

Socialism: Let's Not Resuscitate the Worst Mistake of the 20th Century

arguments to go around

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June 16, 2023

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In the mid-19th century, socialism and communism were largely synonymous, and as often as not they referred to the dream of a future without all the institutions at the service of bankers, landlords, and factory owners; a future without the State. Since Marxism crowded out the utopian variations of socialism, however, the term has come to refer to the authoritarian shift in the international anticapitalist movement. Throughout the 20th century socialism referred to a range of state policies, whether these were states created in the course of revolutions or pre-existing states captured through electoral means by socialist parties.

It is in reference to this experience that I say that socialism was the greatest mistake of the last two centuries, and if over the next few decades we do not survive the ravages of capitalism, the dead end of socialism will bear much of the blame. To understand why, let's go back to the origins of the split.

First, I want to make it clear: I am not writing this argument to go around in the interests of dogmatism. I don't want to make everyone think like me. On a neighborhood level, I'm fine working with people with terrible ideas, as long as they're not calling the cops or doing other things that put other neighbors in danger. On a larger scale, I'm happy to work with people who aren't anarchists, and I think our movements would be weaker if we were all anarchists. But those who push movements to create political parties, to participate in elections, or to imagine the revolution as the creation of a new state are putting us all in danger. The purpose of this newsletter is to explain why.

The Briefest Possible Overview of Marxism

Marx and Engels can and should be credited with a brilliant early modern analysis of economics that is also much more than this, being an analysis of the relationship between economics, social organization, and how people think and talk about our circumstances. They demonstrated in strong terms how the relationships between all these aspects of life were connected, historical, and evolving.

They also gave vital inspiration to anticolonial movements over the next decades, because they were some of the earlier white men from the middle- and upper classes, i.e. with a platform, to openly condemn the horrors of colonialism, even though they both also expressed colonial and racist views tied to their (fundamentally white supremacist) progressive view of history.

This brings us to their primary weaknesses, which, ironically, are also interrelated and also connected to their class and subjective relationships to the workers' movements that they did more to weaken and destroy than the police agencies of most contemporary governments.

All of their hypotheses about causation and order—where these oppressions come from, how they will change, how to change them—are worse than trash. They are either phrased in a way that is pseudo-scientific and untestable, which helps explain why Marxism has held increasing appeal among leftwing cults the more Marxist experiments proved to be real life failures (cults thrive on pseudo-sciences). Or, their affirmations about the future of capitalism and how to change it that were phrased in a falsifiable, testable way have all proven dreadfully wrong. Exactly as their anarchist contemporaries predicted. Those anarchists did not have a clear, reproducible, published method, but their predictions around the evolution of European geopolitics over the next fifty years, the result of socialist states, and the relative importance and roles of movements to abolish capitalism versus the results of capitalism's evolution as a motor of history, all proved correct. Even, or because, the anarchists were thinking not from a rigid methodology

but from an intuitive understanding of capitalism and the State based on their subjective position fully within lower class struggles from Russia to Oaxaca, struggles that—rather than imposing a moral ranking of the proletariat favoring putatively male factory labor as the paragon of the working class—were enthusiastically open to solidarity and mutual learning between peasants, factory workers, sailors, sex workers, truly declass  intellectuals (i.e. ones that didn’t keep factory-owning friends in their back pockets), lumpen from the slums, and Indigenous farmers.

Nothing about this solidarity was perfect, but it was sincere and in the late 19th century it was the most effective catalyst for global revolution we had. Marx destroyed all that, because as an alienated academic who saw himself as a movement leader without ever really having been a movement participant (in his boasts about being on the barricades in his youth we can hear the later echoes of Andreas Malm), he destroyed the International by playing politics and expelling the anarchists and anticapitalist feminists like Andr  Le  (in fairness to her, she later found it impossible to work with Bakunin’s faction, Bakunin also being an intolerable authoritarian, though on a much smaller scale than Marx; he was happy for other factions to exist and thrive in their own way, he was actually dedicated to the struggle and didn’t feel a need to control it, but he acted in authoritarian ways within his own circles.) The anti-authoritarians actually ended up being the larger part of the split, as became apparent when the Anarchist International moved to the region of self-organizing artisanal workers in St Imier, Switzerland. Marx and Engels, meanwhile, to keep control of their International and make sure it wasn’t taken over by actual workers, moved it to New York where the climate was reactionary and organized workers were scant. It died a prompt death, but the important thing was, Marx’s ego was spared.

The Socialist Revolutions

Every single state created after a revolution by a socialist or communist Party has resulted in a continuation of capitalism. Often, the Communists were more successful than the capitalists at implanting capitalism in “less developed” countries like Russia and China (“less developed” being a phrase that is equally coherent coming from a Party bureaucrat or an IMF technocrat).

In the USSR, already in the early 1920s the Party abandoned its limited attempts to abolish capitalism. Lenin himself admitted that what they had created was a form of state capitalism. They had also destroyed much of the broader anticapitalist movement. In 1918, the Bolsheviks killed and jailed hundreds of anarchists in Moscow to stop them from carrying out expropriations and other attacks against the local bourgeoisie. In order to keep their grasp on power, the Bolsheviks at various moments needed to ally with the bourgeoisie, showing once again that no matter the color of one’s flags, the calculations of statecraft remain the same. Whereas some members of the upper classes fell victim to their purges, the vast majority of the Bolshevik police apparatus was directed against the working class and the peasants, especially those who carried out revolutionary actions. Peasants were suppressed and murdered for establishing communes, workers were suppressed and murdered for going on strike. You can read in more detail about the repressive, counterrevolutionary actions of the Bolsheviks here: [One Hundred Years after the Bolshevik Counterrevolution](#)

The socialist leadership of Cuba also repressed workers’ organizations, and after a brief attempt to change the foundations of the economic system, decided it made sense to preserve Cuba’s role in the global economy as a sugar cane plantation. This is because all states need to

implant and manage extractive economies. And so it is that China, under a Communist Party, is the second largest capitalist economy in the world. In fact, measured ideologically it is probably the most purely capitalist country, given that in its foreign and domestic policy the Chinese government consistently promotes and prioritizes economic growth, while criticizing the US government for adventurist wars that endanger continued growth.

Socialist governments are also imperialist. The USSR deployed a geopolitics that in many ways was a continuation of Russian imperialism. The Chinese communists reproduced the imperial court's policy towards Southeast Asia, and the Vietnamese communists replicated the imperial pretensions of the earlier monarchy towards Cambodia and towards the stateless peoples, like the Hmong, living within their claimed national borders.

The Socialist Elections

Attempts to achieve socialism through electoral means have (usually) been less violent, but they have been just as disastrous for revolutionary movements, for our attempts to finally free ourselves from the yoke of capitalism, to create lives worth living, to survive this oppressive, extractive system that is destroying life on this planet.

When Marx pushed the International to abandon its historic mission of creating autonomous workers' organizations in order to form political parties and go on a fool's errand to capture the State, it was the State, predictably, that captured them. It was also the end of the International, and a major setback for the workers' movement. But the Marxist inspired political parties did pretty well! One of the first of them, the SPD in Germany, got into power and got a big opportunity to stop a nationalist war, or in this case, to support a nationalist war and send millions of workers to the slaughter, since a political party's gotta do what a political party's gotta do.

The socialists didn't learn many lessons from the disasters of World War I, though. In Italy, the Socialist Party slowed the spread of workers' communes and factory operations, preventing a possible revolution in 1919–1920. When the workers' movement faltered, the fascists under Mussolini took over. In France, the Socialist Party refused to take action against Franco's fascist uprising in 1936 or give meaningful support to the antifascist side in the resulting civil war. For their part, the Socialists in Spain did more to repress communes, workers' organizations, and anarchists in order to protect bourgeois property rights than to fight the fascists.

After WWII, socialist parties across Western Europe supported the Cold War priorities of US military planners. In the UK, the Labour Party began its turn towards neoliberalism already in the '70s, and other Socialist parties followed close behind.

The Referenda

Leftwing parties attempting to channel the power of popular uprisings into what they understood to be concrete gains also helped to destroy those movements and strengthen the State, because they failed to realize that a substantive change, in the minds of those who believe in the State, is nothing more than words on paper.

In Greece, after the 2008 insurrection when people burned every police station and bank in the country, in the following years social movements took advantage of the change in the balance of powers to create hundreds of autonomous spaces, to improve people's access to healthcare and

encourage neighborhood self-organization against rising rents, and help refugees survive the violence of borders and criminalization. The progressive political party Syriza also took advantage of the situation to win the elections, while the combined forces of the European Central Bank and the IMF did their best to destroy the Greek economy and force the country into poverty in an attempt to crush the social movements with precarity, using the weapon of debt restructuring they had honed over the prior decades in the Global South. When Syriza promised to reject the austerity measures if they won a referendum, turnout was massive, including many people from the social movements who had previously defended their autonomy by never trusting governments and keeping political parties at a safe distance. All those people got their hopes up, and hope is one of the most valuable things in a revolutionary movement. The option to reject the austerity measures won the referendum and, predictably, Syriza did not keep their promise. Once you're a political party in power, making enemies with banks and other states just doesn't make sense. Their hopes dashed, the social movements deflated, the rightwing came into power, and austerity became the order of the day in Greece.

In late 2020, a constitutional referendum was held in Chile to replace the Constitution that had basically been authored by the Pinochet dictatorship. The referendum was proposed as a release valve to take the steam out of the uprising that rocked the country in 2019 and much of 2020, provoked by years of austerity and increasing poverty. An overwhelming majority of people voted for a new constitution, electing representatives from the different Indigenous peoples in the territory occupied by the Chilean state, as well as progressive politicians and movement representatives, or at the least, people who billed themselves as representing the movements. For two whole years, the social movements that had been so combative largely went dormant as they became spectators of this process. When the draft of the new constitution finally went to a vote in another referendum, it was defeated, and the whole process amounted to nothing. This was, of course, predictable. The capitalists still own the media, and mass media no matter who owns it create spectators, and spectators are very easy to frighten. Historically, the only exception to the effectiveness of this form of social mind control is for people to be out in the streets, setting banks on fire and building a different future instead of sitting at home paying attention to the media.

A Last Chance

Many of us, perhaps most of us, will not get another chance for a revolution, for creating a world meant for life and not for the extraction of profit and power. We had a real shot a century ago, and we blew it. Since then, the hour has grown very late. Despite this, or likely intoxicated by the sense of urgency, many of us have forgotten our history and are turning again to the false promises of the State, in the forms of progressive, charismatic politicians, ecosocialism or eco-Leninism, the Trotskyist or Stalinist sects that have begun proliferating again, or the crypto-authoritarianism of the latest new cult of grad students who think they know better.

Many have been crushed down by repression, exhaustion, the perpetual disappointment with movements that refuse to address their weaknesses, or the depression of living through a beautiful rebellion in which we become stronger than we ever have before, only to see things return to how they were. So they begin to pray for a magic bullet, some superhero, an all-powerful entity,

a State to step in and solve things for us. And all that God asks in return is that they surrender their memory and their agency.

But only we will save us. An insurrection was never going to fix things overnight. The revolution was always a long path, a never ending one, in fact. The major rebellions, the qualitative expansions of our movements, was only ever going to present a new challenge, a need to develop new strategies and new structures. Stagnation, especially in our moments of strength, only leads to more stagnation.

It's not too late, though. To recover our memory of generations of struggle. To learn from our recent setbacks. To discover ways to help as many of us as possible to survive the inferno that capitalism has become. The State is a machine for controlling and exploiting a society. It has no other function, any more than a car can grow strawberries or make milkshakes.

But communities of living beings acting in solidarity? No one is better positioned to define survival and to achieve it. Survival, and life, and joy, and healing.

Further Reading

CrimethInc, *The Russian Counterrevolution*

Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*

Volin, *The Unknown Revolution*

Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*

Ngo Van, *In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary*

Jan Valtin, *Out of the Night*

Erik Benítez Martínez, *La traición de la hoz y el martillo*

Augustí Guillamón, *El terror estalinista en Barcelona 1938*

CrimethInc, "Syriza Can't Save Greece"

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