supervision of revolutionary order,” but would be “elected by democratic vote in the union organisations,” remain under the control at all times of the “the trade union assemblies,” and leave “economic affairs... the exclusive preserve of the unions.”⁵⁹

The movement insisted that coordinated military defence was always *subject* to the basic aims of the revolution: self-management, collectivisation and emancipation. It was *not* an end in itself, and could *not* take place at the cost of any of these basic aims. The armed forces were the tools of the masses, not abstractly but directly. They were not to become the basis for a new power to be wielded *over* the masses, whether by an ambitious officer caste, or by a self-proclaimed revolutionary party. If this happened, the revolution would be destroyed *from within*, as surely as by any external counter-revolution.

Again: power, freedom and anarchist revolution

The point I am making is that the issue of making and defending a revolution is nothing new to the anarchist movement. On the contrary, the movement has a rich tradition of thought on these matters, as well as an extensive record of first-hand experience that can be fruitfully engaged. As I have shown, the mainstream of anarchism has advocated moving from resistance to a revolutionary rupture, a “social revolution” that involves forcibly replacing the existing order with a new one, and involves the armed defence of that revolution.

For instance, there is nothing “difficult to understand” about Bakunin viewing the Paris Commune as “a practical realization” of his vision.⁶⁰ Anarchism is not against the democratic power of the popular classes, nor to the determined struggle against counter-revolution. Of course it is the case that “once social movements are strong enough to point towards a real alternative to the *status quo*, states will intervene with the aim of suppressing them.”⁶¹ But what anarchist would deny this?

Anarchist anti-statism arises from *precisely* the anarchist recognition of the profoundly anti-popular class character of the state machinery. But that same recognition also means that anarchists do not seek to use states to defend revolutions. Bakunin insisted that genuine democracy was fundamentally incompatible with the state, which anarchists define as a centralised and hierarchical body run from the top-down by and for a ruling class, an institution of domination “where all the real aspirations, all the living forces of a country enter generously and happily” only to be “slain and buried.”⁶²

⁵⁹ The Friends of Durruti, *Towards a Fresh Revolution*. p. 25

⁶⁰ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism.”, pp. 131–132, 148; see Mikhail Bakunin, “The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1871] 1971).

⁶¹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism.”, p. 139

⁶² Bakunin, “The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State.” p.269

There is no contradiction at all between the anarchists wanting revolution while opposing authoritarianism: anarchists *resist* the hierarchical violence and coercion that underpins exploitation and domination, while (generally) admitting to the necessity of coercion, even violence, for *resistance*.⁶³ Anarchists have always stood for popular resistance against oppression, which, even in its most peaceful forms, always involves some coercion by the oppressor; resistance to this coercion is not oppression, but its negation. Emancipation cannot be vetoed by a privileged few. Engels, I think, misunderstands the anarchist position on these basic issues when he claims that the anarchists “anti-authoritarianism” is contradictory.⁶⁴

Now, we can usefully debate the adequacy of the many anarchist and syndicalist experiences in armed revolutionary self-defence; we should also debate issues of alliances, financing, military technique and the like. There is *always* a need to ruthlessly draw the lessons of all previous experiences, including military ones—something that the anarchist movement has repeatedly done.⁶⁵ But none of this is possible if we proceed from manifestly incorrect assertions that the broad anarchist tradition ignores the need for a coordinated military opposition to counter-revolution.

I have been speaking about the mainstream. It is also important to note that there *has* always been a section of the anarchists and syndicalists with an arguably naive belief in the possibility of a “bloodless revolution.”⁶⁶ To some extent we see this in the famous Industrial Workers of the World, active in over a dozen countries. Unions like the IWW did *not* ignore the state; they just tended to argue that the occupation of the workplaces would cut the supply lines to the military, and that the ordinary soldiers would come over to the side of the people.

It is true that many anarchists and syndicalists today have not thought deeply enough about the practicalities of revolution – partly because of a deep and important immersion in current struggles, coupled with inadequate reflection on issues that seem less pressing. There is also a long-standing and ongoing conceptual confusion over the issue of “taking power” within some sections of the movement: often a healthy opposition to substitutionism (against a revolutionary minority, anarchist or otherwise, taking power *over* everyone else) is conflated with something quite different (the oppressed *as a whole* overturning the existing system, and creating and defending a new one).⁶⁷ This leads to some anarchists to faulty formulations, like a flat opposition to any attempt to “take power.”

The anarchist programme is surely far better expressed by the formulation that anarchists *want* power – not for themselves, for the anarchists alone, but power for *everyone*, which requires power residing in the hands of the popular classes *as a whole* through “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.,” not in the hands of a particular party.

⁶³ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*, pp. 33, 48, 67, 204; Cf. Friedrich Engels, “On Authority,” in *Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, ed. N.Y. Kolpinsky (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1873] 1972). pp. 102–105.

⁶⁴ Engels, “On Authority.” Engels’ views are critiqued in Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 4.7, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

⁶⁵ For example, on Spain, see The Friends of Durruti, *Towards a Fresh Revolution*. p. 12; José Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, [1964] 1990). pp. 13–14

⁶⁶ For example, R. Chaplin, *The General Strike* (Chicago: IWW, [1933] 1985). not paginated; M. Dubofsky, “Big Bill” Haywood (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987). p. 65V. Richards, “Notes for a Biography,” in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1965). pp. 283–284

⁶⁷ Wayne Price, *Our Programme Is the Anarchist Revolution! Confronting the Question of Power* (Johannesburg: Zabalaza Books, 2009)., pp. 12–14

And this, as I have said before, was seen by the majority of anarchists as requiring coordinated, military, defence against counter-revolution.

This conception of the anarchist mainstream is really quite different to John Holloway's notion of "changing the world without taking power." This holds that the state and capital will somehow be slowly yet thoroughly undermined by alternative institutions.⁶⁸ It assumes that a peaceful and gradual transition to a new society is possible, as if the state will stand back and allow this to take place; it will not. Since, in any case, the state and capital concentrate the major means of administration, coercion and administration in the hands of the ruling class, it is unclear how alternative institutions will *break* this monopoly *without* confrontations and a decisive revolutionary rupture.

Black Flame, debates within anarchism/ syndicalism and the question of specifically anarchist political organisations

Having spoken about the FAI, I will comment on Paul's claim that anarchism denied the need for a specific political organisation that can intervene in the class struggle. Here Paul cites Lenin as arguing that anarchism is based on a mistaken generalisation i.e. moving from a critique of the practice of reformist political parties to a rejection of any attempt to build *political* organisations.⁶⁹ Such an attempt is however, he argues, necessary to link struggles, and to fight for ideological clarity and a revolutionary project.

First, it must be clear that anarchists and syndicalists are "not in any way opposed to the political struggle," but simply stress it "must take the form of direct action," centred on the unions.⁷⁰ They did not reject *political struggles*— struggles around State policy and civil and political freedoms. They rejected "political action" in the very specific sense of using political parties and the state apparatus for emancipation. In place of "political action," they stressed self-activity and struggle-from-below against the ruling class.⁷¹ Electioneering was ineffective, corrupting and ideologically disorientating. The "peoples owe all the political rights and privileges" that they enjoy "not to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength".⁷²

All anarchists and syndicalists stress the importance of revolutionary ideas as the basis for a revolutionary movement, speaking of the need for a "*fundamental transvaluation of values*,"⁷³

⁶⁸ J. Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution for Today*, revised ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

⁶⁹ Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism.", p. 135, emphasis in the original

⁷⁰ Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Chapter 5*.

⁷¹ Berkman, *The Abc of Anarchism*. pp. 55–56; Foster, *Syndicalism*. pp. -4, 20–26, Kubo Yuzuru, "On Class Struggle and the Daily Struggle," in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume 1: From Anarchy to Anarchism, 300 CE to 1939*, ed. R. Graham (Montréal: Black Rose, [1928] 2005). p. 381; R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York/ London: The Free Press/ Collier-Macmillan, [1915] 1962). p. 317; E. Pouget, *Direct Action* (London: Fresnes-Antony Group of the French Anarchist Federation/ English translation by the Kate Sharpley Library, n.d.). not paginated; Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Chapter 5*; Lucien van der Walt, "Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904–1921: Rethinking the History of Labour and the Left" (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 2007)., pp. 347–348, 574–577, 609–610; also see Thorpe, *'The Workers Themselves': Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour 1913–23*., pp.14–21

⁷² Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Chapter 5*., emphasis in the original

⁷³ Emma Goldman, "The Failure of the Russian Revolution," in *The Anarchist Reader*, ed. George Woodcock (Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, [1924] 1977). p. 159, emphasis in the original

a “revolutionary imagination.”⁷⁴ The “material conditions” and “needs” of the popular classes generated, Bakunin argued, a fundamental antagonism to capitalism, landlordism and the State, and a desire for “material well-being” and “an atmosphere of freedom.”⁷⁵ This is not enough, however; misery does not lead in itself to revolution. The popular classes are “poverty-stricken and discontented,” but in the very depths of the “utmost poverty” often “fail to show signs of stirring.”⁷⁶ And when they did rise, they rarely break free of the current order.

What is missing is a “new social philosophy,” a “new faith” in the possibility of a new social order, and in the ability of ordinary people to create such a society.⁷⁷ A revolutionary counter-culture embodying the “new faith” is vital, and distinguishes revolutions from sporadic outbreaks and revolts. Revolutions embody, Kropotkin insisted, “the birth of completely new ideas concerning the manifold links in citizenship – conceptions which soon become realities, and then begin to spread among the neighbouring nations, convulsing the world and giving to the succeeding age its watchword, its problems, its science, its lines of economic, political and moral development.”⁷⁸

Anarchism and syndicalism do not, therefore, argue for some sort of left-wing economism, nor do they believe revolutions happen automatically without conscious interventions. The key question that is debated by the movement is *how* best to fight the battle of ideas, so making anarchism the “watchword” of a new age, in a way that prevents the militant minority of conscious revolutionaries from engaging in substitution and/ or dictatorship over the popular classes.

All of this, of course, raises the question of whether a specific anarchist/ syndicalist political organisation is needed, and, if so, how it should be structured.⁷⁹ Paul is quite right that there is a current in anarchism that argues against the need for any specific political organisation, but this characterisation cannot be applied to anarchism and syndicalism *as a whole*.

Paul is talking about one position in a complicated debate, but presents this position as the definitive and shared anarchist one, which it evidently is not. Some (like Serge) believed that propaganda would suffice to win the masses over, and that there was no need for specific libertarian political organisation for this task. There could be some cooperation, but only through

⁷⁴ Errico Malatesta, in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, [6 April 1922] 1965). pp. 117–118

⁷⁵ M. Bakunin, “The Policy of the International,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. S. Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1869] 1971). pp. 166–167, emphasis in the original

⁷⁶ Bakunin, “Letters to a Frenchman on the Current Crisis.” p. 209; also see Mikhail Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1873] 1971). p. 335

⁷⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, “The Programme of the Alliance,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1871] 1971). pp. 249, 250–251

⁷⁸ Pyotr Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution, 1789–1973, Volume 1*, introduction by Alfredo M. Bonanno ed. (London: Elephant Editions, [1909] 1986). pp. 22–23

⁷⁹ By specific anarchist (or syndicalist) political organisation, I mean an organisation comprised exclusively of anarchists (or syndicalists), and devoted to the promotion of anarchism, its theories, methods and goals.

informal processes.⁸⁰ The problems with informal organisation or “anti-organisationalism” are well-known,⁸¹ and I will not repeat them.

Another position, usually identified with a section of syndicalists, insisted that there was no need for a *specific* libertarian political organisation, because the battle of ideas could be adequately waged by unions and other mass movements. They did not deny the need for politics, or ignore the state as some have charged.⁸² On the contrary, they insisted that revolutionary unions must be embedded in larger popular movements and counter-cultures, must be linked to other organised popular constituencies, must take up issues beyond the workplace, and must make revolutionary propaganda through a mass press, theatres, schools and other bodies.⁸³ I personally do not find the argument that the union is self-sufficient convincing. This is not least because unions cannot be politically homogenous, making it necessary to have a specifically anarchist or syndicalist political organisation fighting for syndicalism.⁸⁴

The third position was organisational dualism: most anarchists and syndicalists were quite explicit in advocating the need for organised, specifically anarchist, militant minorities, organised in political organisations, to work in tandem with mass organisations. As the Mexican anarchist Flores Magón stressed, there must be “an activating minority, a courageous minority of libertarians” that would “move the masses ... despite the doubts of the incredulous, the prophecies of the pessimists, and the alarm of the sensible, coldly calculating, and cowardly.”⁸⁵

The main debate was over *how* such formations should be structured, and operate, with two main poles. A “synthesist” position, held by figures like Emma Goldman, Hatta Shüzō, and “Voline” (Vsevolod Eichenbaum) argued for a loose formation. *All* varieties of anarchists and syndicalists should be united; differences should be set aside.⁸⁶ The obvious problem is that such

⁸⁰ For example, L. Galleani, *The End of Anarchism?* (Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, [1925], 1982). pp. 11, 44–45; O.V., *Autonomous Base Nucleus* (n.d. accessed 30 March 2004); available from www.geocities.com. For historical examples worldwide, see *inter alia* Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). pp. 150–152; Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1991). p. 233; I. Meredith, *A Girl among the Anarchists* (University of Nebraska Press, [1903] 1992). chapter 2.; F Mintz, “Class War: The Writings of Camillo Berneri,” *The Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*, no. 4 (1978). p. 47; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, new edition with postscript ed. (Penguin, 1975). p. 251; R.A. Yoast, “The Development of Argentine Anarchism: A Socio-Ideological Analysis” (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975). pp. 155–156

⁸¹ Informal structures are often far more undemocratic than formal ones, as they are open to manipulation by hidden elites, and have few measures to ensure accountability and good practice. As Paul notes, this criticism has been made by anarchists like Jo Freeman. It can also be found in van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*, p. 240

⁸² Views critiqued in R.J. Holton, “Syndicalist Theories of the State,” *Sociological Review* 28, no. 1 (1980). p. 5, and clearly expressed in James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). pp. 276, 280; R. Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London: Pluto Press, 1971). p. 43; R.V. Lambert, “Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955–1965” (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988). p. 45

⁸³ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*, p. 21

⁸⁴ P. Archinov N. Makhno, I. Mett, Valevsky, Linsky, *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* (Dublin: Workers Solidarity Movement, [1926] 2001). pp. 6–7

⁸⁵ Quoted in D. Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). pp. 83–84

⁸⁶ Goldman, quoted in Joll, *The Anarchists*. p. 204, emphasis in the original; John Crump, *Hatta Shuzo and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993). pp. 155–7, 159–160, 174–177; S. Fleshin Voline, M. Steimer, Sobol, J. Schwartz, Lia, Roman, Ervantian, *Reply to the Platform (Synthesist)* (1927, accessed 15 March 2004); Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, [1934] 1996). pp. 294–295;

groups will lack any theoretical agreement or common activities, will struggle to pool or prioritise resources, and have limited impact.⁸⁷

By contrast, figures like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Makhno, Oiticica, Shifu and others favoured an “organisation of tendency” based on close political unity and collective discipline.⁸⁸ Bakunin favoured an organisation based on shared analysis and principles, and agreed strategy and tactics, to be abided “at all times with scrupulous observance”.⁸⁹

Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta were all members of the anarchist International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, which had a clear platform and was active in the First International.⁹⁰ Without wanting to open up a discussion on the Bakunin/ Marx conflict, which would require another paper, I must point out that the Alliance was not the sinister revolutionary conspiracy that Marx, Draper and others would assert.⁹¹ Its members sought to act, in Bakunin’s words, “as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the instincts of the people,” rejecting “any idea of dictatorship and of a controlling and directive power.”⁹² For Kropotkin, it was necessary to build a “party” with “revolutionary propaganda,” “spirit and daring,” to “march in front in order to realise the revolution”.⁹³ He insisted unions be complemented by the anarchist “party,”⁹⁴ as did Malatesta.⁹⁵

Libertarian “organisations of tendency” have been a common feature of anarchist and syndicalist history, although terms like “party” have fallen out of favour. In Spain, the Alliance was followed by the Anarchist Organisation of the Spanish Region, the National ups Federation of Anarchist Groups and the FAI. In Mexico, there were *La Social*, *Luz*, *Lucha* and the *Grupo Luz*; in China, Shifu’s Society of Anarchist-Communist Comrades, active in the unions; in Russia, Maximoff’s KRAS in the *soviets* and factory committees; in Japan, the Black Youth League in the National Libertarian Federation of Labour Unions (*Zenkoku Jiren*) in the 1920s and 1930s; a notable post-war example is the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU), active from the 1950s to today.

⁸⁷ S. Craparo, *Anarchist Communists: A Question of Class, Studies for a Libertarian Alternative Series* (Italy: Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici, 2005). p. 83; N. Makhno, *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*. p. 1

⁸⁸ There were some disagreements about precise forms and practices between, say Malatesta and Makhno, but these fall outside this paper’s scope.

⁸⁹ Bakunin, “The International Revolutionary Society or Brotherhood,” p. 138

⁹⁰ See, *inter alia*, Bakunin, “The Programme of the International Brotherhood.” and Bakunin, “The Programme of the Alliance.”

⁹¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association,” in *Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, ed. N.Y. Kolpinsky (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1873] 1972). pp. 113, 116, 118, 120. Also Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1994). p. 277

⁹² Bakunin, “The Programme of the International Brotherhood.” pp. 154–155; Mikhail Bakunin, “On the Internal Conduct of the Alliance,” in *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (Montréal: Black Rose, [n.d.] 1980). p. 387. Some of the earliest proposals suggested a hierarchical internal model for these groups, but this was abandoned by Bakunin and the rest for obvious reasons.

⁹³ Pyotr Kropotkin, “The Spirit of Revolt,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*, ed. R.N. Baldwin (New York: Dover Publications, [1880] 1970). p. 43

⁹⁴ Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism.*, pp. 277, 281

⁹⁵ Malatesta, in *Ibid.* p. 130; Errico Malatesta, in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, [22 September 1901] 1965). p. 181; Errico Malatesta, “A Project of Anarchist Organisation,” in *The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Writings 1924–1931: Errico Malatesta*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, [October 1927] 1995). p. 97

Some clarity: the relation between anarchism, syndicalism and “real democracy”

As part of his arguments about anarchism and politics, Paul claims that anarchism denies “the possibility of real democracy.” Bakunin, he adds, had “a much more general rejection of the possibility that society could be democratized.”⁹⁶

How accurate is this claim? It depends heavily on what is meant by “real democracy” in the first place. Bakunin and Kropotkin and other anarchists criticised parliamentary democracy for *not* being “democratic.”⁹⁷ Malatesta argued that “government by everybody is no longer government in the authoritarian, historical and practical” sense of the word.”⁹⁸ Rather than deny “the possibility of real democracy”—if we mean by “democracy” the rule of the *demos*, or people—it *aspires* to it *and* rejects the false “democracy” of parliament.

Paul speaks of “the anarchist alternative” to “democracy” as “seeking consensus.”⁹⁹ I agree with Paul’s point that consensus-decision making struggles to deal with serious divisions. But I cannot accept his formulation that “seeking consensus” is in any sense an “alternative” to “democracy,” because it is, in fact, an attempt to *maximise* democracy. The attraction of some anarchists to consensus-decision making is precisely that—as Ruth Kinna, who Paul cites—notes, it seems to these anarchists the best of the “systems of *democracy*”.¹⁰⁰

The assumption that there is an anarchist consensus on the use of consensus-decision making is also incorrect. The likes of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta made no mention of it; the largest organisations in the broad anarchist tradition—like the syndicalist unions—all used majority rule; so did all major anarchist congresses and scores of other anarchist bodies. This is partly because there are serious problems with consensus-decision making from a democratic standpoint. Paul himself notes that Kinna is highly critical of consensus decision-making,¹⁰¹ the same is true of *Black Flame*. Even Uri Gordon, described by Paul as a pro-consensus “anarchist theorist,” stresses that “facilitated consensus” was “quite alien” to anarchists until the late 1960s, and even now, many prefer the “debate-and-vote format”.¹⁰²

Of course, as Paul notes, Gordon flatly states that anarchism is not “democratic”. But does Gordon really mean what Paul thinks? Gordon argues (on very shaky grounds) that democracy aims at “collectively binding” decisions, “mandatory” for all, whereas anarchism aims at some sort of “non-enforceability.”¹⁰³ That is, he is not opposed to the rule of the *demos* at all, but is, rather focussed on protecting dissidents within the *demos*, whose rights he feels would be violated if forced to implement decisions that they firmly oppose. This is a defence of conscientious objection, based on a profoundly democratic impulse. Paul cites Woodcock’s well-known statement that anarchism is against “democracy” because it can violate “the sovereignty of the individ-

⁹⁶ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism.”, pp. 133, 136, 143–144

⁹⁷ Wayne Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (Bloomington, Central Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2007), pp. 172–173

⁹⁸ Errico Malatesta, “Letter to Luigi Fabbri,” in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism, Book Two*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Edinburgh, San Francisco: AK Press, [30 July 1919] 1998), p. 38

⁹⁹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism”, p. 143

¹⁰⁰ R. Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), p. 114, my emphasis

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114–115

¹⁰² Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto, 2008), pp. 25, 36–37

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70

ual”.¹⁰⁴ But this statement follows the same reasoning. In short, both Gordon and Woodcock use the term “democracy” to refer to only one possible *democratic* form, which they critique through a (flawed) line of *democratic* argument – that “collectively binding decisions” coerce dissident individuals, and that such coercion is always ethically wrong.

This line of thought has a long tradition in anarchism: Malatesta tended to make these sorts of arguments.¹⁰⁵ However, Paul should note it is only *one* view in a larger movement dialogue about how best to *attain* “real democracy,” and, in fact, by no means the predominant view.

Many, perhaps most, anarchists would take serious issue with the Gordon/ Woodcock line, as shown in *Black Flame*.¹⁰⁶ Since *any* voluntary organisation is founded on basic points of agreement, explicit or otherwise, it is always premised on the principle of “collectively binding decisions.” Those who join have necessarily accepted the fact of “binding decisions,” removing any logical basis for later making a principle of “non-enforceability.”

Anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin also insisted that strict mandates and ongoing accountability, not a refusal of responsibility, are the very basis of free association and democratic practice. Freedom can *only* exist within and through a *democratic* society: “Society, far from decreasing ... freedom, on the contrary creates the individual freedom of all human beings”.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Bakunin always “fought the individualists” who claimed freedom meant freedom *from* society and accountability,¹⁰⁸ a view Kropotkin called “misanthropic bourgeois individualism.” Instead, “true individuality” could only be developed “through practising the highest communist sociability,”¹⁰⁹ made possible by a society that maximised the freedom of all through collective property, voluntary cooperation and self-management.

Free association and voluntary cooperation are only sustainable when people make decisions *and* carry them out, including undertaking direct responsibility to provide the labour needed to ensure that the material and cultural conditions for the “individual freedom of all human beings” are reproduced.¹¹⁰ This meant that work was the basic price all pay for participation in the new society. In other words, Bakunin and Kropotkin insisted that rights are indissolubly linked to *duties*, it being “obligatory” that “everybody” contributes to “the common well-being to the full extent of his capacities.”¹¹¹ This is *social* vision of freedom is *precisely* what is entailed by

¹⁰⁴ Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements.*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Errico Malatesta, “Neither Democrats nor Dictators: Anarchists,” in *The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Writings 1924–1931: Errico Malatesta*, ed. V. Richards (London: Freedom Press, [May 1926] 1995).

¹⁰⁶ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*, pp. 70–71, 240–242, 244–247, 256–257. On the CNT (and FAI) see Gómez Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI.*, p. 149

¹⁰⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, “God and the State,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1871] 1971). pp. 236–237

¹⁰⁸ Mikhail Bakunin, “Three Lectures to Swiss Members of the International,” in *Mikhail Bakunin: From out of the Dustbin: Bakunin’s Basic Writings, 1869–1871*, ed. R.M. Cutler (Ann: [1871] 1985). pp. 46–47

¹⁰⁹ Pyotr Kropotkin, “Letter to Nettlau,” in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution: P.A. Kropotkin*, ed. M.A. Miller (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: M.I.T. Press, [5 March 1902] 1970). pp. 296–297

¹¹⁰ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*, pp. 47–48

¹¹¹ Mikhail Bakunin, “Programme and Object of the Secret Revolutionary Organisation of the International Brethren,” in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism, Book One*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Edinburgh, San Francisco: AK Press, [1868] 1998)., p. 140; Mikhail Bakunin, “Letter to *La Liberté*,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1872] 1971). p. 289; Pyotr Kropotkin, “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*, ed. R.N. Baldwin (New York: Dover Publications, [1887] 1970)., pp. 56, 59. 95.

the formulation, which the anarchists had from the Utopians, “from each according to ability, to each according to need”; mutual aid is the basis of social justice. Thus, another slogan: “no rights without duties – no duties without rights.”¹¹²

Of course, in some instances, it is possible that a minority might be able to abstain from participating in implementation of a collective decision, without harm to the majority. In many cases—particularly in collective processes of production and consumption—the minority will have to be bound by majority decisions in order for the link between rights and duties to be maintained.¹¹³ To allow otherwise essentially means giving the minority a permanent control over the decisions of everyone else, hardly an anarchist principle. Consensus decision-making does not solve this problem. It cannot deal with serious conflicts, and it gives small but vocal minorities effective control over decisions. With majority decision-making, the minority is not oppressed, since its basic rights are protected, and it can freely campaign to win the majority over.¹¹⁴ An anarchist society “will be full of lively debate and organising, which is what is meant by democracy as a way of life.”¹¹⁵

If Gordon and Woodcock wish to argue that acts that violate individual freedom are objectionable on principle, they must (and do) necessarily support measures to forcibly prevent acts like murder or exploitation. But this simply means that they concede that the absolute “the sovereignty of the individual” is incompatible *with anarchism itself*. In an anarchist order, no individual has the “sovereignty” to violate the basic civil and political freedoms of another, and such constraints are *coercively* enforced as needed. Constraints on “sovereignty” are essential so that free individuals can exist in a free society.¹¹⁶ An anarchist society necessarily and *always* implies constraints on the “sovereignty of the individual.”¹¹⁷ It is therefore nonsense to claim that anarchism stands for the absolute “the sovereignty of the individual,” in decision-making or anything else.

To draw this part to a close, it is necessary to place the arguments raised by Kinna, Gordon and Woodcock into their historical context, and to see these as but one *part* of a larger dialogue *within* anarchism about the best means to match collective decisions and individual freedom. Gordon *et al* present *one* anarchist view, not *the* anarchist view, nor indeed, the most convincing anarchist view.

Many anarchists choose instead to *embrace* the label of “democracy,” rather than to deny it. Anarchism is surely “nothing less than the most complete realisation of *democracy*, democracy in the fields, in the factories, and in the neighbourhoods, co-ordinated through federal structures and councils from below upwards, democracy based on economic and social equality.”¹¹⁸ In this

¹¹² On the seals of the Spanish movement: Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years, 1868–1936* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), p. 86

¹¹³ Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives.*, pp. 171–173

¹¹⁴ Obviously a majority can be spectacularly wrong, as recent anti-Gay referendums in America show, thus the importance of protections. Likewise, minority initiatives are also an essential part of any libertarian and socialist movement and society. See Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 2.11, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

¹¹⁵ Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives.*, pp. 171–173

¹¹⁶ Even Gordon defends “direct action” against oppression, including violent self-defence: Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory.*, pp. 78–108. Malatesta of course defended the use of force in a revolution: Malatesta, “Syndicalism: An Anarchist Critique [Sic]” p. 224.

¹¹⁷ This misreading of anarchism as a doctrine of absolute autonomy is the basic error of R.P. Wolff, *In Defence of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

¹¹⁸ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.* P. 70, emphasis in the original

we echo Bakunin who argued when the “whole people govern” then “there will be no one to be governed. It means that there will be no government, no State.”¹¹⁹ Wayne Price argues bluntly: “Anarchism is democracy without the state.”¹²⁰

The interplay of anarchist democracy and armed defence of the revolution

How, then, does the issue of “the most complete realisation of democracy” link to the commitment of the anarchist mainstream to a “unified structure” of “permanent barricades” to express class struggle through “superior firing power”? The key connection is this: the defence of the revolution should never be confused with a suppression of democratic processes in what Leo called the “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” This is because a revolutionary and free society, a socialist and libertarian society, does not preserve itself—but in fact destroys itself—when it only permits a narrow range of views, violating its most basic principles. In the name of saving the revolution from its enemies, it quietly, perhaps inadvertently but just as certainly, *destroys* it. Thus Bakunin: “The authoritarian system of decrees in trying to *impose* freedom and equality obliterates both.”¹²¹

Democracy through “organs of self-organisation” means democracy for everyone in those structures, and includes the freedom to disagree with *freedom* itself. This does not mean the freedom of a minority to forcibly destroy or subvert those structures, in the face of the opposition of the majority i.e. the structures and processes can be defended with force. At the same time, this does not mean the right of the majority to suppress the minority merely on the basis of its views i.e. the structures and processes being defended *necessarily* include the defence of full political and civil rights. As Diego Abad de Santillan, a key figure in the FAI and CNT wrote,¹²²

We can oppose with force those who try to subjugate us on behalf of their interests or concepts, but we cannot resort to force against those who do not share our points of view, and who do not desire to live as we attempt to. Here, our respect for liberty must encompass the liberty of our adversaries to live their own life, *always on the condition that they are not aggressive and do not deny the freedom of others ...*

In short, legitimate coercive power is used against those who commit harmful *acts* involving coercion and force against individuals, and against the anarchist social order that makes free individuals possible i.e. against acts that reintroduce hierarchy, domination and exploitation.¹²³

Legitimate coercion defends the revolution, but the revolution’s heart is radical democracy and equality. Anarchism can only be the guiding programme of the revolution because it is *freely accepted* by the popular classes, who could always choose to renounce it. That is, the anarchist revolution would only succeed if the anarchists *win* the battle of ideas, but the war of ideas will *never* end, since the future society would be based on multi-tendency (if you like, “multi-party”) participatory democracy. Moreover, the battle of ideas is not won by coercion, but by *debate*.

¹¹⁹ *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 287

¹²⁰ Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives.*, p. 172, emphasis in the original

¹²¹ Bakunin, “Letters to a Frenchman on the Current Crisis.” pp. 193–194, emphasis in the original

¹²² Diego Abad de Santillan, *After the Revolution: Economic Reconstruction in Spain* (Johannesburg: Zabalaza Books, [1937] 2005).47, my emphasis

¹²³ Even Gordon defends “direct action” against oppression, including violent self-defence: Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory.*, pp. 78–108

The revolution that the anarchists and syndicalists envisage is libertarian communism i.e. it is both *for* freedom and *against* capitalism and other inequities. Defence of the revolution is defence of *all* of these elements. Legitimate coercion is used to defend *all* of these elements, and never *against* them. The revolution is not, Abad de Santillan stressed, the rule-from-above of “a committee, of a party, of a given tendency.”¹²⁴ Thus, Bakunin insisted:¹²⁵

I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free, and the freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation.

It is precisely for these reasons that anarchists reject the notion of a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” as I will show below. Democracy cannot be suspended to “save” the revolution, since it is an integral and *essential* part of the revolution—*its means and its end*. To destroy democracy is simply to destroy the revolution. Legitimate coercion is applied to external *threats* and to internal anti-social *crime*, but not to critics, dissenters, rivals, strikers, and protestors.

Some clarity: the Paris Commune, the anarchists, and “the state”

I indicated earlier that the anarchists were great admirers of the Paris Commune. In fact, the anarchists helped inspire the Commune, and all of the radically democratic measures of the Commune were anticipated in anarchist writings. The Paris Commune was only one link in a chain of communalist risings. In September and October 1870, the Bakunin circle launched revolutionary communes in Lyon and Marseille, inspiring similar revolts across France, many of which flared anew after Paris rose on the 18th March 1871. In 1873 and 1874, the communalist movement spread into Spain via the so-called “Cantonalist” revolt, where the anarchists were central, and into Italy, where Bakunin played his last active role in the Bologna rising.¹²⁶

The core elements of the Commune programme are absent in Marx’s earlier work, but central to Proudhon’s since the 1840s: mandated delegates with instant recall, cooperative production, self-government, a militia with elected officers etc. They were championed by Proudhonist mutualists in the Commune. Representing a major force in French working class, they held seventeen seats on the Communal Council. Anarchists like Eugène Varlin, Louise Michel and Elisée Reclus were leading Communards. When the Blanquists and others managed to create a Committee of Public Safety to close down free speech, the Proudhonists and anarchists threatened to withdraw from the Communal Council.¹²⁷

The Proudhonists¹²⁸ were the anarchists’ immediate predecessors and inspiration, and their stress on radical democracy was carried over into the new movement. Every one of these appears

¹²⁴ Abad de Santillan, *After the Revolution: Economic Reconstruction in Spain.*, p. 48

¹²⁵ Bakunin, “God and the State.” pp. 236–237

¹²⁶ Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits.*, pp. 229–239. The Lyon commune was heroic if unsuccessful, its programme approximating that Marx later praised in Paris: F. Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1936] 1951), p. 467.

¹²⁷ Thomas B. Backer, “The Mutualists, the Heirs of Proudhon in the First International, 1865–1878” (Cincinnati, 1978), pp. 406–408

¹²⁸ See Iain McKay, “The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 50 (2008). Bakunin described anarchism as Proudhonism “greatly developed and taken to its ultimate conclusion by the proletariat,” drawing on Marxist economic theory and eschewing Proudhon’s “idealism.” Unlike the mutualists, the anarchists favoured a radical revolution, rather than gradual change, usually stressing trade unions. See Bakunin

in Bakunin's writings between 1866 and late 1870. For instance, in response to the Prussian invasion, he advocated a "mass uprising," "from the bottom up," against both the invaders *and* the national, French ruling class, turning the war between states into a class revolution. It would be driven by a working class-peasant alliance based on a programme of collectivisation, the "self-organisation of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upward," and coordinated "fighting battalions" of "citizens' militias".¹²⁹

Bakunin's and Kropotkin's only critique of the Paris Commune was that it did not go *far enough* in collectivising means of production or introducing popular self-management. Too much power was in the hands of a Communal Council, modelled on the old municipal government, and then in so-called Committee of Public Safety. This introduced elements of the state, which are antithetical to radical democracy.¹³⁰

Paul nonetheless suggests that there is a contradiction between Bakunin's celebration of the Paris Commune, and his opposition to "every government and every state power".¹³¹ He suggests Kropotkin was more consistent, because he supposedly rejecting the Commune as a "state." Since Kropotkin did not really take this position,¹³² so Paul's charge against Bakunin applies to Kropotkin too.

I suggest, however, that there is no contradiction within Bakunin's or Kropotkin's thinking here, merely a classic case of anarchists and Marxists talking past one another. This is easily shown. The mutualists in the Paris Commune did not believe it was a state. Bakunin and Kropotkin viewed the Commune, *on the whole*, as a "negation of the state,"¹³³ which "evaporated."¹³⁴ But his part, Paul insists that the Commune *was* a state, at least, a so-called "workers' state."

Obviously there is a basic disagreement on what the term "state" means in the first place. For Paul, all states are coercive instruments used by one class against another. This means that there can be a "workers' state," used by the working class to end all "exploitative social relations".¹³⁵ Leo calls this the "dictatorship of the proletariat," which he insists is only "the democratic defence of working class power" through its "organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc."¹³⁶

on Proudhon, in James Guillaume, "A Biographical Sketch [Bakunin]," in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [n.d.] 1971). p. 26

¹²⁹ Bakunin, "Letters to a Frenchman on the Current Crisis." 184, 186–187, 189–192, 197, 204

¹³⁰ Pyotr Kropotkin, "The Commune of Paris," in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution: P.A. Kropotkin*, ed. M.A. Miller (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: M.I.T. Press, [1880] 1970), pp. 123–124. It is important to distinguish between two meanings of the "Paris Commune": the broad meaning, referring to revolutionary Paris *as a whole*, including the suspension of rents, free schools, the partial introduction of the ten-hour day, the Clubs and other popular associations etc.; and the narrower meaning of the Paris Commune as the elected communal *Council* alone, involving a small number of delegates. Bakunin and Kropotkin favoured both, but wanted the former to decisively predominate over the latter. Marx sometimes focussed on the second: "The Commune was formed by municipal councillors ...": quoted in Lenin, "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution," p. 267

¹³¹ Quoted in Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism," p. 148

¹³² Kropotkin, "The Commune of Paris," pp. 119, 121, 124–128.

¹³³ Bakunin, "The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State," pp. 265–269

¹³⁴ Kropotkin, "The Commune of Paris," pp. 119, 121, 124–128.

¹³⁵ Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism," pp. 146–147

¹³⁶ Zeilig, "Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition," pp. 221–222

If (and I stress, only if) we concede Paul and Leon's definition, then we *must* argue that Bakunin and Kropotkin, as defenders of working class power and its armed defence, were *for* a "workers state" and a "dictatorship" of the proletariat. Indeed, it would follow that the majority of the broad anarchist tradition were *for the state*. Most of the criticisms Paul has made of anarchism must fall away, since we would have to admit that Bakunin and Marx, and Lenin and Kropotkin, had no disagreements. In fact, the whole debate between Marxism and anarchism becomes quite meaningless. Leo sees this. Since he admits that Bakunin favours the "the democratic defence of working class power," he has to admit it follows that Bakunin seems to advocate the "dictatorship of the proletariat": "'Permanent barricades', he argued, would coordinate the defence of the revolution against internal and external enemies."¹³⁷

However, anarchists are not Marxists, nor are Marxists anarchists. The issues are simply not being posed clearly enough because we are not being open enough about our premises. In the first place, anarchists and Marxists define the state somewhat differently. In the second place (see next section), anarchists do not believe there is no historical evidence that any Marxist "dictatorship of the proletariat" has been linked to an end to "exploitative social relations," "working class self-emancipation" or "the democratic defence of working class power" through "organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc."

On the first issue, Lenin speaks of the state as the "product and manifestation" of class antagonisms, arising in the midst of class conflict and acting to maintain the rule of the economically dominant class through "special (coercive) force."¹³⁸ For anarchists, though, the state is not simply a coercive instrument used by one ("economically dominant") class against another. It is a hierarchical system of territorial power that *necessarily* concentrates power in the hands of a few, and that defends the class system in the interests of capitalists, landlords *and* state managers, that is, the ruling class.

In both aspects, it is the means whereby a minority rules a majority, and ensures that it is exploited as well. Thus Bakunin, "all State rule, all governments being by their very nature placed outside the people, must necessarily seek to subject it to customs and purposes entirely foreign to it."¹³⁹ A "workers state," as defined by Paul, is logically impossible in *anarchist* terms. The anarchists want the masses "organised from below upwards by means of its own autonomous and completely free associations, without the supervision of any guardians," which is the antithesis of the state.¹⁴⁰

Bakunin and Kropotkin also did not even mean the same thing as Marx and Lenin when defining classes. For Bakunin, the class system was not defined in simply "economic" terms, as *relations of production* expressed in inequitable ownership of the means of production, but also in terms of *relations of domination*, expressed in inequitable ownership of the means of *coercion*—the capacity to physically enforce decisions—and the means of *administration*—the instruments

¹³⁷ Zeilig, "Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition," p. 222

¹³⁸ V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (London: Martin Lawrence, [1917] 1933), pp. 7–12

¹³⁹ Mikhail Bakunin, "Appendix," in *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, ed. K.J. Kenafick (London: Freedom Press, [n.d.] 1990), p. 63

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63

that govern society.¹⁴¹ In the current era, the means of coercion centre on the armed forces, the courts and the prisons, while the means of administration centre on the state bureaucracy.

Thus, the ruling class includes, but is not reducible, to the economically dominant group: it also includes the *state managers*, senior officials, judges, military heads, mayors and parliamentarians, whose power is primarily due to their ownership of the means of coercion and administration. Capitalists are only *part of the ruling class*.¹⁴² The interests of capital and the state were convergent, but not identical. Capitalist competition was paralleled by geopolitical rivalry, which arose from a competitive state system that followed a distinct logic: “every state, to exist not on paper but in fact, and not at the mercy of neighbouring states, and to be independent, must inevitably strive to become an invasive, aggressive, conquering state”.¹⁴³

From this perspective, too, it is nonsensical to speak of a “workers state,” or to suggest majority, oppressed, exploited popular classes can ever have a state of their own. The state is a “special (coercive) force,” but one that is always the property of a *minority*, since it is always and everywhere a highly *centralised* structure that is structured to concentrate power in the hands of a directing elite and on behalf of a minority class. Bakunin writes that a strong State has “only one solid foundation: military and bureaucratic centralisation”.¹⁴⁴ “It would be obviously impossible for some hundreds of thousands or even some tens of thousands or indeed for only a few thousand men to exercise this power.”¹⁴⁵

It is therefore not possible to describe “the democratic defence of working class power” through its “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” *as a state* since a *state*, properly speaking, is *incompatible* with “the democratic defence of working class power,” as it *cannot* be democratic. It is fundamentally *incompatible* with what Leo calls the rule of the popular classes through their “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.,” because the logic of the state is antithetical to the logic of participatory democracy and self-management; because the state structure is a centralised organisation of minority class domination.¹⁴⁶

If Paul, in speaking of “centralised military force,” means merely the coordinated military defence of “socialism from below,” then it is not a state, and we are in agreement about its utility; if by “centralised military force,” or “dictatorship of the proletariat,” he means an armed force controlled by a small military and bureaucratic elite, even if nominally on behalf of the people, then we have elements of a state here, and anarchists cannot accept it.

For Bakunin and Kropotkin, such a programme of state “socialism” must, in centralising all power into the hands of the state, objectively entail for the working class a “barracks” regime,

¹⁴¹ van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. p. 109. I am expressing the basic anarchist theses on class here in as precise and abbreviated a conceptual language as possible; different writers have used different terminology at different times to express the same ideas, some emphasising the relations of domination more, others, the relations of production, but none embracing a simple economic model of class. In general, the scholarly literature on anarchist class theory is rather weak: for instance, Ivan Szelenyi and Bill Martin, “The Three Waves of New Class Theories,” *Theory and Society* 17, no. 5 (1988).

¹⁴² Some anarchist circles use the term *bourgeoisie* or “capitalist class” to speak of the larger ruling class. This is a sloppy formulation, as it directs political and analytical attention away from the role of the state managers.

¹⁴³ Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy.” p. 339

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.337

¹⁴⁵ Bakunin, “Letter to *La Liberté*.” p. 281. See also Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy.” p. 330

¹⁴⁶ R. Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Chapter 1* (first published by Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, [1938] cited and accessed 12 November 2000); available from www.spunk.org.

“where regimented workingmen and women will sleep, wake, work, and live to the beat of a drum,”¹⁴⁷ “centralised state-capitalism.”¹⁴⁸ Called revolutionary, it is flatly reactionary.

Paul speaks of anarchists having a “reified” view of the state that ignores different contents (“differences between feudal, capitalist and workers’ states, for instance”) and forms (like that between “liberal democracies and fascist dictatorships”).¹⁴⁹ Regarding the former, the anarchists are clear that the content of a state can never be proletarian or peasant or slave or serf. The latter is a misunderstanding, for the anarchists were, for the most part, perfectly clear that more civil and political rights were advantageous to the popular classes, just as were higher wages and better jobs. Thus, Bakunin:¹⁵⁰

We are firmly convinced it is true that the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy. In a republic there are at least brief periods when the people, while continuously exploited, is not oppressed, in the monarchies, oppression is constant. The democratic regime also lifts the masses up gradually to participation in public life – something the monarchy never does.

But even in its most democratic form, parliamentarism, the capitalist state reduces the political participation of the masses to ballots every few years –with perhaps some nominal and ineffectual consultation in between. For Kropotkin, “centralised government” concentrated power in “Parliament and its executive”, and was therefore also unable to deal with the concerns of ordinary people, “all the numberless affairs of the community.”¹⁵¹ The problem of parliament is not bad or corrupt parliamentarians, but the fact that several hundred people take decisions for many, many millions. This centralisation is no accident, for to “attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more...”¹⁵²

Obviously, then anarchists accept the need for armed revolutionary self-defence. They stress, however, that this must mean the defence of a basically democratic order *and* this is basically incompatible with the state, no matter its content or form. When advocating “permanent barricades,” the “fighting battalions” of “citizens’ militias,” and a National Defence Council, the anarchists stress the *popular* and *participatory* character of the project. Thus Bakunin argued for a federation of “all labour associations,” “a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council” of delegates “invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times,” plus a further level where “all provinces, communes and associations” will “delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly” “to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces” and “organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction” and ensuring “the universality of the Revolution”.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Bakunin, “Letter to *La Liberté*.” p. 284

¹⁴⁸ Kropotkin, “Modern Science and Anarchism.” pp. 170, 186

¹⁴⁹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism.”, p. 136

¹⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakunin, “Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1867] 1971). p. 144

¹⁵¹ Kropotkin, “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles.” p. 50

¹⁵² Pyotr Kropotkin, “Representative Government,” in *Words of a Rebel: Peter Kropotkin*, ed. George Woodcock (Montréal: Black Rose, [1885] 1992)., p. 143

¹⁵³ Bakunin, “Programme and Object of the Secret Revolutionary Organisation of the International Brethren.”, pp. 155–156

Judgement: do anarchists have a “massive misunderstanding” of the “Marxist tradition”?

Now, having clarified the anarchist and syndicalist positions as clearly as possible, let me turn to the final issue: the anarchist judgement of Marxism. Three issues need to be separated out here. One, how do we assess the “Marxist tradition” as a whole? Two, what did the Bolsheviks do between 1917 and 1927? And, three, why did so-called “Stalinism” arise?

As noted earlier, Paul thinks the anarchist movement suffers from a “massive misunderstanding of Marxism,” neglecting its “essence as *the* theory of working class self-emancipation,” while Leo charges that *Black Flame* is riddled with “ clichés” that would “raise the eyebrows of even right-wing critics” of Marxism. Leo correctly notes *Black Flame* describes “classical Marxism” as a tradition which moves from Marx and Friedrich Engels, via Karl Kautsky, to Lenin and Trotsky, and then to Joseph Stalin and Mao.¹⁵⁴ Paul argues, also correctly, that the anarchists draw a direct link between Marx, Lenin and Stalin, viewing Lenin as “the main representative of the state socialist tradition which was tried and failed in the 20th century.”¹⁵⁵

This characterisation of the mainstream anarchist position is, indeed, quite true—although I hasten to add that few anarchists would consider the old East bloc regimes to represent anything of a real “socialist tradition.” Here is one of the areas where it is important to acknowledge quite a bit of common ground. *International Socialism* (and the IST) has long been identified with the view that these regimes were “varieties of bureaucratic state capitalism,” and were all “local dictatorships.”¹⁵⁶ This is a major break with the views of most Communists (“Stalinists,” in the Trotskyite lexicon) as well as from orthodox Trotskyism (including Trotsky’s own views),¹⁵⁷ since these shared the view that the East Bloc was in some sense “socialist” or a “workers’ state,” or both, despite distortions or degeneration. This would also be the view of most anarchists, as we have seen with Malatesta, and goes back to the positions of Bakunin and Kropotkin.¹⁵⁸

The space for *agreement* between the anarchist mainstream, and the IST/ *International Socialism* tradition on these issues is, then, quite wide. Differences arise though at some key points. While there is no debate here as to *whether* the old East bloc was state-capitalist etc., there is significant disagreement about *when* and *why* this took place, as well as *how* state-capitalism operated.¹⁵⁹ These issues have, of course, serious implications for how we assess the Marxist tradition. For *International Socialism*, state-capitalism is dated to around 1927–1928 – that is, the period of Stalin’s final victory.¹⁶⁰ Such a periodisation is, of course, necessary if Marx, Lenin and Trotsky are to be identified with “working class self-emancipation” (Paul, Leo), as opposed to routine class and national oppression, and an endless drive to accumulate capital (“Stalinism”).

Let us deal with the first issue posed in this section: how do we assess the “Marxist tradition” as a whole? Paul states that the “rational kernel” of the anarchist critique of Marxism is “the fact

¹⁵⁴ Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” p. 221

¹⁵⁵ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” pp. 132–133

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133, note 15

¹⁵⁷ See D. Hallas, *Trotsky’s Marxism* (London, Chicago and Melbourne: Bookmarks, 1979).

¹⁵⁸ Bakunin, “Letter to *La Liberté*” p. 284; Kropotkin, “Modern Science and Anarchism.” pp. 170, 186

¹⁵⁹ There is insufficient space to discuss the differences in analysis which lead to this same conclusion on the state-capitalist nature of Stalinism, but see Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 3.13, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

¹⁶⁰ See Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, ed. with introduction and postscript by Chris Harman (London, Chicago, Melbourne: Bookmarks, [1964] 1988).

that the most powerful voices claiming to be Marxists in the 20th century were statist (of either the Stalinist or Maoist variety) who presided over brutal systems.”¹⁶¹ For his part, Leo admits that most anarchist charges against “classical Marxism” as reductionist, determinist and statist *are* entirely correct *if* “you include Kautsky, Stalin and Mao in the Marxist canon.”¹⁶² That is, they are, on this basis, not “clichés” that would “raise the eyebrows of even right-wing critics.”

As far as I am aware, all of these figures *have* regularly been described as “Marxists” by *International Socialism*’s and the IST’s writers and co-thinkers at one point or another.¹⁶³ Kautsky is called “the most prominent Marxist theorist of the Second International,” which is exactly why his apostasy “shocked” Lenin.¹⁶⁴ Another writer distinguishes between pre-Russian Revolution “classical Marxism” (Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, Trotsky), “Soviet Marxism” (Stalin, Khrushchev and so on), and “dissident Marxism” (Serge, Kollontai, Thompson, Amin etc.).¹⁶⁵ He describes Kautsky and his like “as taking their Marxism seriously,” but as dogmatic and simplistic. Paul writes elsewhere that “Stalinism marked a fundamental *transformation* of Marxism,” although even “Soviet *Marxism*” inadvertently opened the door to “genuine revolutionary Marxism.”¹⁶⁶

In other words, if regimes of “Stalinist or Maoist variety” may be “far from anything” *International Socialism*’s writers and co-thinkers “would recognise as socialist,”¹⁶⁷ they are evidently not “far from anything” the IST can recognise as *Marxist*. I am not, here, discussing which of these currents constitutes “genuine” or “real” “revolutionary” Marxism – merely noting that Kautsky, Stalin and Mao *are* deemed “Marxists” by the IST, indeed, “the most powerful voices claiming to be Marxists in the 20th century.”

This is crucial. Consider the implications: it simply means that the *mainstream* of pre-Leninist Marxism was dogmatic and crude; it also means that the *mainstream* of 20th century Marxists were of the “Stalinist or Maoist variety”; it means that by the IST’s admission, almost *all* Marxist regimes have been state-capitalist, precisely as anarchists claim. Even Draper, who Paul and Ian cite, stated bluntly that a very large part of Marxism was “socialism from above.”

Surely, then, Paul should not be too surprised by the anarchist claims that Marxism was on the whole marked by “state-capitalism,” “brutal systems,” and “local dictatorships”? This is precisely what the IST’s *own* statements on Marxism show, and is, as Paul admits, the “rational kernel” of the larger argument that Bakunin, not Marx, has been “vindicated by the verdict of history.”¹⁶⁸ Given Paul’s own characterization of the trajectory of Marxism, these positions are, I think, neither “superficial” nor “inept,”¹⁶⁹ but reasonable and accurate. Every single Marxist

¹⁶¹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 133, note 15

¹⁶² Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” p. 222

¹⁶³ Let alone the great majority of other Marxists.

¹⁶⁴ On Kautsky: C. Harman, “Pick of the Quarter,” *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 104 (2004). Also see John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (London: 1998).; David Renton, *Classical Marxism: Socialist Theory and the Second International* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2002).

¹⁶⁵ David Renton, *Dissident Marxism: Past Voices for Present Times* (London, New Yorks: Zed Books, 2004)., pp. 4–8, 235–238

¹⁶⁶ Paul Blackledge, “The New Left’s Renewal of Marxism,” *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 112 (2006)., my emphasis

¹⁶⁷ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 133 note 15; also Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” p. 221

¹⁶⁸ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 133

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133

regime was, according to the IST itself, sooner or later a “dictatorship.” This includes the Soviet Union under Lenin and Trotsky, which was, we read in *International Socialism* itself admits, under “Bolshevik dictatorship” by 1921.¹⁷⁰ So, it is hardly surprising that claims that the “essence” of Marx and Lenin was “the theory of working class self-emancipation” ring somewhat hollow to the anarchists.

If Paul wishes to charge anarchists with a “massive misunderstanding of Marxism,” neglecting its “essence as the theory of working class self-emancipation,”¹⁷¹ he must then concede that this “massive misunderstanding” was shared by *most Marxists*. Further, if we admit that Kautsky, Stalin and Mao were Marxists (“debased” or otherwise),¹⁷² then it cannot be claimed that the “essence” of Marxism is “the theory of working class self-emancipation.”¹⁷³ Rather than being the “essence” of Marxism, that is, this position has been rather *unusual* in the Marxist tradition. If most Marxism has been “Stalinist” or Maoist, or Kautskyist, then “working class self-emancipation” is *not* a *defining* feature of Marxism, but only the position of *one* strand in Marxism—a *minority* position by any reasonable historical judgement.

“Socialism from below” has manifestly *not* been the basic project of most self-identified Marxists, most Marxist movements and most Marxist writing, as Ian’s own work has shown.¹⁷⁴

Leo argues that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is the “most maligned concept in Marxism.”¹⁷⁵ Perhaps, but “maligned” by who? It is a Herculean task to find a Marxist regime in which this actually meant “the democratic defence of working class power” by “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” Why should anarchists accept the IST view that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” equals the democratic defence of working class power” by “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.”? Most Marxists never have.

Leo claims that *Black Flame*’s discussion of classical Marxism repeats the “daily clichés of the media.”¹⁷⁶ This is a bit of a cheap shot, but the fact of the matter is that, if Marxism is presented as statist, reductionist and determinist in the “daily clichés of the media” anywhere, it is *not* in the commercial press but in the mainstream *Marxist* media, like mass circulation Communist and Trotskyite papers like *Umsebenzi* in South Africa, *L’Humanité* in France, *New Age* and *People’s Democracy* in India, *Angve Bayan* in the Philippines etc.

Paul claims that “brutal dictatorship” breaks with Marx’s and Lenin’s views on socialism.¹⁷⁷ The truth is rather more messy than that (see below), but the point is that Marxism has been and still is the official “doctrine” of what Paul calls “brutal systems” of “bureaucratic state capitalism.” Why should Marxism *not* be judged by this record, as if its history starts and ends in a world of theory? I doubt that Paul would argue that “the only significance of Christianity in history is to

¹⁷⁰ C. Harman, “How the Revolution Was Lost,” in *Russia: From Workers’ State to State Capitalism*, ed. P. Binns, T. Cliff, and C. Harman (London, Chicago and Sydney: Bookmarks, 1987), p. 18

¹⁷¹ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 132; Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” pp. 221–222

¹⁷² Blackledge, “The New Left’s Renewal of Marxism.”

¹⁷³ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 132

¹⁷⁴ For example, I.H. Birchall, *Workers against the Monolith: The Communist Parties since 1943* (London: Pluto Press, 1974).

¹⁷⁵ Zeilig, “Contesting the Revolutionary Tradition,” pp. 221–222

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 221–222

¹⁷⁷ Blackledge, “Marxism and Anarchism,” p. 133, note 15

be found in reading unaltered versions of the Gospels,” and ignore 2,000 years of the Church.¹⁷⁸ If we do not want to do the same with Marxism, then it can hardly be insisted that a few texts constitute the “only significance” of the Marxist movement, “while keeping quiet about what the doctrine has become in history.” By any reasonable measure, most of Marxist history has nothing to do with any “vision of socialism from below.”

Track record: the Soviet Union, 1917–1928 and the Bolshevik myth

What did the Bolsheviks do between 1917 and 1927? This is crucial to any discussion of the tradition. This section does not address, let me stress, the question of *why*, but *what*. The Trotskyist tradition, in all its forms, has always centred on the thesis of a rupture in Soviet history: the Lenin-Trotsky regime was marked by radical social progress; the “Stalinist” period by reaction. What marks the IST is the dramatic claim that under Stalin, the Soviet Union underwent outright reversion from socialism to capitalism; most Trotskyists suggest the system remained post-capitalist, if distorted.

Such claims rest upon setting up a strict contrast between the two periods. So, for the late Tony Cliff, for instance, under Lenin, “the land of the landowners was distributed to the peasants, the factories were taken under state ownership and were run under workers’ control, the oppressed nationalities got the right of self-determination,” Russia was a “federation of free and equal peoples,” marked by the “emancipation of women” and the removal of anti-homosexual laws.¹⁷⁹

But this neat juxtaposition is not defensible. Was “the land of the landowners” really “distributed to the peasants”? Initially—but as the result of a massive wave of peasant risings in which the Bolsheviks, with their urban base, were largely absent. The Bolsheviks were quite clear that rural production must be under state control, and from mid-1918, War Communism instituted forced grain requisitions. Cliff admits “many hundreds of thousands” died in the Civil War, but claims “not because of the action of the Soviet government.”¹⁸⁰ As a matter of fact, forced grain requisitions contributed directly to the mass starvation of millions upon millions (not “many hundreds of thousands”), as peasants were deprived at Red Army gunpoint from the grain they needed to eat, as well as the seed-grain needed to plant the next harvest. This led directly to a second wave of peasant risings from 1918, directed *against* the Bolsheviks via “Green” armies – revolts that continued into the 1920s.

The peasants were, of course, the vast majority in the Russian territories. If the Bolshevik forces ruled this majority by fire and the sword, the better to starve them, it is the clearest evidence that Bolshevism ran a minority dictatorship. Lenin in power has nothing to with the popular “self-emancipation” is, as Paul and Leo insist, the “essence” of Marxism. If Lenin’s programme led directly to state terror against an oppressed and exploited class that (even today) compromises half of humanity, it can hardly be presented as evidence that the “essence” of Marxism is “self-organisation” and “socialism from below.”

¹⁷⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Fate of Marxism,” in *The Anarchist Papers*, ed. Dimitriou Roussopoulos (Montréal: Black Rose, 2001), p. 77

¹⁷⁹ Tony Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium* (London, Chicago, Sydney: Bookmarks, 2000), pp. 66–67

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66

Resistance was by no means confined to the countryside, as apologias for Lenin tend to suggest. Nor was urban opposition confined to moderate socialists or conservative layers. Large sections of the urban working class opposed the Bolshevik government *because* its measures seemed to conflict directly with “the democratic defence of working class power” through “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.”—that is, from a position far to the *left* of the Bolsheviks.

Rather than run “under workers’ control,” as Cliff claimed, industry was placed under direct state control, with managers appointed from above. It is simply not true, as Harman said, that “workers’ control” was still in place even in the late 1920s, or that the unions represented workers.¹⁸¹ In 1919, individual managers ran merely 10.8 percent of enterprises, but by 1920, 82 percent.¹⁸² Cliff stated that Stalin’s Russia was characterised by Taylorism and piecework, which he described as evidence of the application of “the most refined method of capitalist exploitation.”¹⁸³ This is perfectly true, but Taylorism and piecework were first under Lenin, in 1918.¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile, elections were abolished in the Red Army in March 1918, following which 50,000 Tsarist officers were drafted in to serve in commanding positions, under the eye of Bolshevik appointees, the *commissars*—not *soviets*. The secret police, the *Cheka* (the “Extraordinary Committee to Fight Counter-Revolution”), was formed in December 1917 to watch “the *press*, saboteurs, *strikers*, and the *Socialist-Revolutionaries* of the Right”.¹⁸⁵

The Bolshevik Central Committee declared the organs of the *Cheka* “were founded, exist and work solely as the direct organs of the Party,” not the *soviets*.¹⁸⁶ The *Cheka* was 20 times larger than the Tsarist *Okhrana*, and carried out in 5 years 20 times more executions than the *Okhrana* managed in 50 years. From mid-1918, the *Cheka* ran concentration camps for “class enemies,” refractory workers, criminals and left opponents, followed in April 1919 by forced labour camps; both were “cleared from time to time by mass extermination of inmates.”¹⁸⁷ The *gulag* emerged under Lenin, and most of the inmates were from the popular classes.¹⁸⁸

Harman claimed that the Bolsheviks were the “majority party” in the *soviets*. This was never true outside of a few cities, and then only for a few months, as Bolsheviks were roundly

¹⁸¹ C. Harman, “The Nature of Stalinist Russia and the Eastern Bloc” in *Russia: From Workers’ State to State Capitalism*, ed. P. Binns, T. Cliff, and C. Harman (London, Chicago and Sydney: Bookmarks, 1987), p. 43. Harman stated that managerial directives were “influenced” by the unions and the “Communist workers.” What is left unsaid is that the unions were wings of the party (the “Communist workers”). The 2nd All-Russian Trade Union Congress (January 1919) saw the unions agree to merge into the state industrial administration, in line with the view that the new state “requires trade unions, not for a struggle for better conditions of labour... but to organise the working class for the ends of production”: L. Trotsky, *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism)* (London: The Labour Publishing Company/ George Allen and Unwin, [1920] 1921), p. 132

¹⁸² All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from Harold Shukman, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of the Russian Revolution* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1994). pp. 29, 166, 175, 177, 182, 184, 187

¹⁸³ Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, pp. 30–34

¹⁸⁴ Victor G. Devinatz, “Lenin as Scientific Manager under Monopoly Capitalism, State Capitalism, and Socialism: A Response to Scoville,” *Industrial Relations* 42, no. 3 (2003); also see S. Smith, “Taylorism Rules Ok? Bolshevism, Taylorism and the Technical Intelligentsia – the Soviet Union, 1917–41,” *Radical Science Journal*, no. 13 (1983).

¹⁸⁵ In R.V. Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism*, vol. 1 (1985). p. 90, my emphasis.

¹⁸⁶ Shukman, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of the Russian Revolution*, p. 183

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183

¹⁸⁸ Of the 17,000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted 39% and 34% respectively; of the 40,913 prisoners held in December 1921 on whom data is available, nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated: George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 178.

defeated in the 1918 urban elections across the country by the Mensheviks, SRs and Russia's small anarchist movement.¹⁸⁹ This reflected widespread discontent, also expressed in strikes and marches.¹⁹⁰ Rather than permit, as Harman claimed, a “democratic dialectic between party and class,” the Bolsheviks routinely dissolved *soviets* that elected non-Bolshevik majorities, and prevented elections wherever possible.¹⁹¹ The Bolsheviks gerrymandered the Petrograd Soviet to secure their victory regardless of the votes cast in the workplaces.¹⁹² Even Harman admitted that *by early 1919* there had been “no elections to the Moscow soviet for *over 18 months*.”¹⁹³ The anarchists and left-SRs who supported *soviet* democracy, like Maximoff, were harassed from late 1917, followed by mass arrests and the suppression of anarchist newspapers from 9th April 1918.¹⁹⁴

Bolshevik representation in the *soviets* was not, in any events, key to Bolshevik power. That is a myth. Party power lay elsewhere: control of the cabinet (*Sovnarkom*, an executive body), the nationalised economy (via the *Vesenka*, or Supreme Economic Council), the *Cheka* and the Red Army, plus a large bureaucracy heavily recruited from the Tsarist regime. Less than 10 percent of senior officials in key ministries like were even members of the party. It was this power that allowed *soviet* democracy to be suppressed, and party of 600,000 to rule a country of 90 million in 1920.

Harman insists that managerial directives were “influenced” by the unions and the “Communist workers” into the late 1920s. Left unsaid is that the “unions” were wings of the party-state (the “Communist workers”) from 1919, that most “union” leaders were subsequently state appointees, and that “unions” played an active role in blocking strikes and punishing strikers.¹⁹⁵ The factory committees were, meanwhile, subordinated to the *Vesenka* and the “unions,” and the 1918 Emergency Assembly of Factory Committees was crushed.

It is simply not the case that the Bolsheviks took it “for granted that strikes were not to be suppressed by the state”, or that “workers were free to change their places at their own discretion.”¹⁹⁶ Large sections of industry were militarised, and changing jobs without permission was “desertion,” a punishable crime. The July 1918 general strike, the spring 1919 strike wave in Moscow, Petrograd, Astrakhan and elsewhere, and the Moscow-Petrograd strikes were all crushed with force.

¹⁸⁹ Harman, “How the Revolution Was Lost,” p. 18

¹⁹⁰ William G. Rosenberg, “Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power,” in *The Workers Revolution in Russia: The View from Below*, ed. D. Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁹¹ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 22; Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State, First Phase 1917–1922*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 191; Israel Getzler, *Martov: A Political Biography of a Russian Social Democrat 1918–1921* (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 179; Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918–1921* (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 366–7; Vladimir N. Brovkin, *The Mensheviks after October: Socialist Opposition and the Rise of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 159

¹⁹² Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 248–252; Vladimir Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918–1921*, p. 240

¹⁹³ Harman, “How the Revolution Was Lost,” p. 19, my emphasis

¹⁹⁴ Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, pp. 184–185

¹⁹⁵ See, *inter alia*, Simon Pirani, “Socialism in the 21st Century and the Russian Revolution,” *International Socialism: a quarterly journal of socialist theory*, no. 128 (2010).

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, pp. 28, 34

When in 1921 the Kronstadt sailors took up the strikers' demands for new elections to the *soviets*, independent trade unions, freedom for all "left" political prisoners and papers, an end to the Bolsheviks' political monopoly, and an end to grain requisitions,¹⁹⁷ they were shot down, buried in mass graves or sent to labour camps.

Without a hint of irony, the Bolsheviks celebrated the crushing of Kronstadt on the 18th March, the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Paris Commune.

Harman claimed the Bolshevik party was still relatively open before Stalin. On the contrary, by late 1919, the party was highly centralised; the few remaining factions were banned in 1921; in 1922, the Workers' Opposition was declared an illegal faction, its leaders forced to recant; radical Bolshevik factions like the Workers Group were jailed.¹⁹⁸

The GPU, successor of the *Cheka*, operated a vast network of 51,000 paid informants throughout the early 1920s; beating, torture and rape were routinely used in interrogations; all key left opponents of the Bolsheviks (including most "Soviet anarchists") were deported, jailed, used as slave labour in camps, or executed; arrests intensified as *soviet* elections approached in 1922 and 1925, despite which the Bolsheviks lost every single open contest; the discontent of the peasant majority simmered, but Peasant Unions and other bodies were ruthlessly repressed.¹⁹⁹

Arrests of anarchists and other leftists continued throughout the 1920s, many sent to Lenin's "polit-isolator" units, or his concentration camps in Siberia and elsewhere.²⁰⁰ In 1922, the Right SR leadership was sentenced to death in a show trial; the 1924 trial of the Left SRs included the "Stalinist" spectacle of the accused admitting to a series of manifestly false charges under duress. Despite the fragmentation of the data, there can be no doubt that continuous, large-scale repression of strikers and political dissidents occurred throughout the pre-Stalin era.²⁰¹

According to Cliff, "the oppressed nationalities got the right of self-determination." This would be impressive, given that the non-Russian nationalities and minorities comprised around half the population of imperial Russia. But in fact, the Bolsheviks used the Red Army to impose Russian-run regimes in Belarus and Ukraine (1919), Georgia (1921), Armenia and Azerbaijan (1922).²⁰² Ian cites Serge as claiming that "Trotsky was, much later ... to recount that Lenin and he had

¹⁹⁷ The *Petropavlovsk Manifesto* has long been easily available, and a full set of the *Izvestia*, the rebels' paper, is now online in English translation: see *Izvestia* (1921, accessed 6 June 2006); available from libcom.org. The rebels at no point raised the slogan "soviets without Bolsheviks," and many loyal Bolsheviks participated in the Kronstadt *soviet* and uprising: Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 181

¹⁹⁸ For instance, P. Avrich, "Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group," *Russian Review* 43, no. 1 (1984).

¹⁹⁹ See Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, pp. 234–237; Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defence of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia and Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen's Association for Anarchists and Anarcho-syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia, *The Tragic Procession: Alexander Berkman and Russian Prisoner Aid* (London: Kate Sharpley Library/ Alexander Berkman Social Club, [1923–1931] 2010). Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia after Lenin* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 20–26, 44–46, 52–53; 61–80, 90–93; Anatoly Dubovic and D.I. Rublyov, *After Makhno: The Anarchist Underground in the Ukraine in the 1920s and 1930s: Outlines of History and the Story of a Leaflet and of the Fate of Anarchist Vershavskiy* (London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2009); M. Jansen, *A Show Trial under Lenin: The Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Moscow 1922* (Springer, 1982); The Delegation of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionists, *The Twelve Who Are About to Die: The Trial of the Socialists-Revolutionists in Moscow* (Berlin: Published by the Delegation of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionists, 1922).

²⁰⁰ Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 234–235.

²⁰¹ Simon Pirani, *Detailed Response to Kevin Murphy* (2010 [cited 20 October 2010]); available from www.revolutioninretreat.com.

²⁰² There were also failed invasions of Estonia (1918–1920), Poland (1919–1921).

thought of recognising an autonomous region for the anarchist peasants of the Ukraine, whose military leader Makhno was.”²⁰³

Even if this highly doubtful anecdote was true, it is hardly evidence of the Bolshevik leaders’ emancipatory agenda. It simply shows Lenin and Trotsky arrogated to themselves the right to decide whether the now-independent Ukraine—the largest Russian territory after Russia itself—should be “recognised” as anarchist or “autonomous.”

Left Bank Ukraine was solidly anarchist, both in the countryside, and many urban areas.²⁰⁴ The local Bolsheviks were marginal sect, although the anarchist majority imposed no restrictions on their press or participation in the local *soviets* and committees. Yet Trotsky decreed its *soviets* illegal; the Red Army smashed its communes, and executed its leaders (a few, like Makhno, escaped into exile), all despite formal treaties of military cooperation and non-interference.²⁰⁵ Thus, the Bolsheviks’ “democratic defence of working class power.” The Bolshevik war on the anarchist Ukraine combined the regime’s policies of repression against the peasantry, the urban working class, and the revolutionary left.

Explanations: once more, did Lenin lead to “Stalinism”?

The previous section has not said a single word about the *causes* of these horrors. It has served mainly to set out the record of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks in the period before Stalin. Paul spoke of the “essence” of Lenin’s thought as “working class self-emancipation,” and Leo of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as “the democratic defence of working class power” through “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” Is this really what we see from 1917 to 1922? Since the IST presents all post-Lenin regimes as examples of state-capitalist tyranny, the only example of a Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat” exemplifying “self-emancipation” and “socialism from below” is the Lenin-Trotsky regime Union. But any serious examination of this period will show little differentiates it from other Marxist dictatorships.

Harman spoke of the Bolshevik state in before 1929 as basically still a “workers’ state,” reflecting “some of the interests of the workers.”²⁰⁶ Cliff argued that it was nonsense to call the Soviet Union under Stalin a “workers’ state” since it was not under workers control.²⁰⁷ But if we accept Cliff’s notion of a “workers’ state,” there are no grounds to call the Lenin-Trotsky era Soviet Union a “workers’ state.” Even Harman admitted that “direct workers’ power had not existed since 1918,” that “the working class was the class that less than any other exerted pressure on the party,” that Trotsky’s faction was not “proletarian,” and that the party itself was highly authoritarian internally.²⁰⁸ Where is the “workers control” here?

²⁰³ Birchall, “Another Side of Anarchism,” p. 179

²⁰⁴ Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917 – 1921* (Edinburgh, San Francisco: AK Press, [1982] 2003).

²⁰⁵ Space precludes discussion of the “Makhnovist” anarchist movement, beyond mentioning it has been systematically misrepresented by pro-Bolshevik writers. For a reply to a recent attack, see Iain McKay, “On the Bolshevik Myth,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 47 (2007), pp. 30–32, 39

²⁰⁶ Harman, “The Nature of Stalinist Russia and the Eastern Bloc “., p. 43

²⁰⁷ Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia.*, pp. 310–312

²⁰⁸ Harman, “How the Revolution Was Lost.” pp. 27, 35. Leo takes issue with *Black Flame* speaking of Trotsky’s “conceit” that he was not part of the bureaucracy, which he misreads as a slight on Trotsky’s character: the point is that Trotsky was himself, by any objective measure, a senior figure in the party-state apparatus, no matter what ideological positions he may have taken in the 1920s.

If anything, the Bolshevik regime seems far closer to Bakunin's and Kropotkin's views of the state as an "invasive, aggressive, conquering" body, the "patrimony" of a "privileged class" based on "military and bureaucratic centralisation," a revolution that ended up with a "barracks" regime of "centralised state-capitalism, "where regimented workingmen and women will sleep, wake, work, and live to the beat of a drum." As Maximoff's theory of state-capitalism pointed out, the repression that took place enabled and defended matched relations of production in which the Bolshevik state, as primary employer and owner, exploited the popular classes through wages, taxes, rent and prices.

There is nothing "superficial" or "inept" about Bakunin's predictions for the Marxist state, since they seem obviously "vindicated by the verdict of history."²⁰⁹

There is no doubt in my mind that the conditions in which the Russian Revolution took place – local counter-revolution, imperial invasion, the shattering of the left, economic collapse and the like – left a deep, a profound, impact on the society that emerged. It is also the case that some of the actions of sections of the left (notably the Right SRs) accelerated the slide towards dictatorship and terror. The isolation of Russia as a result of the failure of the revolutionary outbreaks elsewhere also meant that the Russian Revolution was isolated – creating a situation that had not been envisaged in classical Marxist texts to that point, the *survival* of a revolutionary Marxist regime operating in a backward country, and one that had nothing in common with the Paris Commune model.²¹⁰

But is this really an adequate explanation for the Bolshevik dictatorship? Does foreign invasion lead to polit-isolator camps for anarchists and Left-SRs? For the IST, it seems so, since these circumstances are named the main factor in the rise of a "Bolshevik dictatorship" (Harman's words),²¹¹ and "Stalinism," understood to mean not only a regime based on the brutal repression of the working class and peasantry, but "bureaucratic state capitalism."

Harman argued that "the Bolsheviks had no choice" but to substitute themselves for the working class, because the "class they represented had dissolved itself while defending to fight that power." Nor "could they tolerate the propagation of ideas that undermined the basis of its power, because the working class "no longer existed as an agency collectively organised so as to be able to determine its own interests."²¹² It had suffered "decimation" because of the war, and was therefore replaced by a "centralised governmental apparatus independent of their direct control."

At first glance, Harman does rather sound like an economic reductionist, as does Cliff, who wrote that "the pressure of world capitalism" forced the rulers of the Soviet Union to make the economy "become more and more similar" to "world capitalism."²¹³ Looking more closely, it seems, this would be a misreading – phrases in their texts contradict the attempt to blame imperialism for *gulags*. Harman stated that "It *seemed* to the Bolsheviks such a structure could not be held together unless it contained only those who those who wholeheartedly supported the revolution – that is, only the Bolsheviks."²¹⁴ Cliff argued that the final victory of state capitalism

²⁰⁹ Cf. Blackledge, "Marxism and Anarchism," p. 133

²¹⁰ Stephen Sherlock, "Berlin, Moscow and Bombay: The Marxism That India Inherited," *South Asia: journal of South Asian studies* 21, no. 1 (1998).

²¹¹ Harman, "How the Revolution Was Lost," p. 18

²¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20

²¹³ Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium.*, pp. 29–30

²¹⁴ Harman, "How the Revolution Was Lost," pp. 19–20, my emphasis

in Russia was, at least partly, due to Stalin's manoeuvring in the Bolshevik party, and the fact "that Lenin was on his deathbed and out of circulation for about a year."²¹⁵

This is very significant. If it "seemed" to the Bolsheviks that the fate of the revolution rested on who staffed the "centralised governmental apparatus" that substituted for the working class, then we are talking about choices – choices made in harsh circumstances, but *choices* nonetheless – not about simple determinism. We are talking about the Bolsheviks' *assessment* of events, about the Bolsheviks' *decisions*, and about the Bolshevik's *belief* that they alone "wholeheartedly supported the revolution." If it mattered whether one man, Lenin, "was on his deathbed and out of circulation for about a year," then in the 1920s even the move towards state capitalism (as the IST would have it) was not inevitable, but conditioned by *decisions* and *actions* – decisions and actions made in harsh circumstances, but *decisions* and *actions* nonetheless – that shaped the fate of millions, in fact, the whole course of 20th century socialism.

If that is the case, however, why was it that choices, decisions and actions consistently led to "Bolshevik dictatorship"? The dictatorship emerged *before* the Civil War, which started with the revolt of the Czech Legion at the end of May 1918. The repression of the left, the closing down of *soviet* democracy, the formation of a secret police, and the move towards Taylorism all began well before this time. The Civil War had effectively ended in November 1920, with the defeat of the main White Armies, and the withdrawal of the main Western imperialist forces, yet repression *increased after* this period. No one would deny that the regime became far more vicious after Stalin took sole control at the end of the 1920s, but all of its core features—terror against the popular classes and the left, concentration camps, a one-party state, the suppression of dissent within the party, Lenin's appointment of Stalin to the new post of party general-secretary, capitalist relations in production—were in place in the *Lenin period*.

It was precisely *because* power was so centralised in the hands of a small elite that Lenin being "out of circulation for about a year" mattered. Cliff suggested that state-capitalism started under Stalin, but there is no evidence that the basic relations of production changed from the Leninist period, even if the terror increased.²¹⁶ His instance that it was the "world economy" that "forced" a capitalist dynamic onto the Soviet Union, and his flawed characterisation of the Lenin-Trotsky period, obscure this fact.²¹⁷

Harman suggested that the dictatorship continued because the working class had "dissolved itself," had "no longer existed as an agency collectively organised so as to be able to determine its own interests," having suffered "decimation."²¹⁸ The problem with this line of argument is obviously that the working class that "no longer existed" as a collective force kept insistently

²¹⁵ Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium*, p. 29

²¹⁶ Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 3.13, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

²¹⁷ Tony Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium* (London, Chicago, Sydney: Bookmarks, 2000), p. 30

²¹⁸ In fact, Lenin first formulated the notion of working class atomisation in response to *rising* working class protest: "As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin ... began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated ... workers had become 'declassed.'" However, there "is little evidence to suggest that the demands that workers made at the end of 1920 ... represented a fundamental change in aspirations since 1917": Jonathan Aves, *Workers against Lenin: Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers), pp. 90–91

intruding onto the stage, with strike movements in 1918, 1919 and 1921, all requiring martial law to keep the Bolsheviks in power.²¹⁹

Trying to explain why the Kronstadt garrison – a bulwark of Bolshevik support in 1917 and 1918 – should suddenly revolt, Harman claimed (following Trotsky) that “Kronstadt in 1920 was not Kronstadt of 1917,” as the “best socialist elements” had been “replaced in the main by peasants.”²²⁰ Actually, no less than 91% of the crews of the *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* ships (which spearheaded the revolt) and 75% of the Baltic fleet as a whole had been recruited *before* October 1917 (after all, the Civil War was not based on naval engagements).²²¹ In any case, the issue of class composition is a red herring: are peasant lives worth less? More importantly, a regime operating in a majority peasant country, which views peasant demands as by definition reactionary, which believes demands for *soviet* democracy to be reactionary, *must* be a dictatorship and an injustice.

Lenin and Trotsky’s ambiguous legacy

The elephant in the room, that is not being mentioned, is a very large one: *why* did the Bolsheviks insist that they alone “wholeheartedly supported the revolution”? *Why* could they not “tolerate the propagation of ideas that tolerated that undermined the basis” of the party monopoly? *Why* the fear of new elections to the *soviets*, as demanded in Kronstadt? *Why* did it repress any group that raised the slogan of “free soviets” and a “third revolution”?

There are two basic answers. The first is obvious: the Bolsheviks were a tiny minority, and would never have won any open election by mid-1918. Most workers and peasants – not least their left-wing – certainly did not accept that the Bolsheviks “wholeheartedly supported the revolution.” Supporters of Lenin and Trotsky usually take offence at the claim that the Leninist vanguard party is based upon a substitutionist conception. But what is to be made of Harman’s argument that the Bolsheviks insisted that they alone “wholeheartedly supported the revolution,” and would do so despite the opposition (by 1921) of almost the whole left plus the great majority of the peasantry and working class?

So by what right did the Bolsheviks rule? By what claim did they insist that anyone opposed to Bolshevism was counter-revolutionary by definition? To understand this, we cannot ignore the second factor, Bolshevik theory.

Let me quite clear what I am arguing here. I am not arguing that the Russian Revolution was a Bolshevik *coup d’état*, and I am not arguing that the Bolsheviks started with a sinister plan to create a totalitarian state. It is important to stress that there are radically democratic elements in Lenin’s thought, most obviously in his *State and Revolution*, and Lenin was clearly alarmed in his last years by the party’s bureaucratisation.²²² Likewise, Trotsky played a heroic role in the 1930s, standing almost alone among Marxists against Stalin, championing struggles for racial

²¹⁹ Space precludes referencing every source on the various strike waves under the Bolsheviks – or Bolshevik use of force to break them. For a summary, see Iain McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 6.3, online at anarchism.pageabode.com

²²⁰ Harman, “How the Revolution Was Lost,” p. 20

²²¹ See Isaac Geltzer, *Kronstadt 1917–21: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 207

²²² Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives*, pp. 128–129; Ron Tabor, *A Look at Leninism* (New York: Aspect Foundation, 1988), pp. 93–104

and gender equality, and opposing fascism.²²³ His supporters were murdered across Asia and Europe by Communists, as was his son; most of his old allies capitulated to Stalin; he was forced into exile, and then assassinated.

However, the overall thrust of Lenin's and Trotsky's thought was authoritarian, centralist, and substitutionist. They consistently acted in ways that destroyed the most basic gains of the popular revolution of 1917, and they repeatedly made arguments for a one-party regime.

The *State and Revolution* makes no mention of issues like workplace self-management, and is silent on the importance of political debate and contestation in the *soviets*. It stresses, on the contrary, that the "workers' party" must be geared to "assuming power," and "directing and organising the new system."²²⁴ Since Marxism was always right, a "science," always represented the "real" interests of the proletariat, there was no need for checks and balances.²²⁵ Political contestation was not just useless, but dangerous, as were factions that lacked the correct Marxist understanding of the truth.

This line of thinking also allows the party to substitute itself for the working class when that class had "dissolved itself," or disagreed with the party. Thus Lenin:

We shall be merciless both to our enemies and to all waverers and harmful elements in our midst who dare to bring disorganisation into our difficult creative work of building a new life for the working people.²²⁶

When we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party, and as you heard, a socialist united front is proposed, we say, 'Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position...'²²⁷

... the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organization embracing the whole of that class ... It can be exercised only by a vanguard.²²⁸

Although Trotsky began to argue for the removal of the ban on factions in the late 1920s, it was only in the late 1930s that he came out firmly in support of a multi-tendency, multi-party *soviet* democracy. His arguments in the late 1910s and early 1920s, on the contrary, stressed that, as in 1924: "The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the single historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problems".²²⁹ At most, he was willing to countenance a relaxation of the faction ban. Thus:

²²³ Wayne Price, "From Trotskyism to Anarchism," *The Utopian* 9 (2010), pp. 67–70

²²⁴ Lenin, "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution," p. 255

²²⁵ Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives*, pp. 128–129; Tabor, *A Look at Leninism*, pp. 28–36, 49–51

²²⁶ V.I. Lenin, "Speech in the Moscow Soviet of Workers, Peasants and Red Army Deputies," in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1918] 1962), p. 233

²²⁷ V.I. Lenin, "Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Workers in Education and Socialist Culture" in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1919] 1962), p. 535

²²⁸ V.I. Lenin, "The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes," in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1920] 1962), p. 21

²²⁹ L. Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923–1925*, second ed. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 161

They place the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy²³⁰

The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity ...²³¹

This was, also, tied to a very top-down view of socialism that is hard to reconcile with Paula and Leo's admirable visions of "working class self-emancipation," and "self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc." - a view that is basically state-capitalist in outlook.²³² Again, even the *State and Revolution* takes as its model of socialism "To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service...all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat — that is our immediate aim".²³³ And Lenin says elsewhere:

We must raise the question of piece-work and apply and test it in practice; we must raise the question of applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system ... revolution demands ... unquestioning obedience to the orders of individual representatives of the Soviet government during the work.²³⁴

... study the state capitalism of the Germans ... spare *no effort* in copying it and [do] not shrink from adopting *dictatorial* methods to hasten the copying of it ...²³⁵

And Trotsky:

... if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs ... we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner²³⁶

... the working masses cannot be left wandering all over Russia. They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers... Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps...²³⁷

Such views obviously had some impact on how the Bolsheviks acted. It is not a matter of picking quotations, or taking them out of context: the Bolsheviks in power consistently acted on *precisely* the lines these quotes suggest. By contrast, the libertarian proposals in the *State*

²³⁰ Trotsky, 10th Party Congress 1921, quoted in Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*, p. 203

²³¹ L. Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936–37*, second ed. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), pp. 513–4

²³² Tabor, *A Look at Leninism*, pp. 56–66

²³³ Lenin, "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution."

²³⁴ V.I. Lenin, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1918] 1962), pp. 258, 269, emphasis in the original

²³⁵ V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality," in *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1918] 1962), pp. 340–341, emphasis in original

²³⁶ Trotsky, *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism)*, pp. 150–151

²³⁷ Trotsky, 9th Party Congress 1920, quoted in Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution* (London: Solidarity, 1970), p. 61

and Revolution were not only never implemented, but repudiated by almost all Bolshevik statements and actions once in power. The *State and Revolution* can hardly be treated as the definitive statement of the Bolshevik programme.

The Paris Commune was a radical democracy; the Bolshevik regime was a police dictatorship. Large sections of the Tsarist elite were accommodated, yet the popular classes were systematically repressed: as Trotsky said, “The power of the democratic Soviets proved cramping, even unendurable, when the task of the day was to accommodate those privileged groups whose existence was necessary for defence, for industry, for technique, and science”.²³⁸ And after the Civil War, the regime continued on the path already set. Thus, Trotsky’s Left Opposition advocated forced industrialisation and collectivization years *before* Stalin, which is one reason why its members defected *en masse* to Stalin later.²³⁹ Authoritarian means lead to authoritarian ends, and this is even truer when the ends themselves are authoritarian.

Ultimately, it is self-contradictory to proclaim that Bolshevik ideology was essential to ensure the success of the revolution *and* that this same ideology had *no* impact at all on the revolution’s outcome. As Maurice Brinton concluded in his classic account of this period, “Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period”.²⁴⁰

To speak of a discrete period of “Stalinism” in the history of the USSR is incorrect. The core features of the system existed before Stalin took power; they continued long after his death in 1953. Stalin’s rule was bookmarked by that of Lenin/ Trotsky, on the one hand, and that of Nikita Khrushchev, on the other. But it was not a distinct epoch. Khrushchev distanced himself from the horrors for which he, personally, had been responsible as a Stalin aide by blaming them on Stalin in the “Secret Speech.” In power, of course, he maintained the so-called “Stalinist” apparatus. Likewise, contemporary defenders of Lenin and Trotsky distanced these figures from the horrors for which they, personally, had been responsible by blaming them on Stalin, and in so doing, create a radically false picture of the pre-Stalin period. In power, of course, Lenin and Trotsky laid the foundations of the so-called “Stalinist” apparatus.

In conclusion: to which tradition should we look for 21st century resistance?

As I stated in the beginning, the IST is remarkable for its commitment to socialism-from-below, and to self-emancipation. In this paper, I have tried to clear up some IST misconceptions about anarchism and syndicalism, I have shown where we converge, and, I think, where we differ. We are all for “the democratic defence of working class power” through “their organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” We all for socialism-from-below, and “working class self-emancipation,” are we not?

The question is: are such commitments compatible with support for Lenin and Trotsky? It seems to me, on the contrary, that there is more in common between the IST’s stated commitment

²³⁸ L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?*, Indian ed. (Dehli: Aakar Books, [1936] 2006), p. 73

²³⁹ John Eric Marot, “Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism: Theory and Practice,” *Historical Materialism* 14, no. 3 (2006).

²⁴⁰ Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution.*, p. 84

to socialism-from-below, and the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism, than there is between the IST and the politics of Lenin and Trotsky.

It is impossible to reconcile a defence of “socialism from below” and “self-emancipation” with a defence of the Bolsheviks in power. The early Bolshevik regime was the very antithesis of “the democratic defence of working class power” through “organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc.” Repression of the popular classes under Lenin and Trotsky was somewhat less severe than under Stalin, but this scarcely means it was not ongoing, comprehensive, brutal and integral. The “outline of the Stalin state” was drawn by Lenin and Trotsky.²⁴¹ Lenin and Trotsky really did want a workers’ revolution, and have many important insights, but their basic outlook and strategy is, in the final analysis, incompatible with popular class power.²⁴²

To reclaim socialism, we must reclaim its participatory democratic *and* revolutionary traditions, suppressed by Leninist Marxism. This requires that sincere Marxists seriously engage with—rather than arrogantly lecture to—the black flame of anarchism and syndicalism, and its alternative vision of libertarian communism, revolutionary process and radical democracy

I understand the attraction of the Russian Revolution, and of Marxism, but would it not be more consistent for the IST to embrace the Russian Revolution, while breaking with Lenin and Trotsky, and to—if the IST must embrace Marxism, rather than, logically anarchism/ syndicalism—embrace its *libertarian* currents, like Karl Korsch, Anton Pannekoek and the like, and break with Lenin and Trotsky? This tradition is at least rooted in the most libertarian and democratic side of Marx’s Marxism, even if it was a minority tradition. I will leave matters here.

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²⁴¹ Price, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives.*, p. 129

²⁴² Price, “From Trotskyism to Anarchism.”, pp. 72–74

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