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Remembering 100 Years of International Women's Day and the Russian Revolution

Short book reviews

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2017

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The Russian Revolution may have begun 100 years ago, but the challenges that it posed, not only to the monarchy of the time and to the growing and evolving capitalism of the day, but to authoritarianism of any sort, are as relevant today as they were then.

Recently, we celebrated, not only International Women's Day on March 8th, but also its connection to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. One hundred years ago, women in the cold on the bread lines began protests and riots that led to the overthrow of the 300-year-old Romanov monarchy. Now, before history-phobia sets in, remember that the events that those women initiated, along with the larger revolution that followed from them, affected hundreds of millions of people and hold important lessons for revolutionaries of today. Those events show as much about what should not be done as what could be done to live on this planet in a peaceful, creative, fulfilling, sustainable way.

Here are some short reviews of some relevant books for exploring those events, which still resonate today. The main idea explored is that there is a serious need to re-examine the undue credit far too many anarchists give Marxism and so-called 'Marxist economics.' Bakunin may well have praised Marx's *Capital*, which synthesized many other writers on economics (Proudhon, Smith, Considerant, Say, etc.), and applied elements of those theorists in a more cogent analysis of the developing capitalism of his day.

However, is that good enough in our day? What is the nature of the analysis? How did it actually play out in the lived reality of the history that followed? We will begin with the most detailed and accurate analysis of Marx, Marxism, his followers and their practice.

Ronald Tabor, *The Tyranny of Theory*. AK Press, 2013

Tabor does a great job demolishing Marx and Marxism, not so much with Marx's analysis of nineteenth century British capitalism, but more with the philosophical foundations. Also tackled is Marx's so-called 'economics,' but here, while doing a good demolition job, in my estimation, Tabor does not go far enough. In his critique of Marxism, he demonstrates the internal contradiction of

its analysis of the State as a dictatorship of the ruling class, yet its retention of the State is a necessary and integral part of Marxist theory (and eventual practice in Russia in 1917). This remains a contradiction even were one to accept the supposed ability of the State in Marx's theory to 'wither away.'

Tabor shows that it was not historical quirks, Bolshevik vanguardism or individual personalities that were, and remain, the fundamental problem, but the very nature of authoritarian structures based on an authoritarian theory and philosophy. The party structure was a core problem: "the party elite acted as a centre of gravity around which [the new ruling] class gathered..." (12)

Why did this happen? One basic reason was the philosophical foundation of Marxism: "Although Marx explicitly disclaimed 'metaphysics,' his thought in fact constitutes a metaphysical system: it implies ideas about the ultimate structure of reality." (12) And with regard to the claim that the theory is 'scientific': "Marxism never permits itself to be tested as a specific scientific theory, but insists that it is the equivalent of science itself, in the realm of social thought." (23)

With all of that and more, I agree with Tabor. However, I disagree with a basic idea of his and some of the other authors reviewed: that there is a 'Marxist economics.' There is no such thing; rather, there is a Marxist economic analysis of British nineteenth century capitalism. And this is perhaps the biggest issue with the body of thought and practice: they have nothing with which to replace capitalism in or after a revolutionary event. All they can, and have fallen back on is what they know: capitalist relationships of bosses and bossed, involuntary extraction of surplus value from workers, and authoritarian structures throughout society. In contrast, anarchism has developed many alternative economic analyses and alternative economic systems. They have resulted in the forms of theory and practice encompassed by anarcho-syndicalism.

So it is a rollicking good read, moving from workers' revolt to insurrectionary event to factory takeover, and is enjoyable if you do not look too closely into the ideological limitations and biases of many of the authors. So many are stuck in the nonsense of Marxist apologia. Consider this example from a chapter on Russia, 1917-1920: "Some anarchist called for the takeover of factories, but a Bolshevik delegate replied: "control is not yet socialism, nor even taking of production into our hands...Having taken power into our hands, we should direct capitalism along a path such that it will outlive itself..." But nowhere in this chapter, in a book about Workers' Control, is there the obvious critique of this Marxist nonsense: if Marxism is about 'directing capitalism,' then it is not revolutionary, and certainly not about workers' control.

One look at Simon Pirani's book *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924*, should dispel the illusions held by some of these authors. If a reader can keep off the rose-colored glasses and recognize its limitations, then the book is a good read.

Derick Shannon, Anthony J. Nocella, & John Asimakopoulos, eds., *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics*. AK Press.

As its title suggests, this edited collection is another of several recent works that aim to develop a modern approach to 'anarchist economics.' Overall, the essays help to confirm my contention that there is no such thing as 'Marxist economics.' Some authors still mistake Marx and Engel's analysis of capitalism for a statement on economics. This is my major critique, but it does not apply to all the contributors. On the positive side, the book covers many dimensions of what an understanding of economics should include, and topics that anarchists have been writing about and putting into practice for generations. Economics is often a scary topic for some, but this treatment is not.

Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917-1921: The state and counter-revolution.* (many editions)

Brinton (a.k.a. Chris Pallis) wrote this book in 1970, but don't let the date put you off. The book really has not been surpassed for sharp critical analysis of events on the factory floor during the Russian Revolution. Importantly, he firstly untangles the notion of 'workers' control', noting how many political tendencies have trumpeted that as a slogan, including social democrats, Trotskyists, libertarian Marxists, and anarcho-syndicalists. But what do they mean, and what does the concept sensibly mean at all?

If the Bolsheviks said that they had installed workers control in, say, 1918, when they began dismantling the original Factory Committees that workers themselves had built, and replaced them with Party-controlled 'factory committees,' is that the same idea? Can it be the same beast? Can it lead to the same sort of worker-controlled decision-making, and ultimately, the same sort of society? These are crucial questions, and ones that we still need to mull over, argue around, and come to conclusions about. Brinton's book is a must-read for any revolutionary or aspiring change-agent in current times.

Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini, eds., *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present.* Haymarket Press.

This edited collection is inspiring and annoying in so many ways! The various contributors hail from widely different backgrounds in terms of work, geographic and cultural location, and ideology. The volume's best quality is its coverage of many examples of attempts at workers' control from all over the world, although with too few entries from non-European areas.

Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class struggle in a Moscow metal factory.* Berghahn Books, 2005

Murphy's book has many fine features, including its use of recently opened Russian archival material and its attempt to bring women into the revolutionary story. One of its strongest features is the way it brings the reader into many of the struggles and arguments on the factory floor during the revolutionary period and in the 1920s to early 1930s. Like the next book reviewed, by Pirani, this is a marvellous window into the past, and includes aspects of the social life of the workers and bureaucrats, as well as factory floor meetings. However, Murphy's main purpose is to show how workers' lives were better during the era when Trotsky was around as compared to during Stalin's rule. He fails to recognize that while the repression of the Russian people began with the beginning of Bolshevik rule, and certainly may have accelerated under Stalin, Trotsky, Lenin and the rest were just as complicit in silencing dissent. Stalin built his machine on the foundations of the previous rulers.

Much of the evidence that the author presents is based on the Bolshevik/Communist Party's meeting minutes, making a biased account inevitable. Murphy just seems bitter that Stalin gained the crown instead of Trotsky: there is no evidence that Trotsky would have behaved any better, and much to suggest the reverse. On a positive note, the attempt to look at what was happening on the factory floor is a bonus. Just keep your eyes open as you walk with the author, or you may trip over a series of 'the party directed' and 'the party committee expelled x.' Accepting the Party records as an almost solely valid story of worker reality leaves me wanting a fuller, more accurate account.

Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924: Soviet workers and the new communist elite.* Routledge.

Pirani's book is similar to Murphy's, but a vast improvement. Its main strength is its seeming lack of an ulterior motive, an inherent bias that clouds the narrative. Pirani also takes us onto the factory floor, but uses a wider range of evidence and far more refined analyses. We are presented with an honest attempt to examine the relationship between the Bolshevik/Communist Party and the working class in the factories, not merely an account of arguments between one set of authoritarians within the Party and other sets of would-be bosses, each wanting to take control of the reins of power via that very same Party.

Pirani uses similar archival material from Party and Secret Police records, but his aim is to find out why and how the growing bureaucratic machine succeeded in destroying worker power and democratic worker decision-making structures. He describes the increasing use of terror to maintain control over the population, focusing on this process in working-class factories and districts. Pirani focuses on the period 1920 through 1924, skipping analysis of the previous period, 1917 through 1920. That was when the foundations for the revolutionary retreat were laid and the tactics within the Party were formulated to repress dissent within revolutionaries outside the Party. Despite these shortcomings, this is a good book.

Nestor Makhno, *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine, Under the Blows of the Counterrevolution (April-June 1918), and The Ukrainian Revolution.* Black Cat Press.

Makhno wrote an autobiography, now published in English in three volumes by Black Cat Press in Canada. These books tell the story of Makhno, a peasant/proletarian, building a huge volunteer force in 1917 to fight the invading armies after Lenin ceded the

Ukraine to the Germans & Austro Hungarians, in order to end Russia's involvement in World War One. The Ukrainians did not like the deal, and Makhno, the former factory worker, with a small band of supporters, took up a guerrilla campaign to free the predominantly agricultural region from the new oppressors.

It was not only a struggle against invaders, but also a fight to establish a revolutionary society based on anarchist principles. Within a few months, a large area was liberated and new social systems developed by the peasants on the land and the workers in the towns. This is an exciting account of the ups and downs of four years of struggle, not only against foreign invaders, but also against local would-be rulers who wanted to crush the Ukrainian Revolution. This original history is well worth reading.

Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy's Cossack. The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine, 1917-1921.* AK Press.

Using recently available material, as well as primary sources, such as Makhno's autobiography and the stories of others in the Makhno Insurrectionary Army, Skirda has written an authoritative account of the Makhnovist movement during the Russian Revolution. He examines not only the brilliant military tactics of Makhno and the strategists who fought along side him, but also the politics and revolutionary principles they fought for and the revolutionary structures that were put in place, not only among the anarchist troops, but also by the Ukrainian people who had been liberated. Often forgotten is that the Makhnovists fought some of the greatest and last of the world's cavalry battles—against the invading Austro-Hungarian and German armies, the reactionary White Russian armies, and finally, the Bolshevik troops. This is stirring stuff, an exciting and fast-paced read.