

An Attempted Marxist-Anarchist Dialogue

**Review of Michael Lowy & Oliver Besancenot, *Revolutionary Affinities:
Toward a Marxist-Anarchist Solidarity***

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Michael Lowy and Oliver Besancenot, two Marxists from the Trotskyist tradition, have made an effort to discuss possible convergences and interactions between Marxism and anarchism. (The little book has been well translated from the French by David Campbell, an anarchist who did most of the work while in jail in New York City.)

At first it might seem absurd to seek overlaps between these two schools of socialism. Anarchism stands for freedom and self-management, but in spite of some achievements its movement has failed to successfully create anarchism in any country. Meanwhile whatever Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels originally intended, Marxism became the ideology of repressive, mass-murdering, state-capitalisms (that is, Stalinism). Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, authoritarian Marxist governments persist in North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and especially in the great nation of China. Marxism and anarchism would seem to have little in common. Yet we live in the looming catastrophes of industrial capitalism. People are drawn to its radical alternatives. In this context, it is the failures of each which has drawn some anarchists and Marxists to dialogue, to learn the strengths of the alternate trend. (Although, for all their failures, anarchists never murdered tens of millions of workers, peasants, and others.)

Along with anarchism's vision of freedom, there is a rising interest in Marxism, particularly in its analysis of how capitalism works and what might be done to end it. Some radicals focus on the humanistic, working class, and ecological aspects of Marx's Marxism, rather than its statist, centralist, and determinist aspects. This looks to libertarian-democratic and "ultra-left" trends in Marxism, such as William Morris, the council communists, Luxemburgists, autonomists, the Johnson-Forrest Tendency, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and unorthodox and dissident Trotskyists. Unlike Stalinism, these trends in Marxism might be partners in a dialogue with revolutionary anarchists. (See Price 2017.)

Che

The authors claim to be libertarian Marxists, in opposition to both Stalinism and to social democracy (reformist "democratic socialism"). They want to see what they can learn from anarchism—and what revolutionary anarchism can learn from their view of Marxism. I am all for a Marxist-anarchist dialogue and have written some material seeking to advance it (e.g., Price 2022).

A lot depends on what one means by "Marxism" (as well as "anarchism"). The authors are admirers of Che Guevara. They have written books about him and his "revolutionary legacy" (Lowy 2007; Besancenot & Lowy 2009). In the text, they claim that the struggle of the Mexican Zapatistas show "traces of the revolutionary ethic that lead directly back to Che." (p. 76) They do not note that the founders of the Zapatistas had abandoned the elitist guerrilla strategy of Che. They further declare that "Marx's writings...form the political basis of the revolutionary humanism of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara." (p. 124)

Actually Che Guevara was an admirer of Joseph Stalin. Che played a major role in turning the Cuban revolution into a one-party, one-man, dictatorship, with a state-capitalist economy, allied with Soviet Russian imperialism. Within the upper circles of the Castroite regime, Che was a strong proponent of increasing centralization and of repression of the workers. He sincerely sought to spread the revolution (as he understood the revolution), but his efforts were failures

both in Africa and in Bolivia. While he wrote some high-falutin' philosophical language about socialism, his actual conception was of a totalitarian society. (See Price 2016.)

It may seem unfair to point to the authors' admiration of Guevara, which is only briefly referred to twice in the text. Yet it is difficult to integrate anarchism with advocacy of a Stalinist-type dictatorship, however well-meaning you might be. (Of course, many of the Trotskyist groupings have been admirers of Fidel Castro and Che; but these don't advocate "solidarity" with anarchism.) Besancenot and Lowy may misinterpret Che as a "revolutionary humanist," but how can they ignore his support of the Cuban dictatorship? And then seek a dialogue with anarchism?

Positive Aspects of the Book

And yet, despite this confusing contradiction, some of this book is worthwhile. Besancenot and Lowy are concerned to show "another side of history...that of the alliances and active solidarity between anarchists and Marxists." (p. 1)

They have brief sections on events in revolutionary history when anarchists and Marxists worked together. This includes the First International, in which anarchists cooperated with Marx for years—until Marx organized the expulsion of Michael Bakunin and forced a split with the anarchists. They cover the U.S. Haymarket Martyrs of 1886. These were anarchists who came out of a Marxist background and who still used the Marxist analysis of capitalism.

They briefly cover the development of anarcho-syndicalism, which shared a revolutionary working class orientation with Marxism. They discuss the Spanish Revolution of the thirties. That revolution was betrayed by most of the Marxist and anarchist leaders, both of which joined the capitalist government together with liberal parties. Their partner, the Communist Party, tried to set up a totalitarian state. A minority of revolutionary anarchists and Marxists did try to advance the revolution, but were overwhelmed. There are brief sections (they can hardly be called "chapters") on the May-June '68 almost-revolution in France, on the international demonstrations against "globalization," and on the Occupy movement.

The little book also has nine brief biographical sections on significant revolutionaries. This includes the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. She had little use for anarchism, but her vision of revolutionary socialist democracy-from-below was compatible with anarchism. Similarly, they discuss Buenaventura Durruti. As an anarchist, he played an important role in the Spanish Revolution. He had little use for Marxism but has been respected by Marxists. The same may be said of the famous anarchist Emma Goldman. In Russia, she originally supported the Revolution and was willing to work with the Leninists—until their authoritarianism drove her into opposition.

Their little biographies include "A Few Libertarian Marxist Thinkers." Of the three they cite, the most interesting may be Daniel Guerin. His books on anarchism are widely read. In France during World War II, he cooperated with the Trotskyist underground. Working with syndicalists, anarchists, and Trotskyists, he was a prominent opponent of French imperialism in Algeria and an early Gay liberationist. Admiring J.P. Proudhon and Bakunin, but also Luxemburg, he sought a "synthesis" of revolutionary anarchism and libertarian Marxism. (See Guerin 2017)

The Russian Revolution

The part covering the 1917 Russian Revolution is titled, “Points of Conflict,” including a section, “The Split Between Red and Black.” This is where the book’s difficulties show most clearly.

“Initially, there was a convergence between many anarchists—not only Russian but also from around the world—and the Marxist revolutionaries. Soon after, the convergence had become a dramatic clash between the two...” (p. 80)

The “October” (Soviet) Revolution was organized by the Communists in alliance with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries (peasant-populists) and with anarchists. The initial government was a coalition of the Communists and Left SRs, generally supported by anarchists in the soviets. (“Soviet” means “council.” It originally referred to the popularly elected councils which were rooted in factory committees, village assemblies, and military units.)

But by 1920, the Leninists had banned all alternate parties, including those which had fought on their side in the Russian Civil War. These included the Left SRs and the Left Mensheviks. Anarchists were arrested, jailed, and shot. Not long after, even opposition caucuses in the one legal party were outlawed.

Essentially, the writers favor the rule of the soviets, supported by the revolutionary parties including the Communists—but criticize what happened instead: the rule of the Communist Party, with supposed support by the soviets. This went together with economic changes, “prioritizing centralized nationalization over the local collectivization of the means of production...” (p. 87) They mildly comment, “This choice, like so many others, is questionable.” (same) This is quite the understatement.

Despite this (soft) criticism of the Leninists, Besancenot and Lowy insist that the problem does not lie with Marx. “It is pointless, however, to seek a manufacturing defect in Marxism...on the question of whether to abolish the state immediately or not.” (p. 87) Similarly, they oppose “...drawing a connection between the Lenin years and the Stalin years.” (p. 89) Granted that Marx would have been horrified by what Stalin made out of Marxism—and that V.I. Lenin was no Stalin. Lenin did not aim for a totalitarian state, nor want one. This was unlike Mao Tse-tung, say, who already had Stalinist Russia as a model and goal—as did Che and Fidel.

Yet it is a bit much to deny that Marx’s strategy of working through the state was not a cause of Lenin’s building a party-state, one which laid the basis for Stalinist state-capitalism. And, like Marx, Lenin believed that he and his party knew the truth better than anyone else. This justified the one-party party-state. Believing that his party—and only his party—knew the full truth—and since only his party spoke for the proletariat—Lenin felt justified in suppressing all other points of view, including the anarchists.

In 1921, the sailors at the Kronstadt naval base rebelled. The Kronstadt fortress overlooked the capitol at Petrograd. Influenced by anarchists, the rebels demanded an end to the political monopoly of the Communists, recognition of other left political tendencies, and free elections to the soviets, as well as economic reforms. Emma Goldman urged negotiation with the rebels. Instead, the Communists crushed them militarily, and then shot the captured sailors in batches. To anarchists this was a counterrevolutionary crime. It was comparable to the 1956 crushing of the Hungarian revolution.

The two authors regard this opinion as “one-sided.” “In our view, the conflict between Kronstadt and the Bolshevik government was...a tragic and fraternal confrontation between two revolutionary currents. The responsibility for this tragedy is shared, but falls primarily on those

who held power.” (p. 95) “The crushing of the sailors of Kronstadt was not a ‘tragic necessity,’ but an error and a wrong.” (p. 97)

In other words, the anarchist-influenced rebel sailors are partially to blame (they dared to demand socialist democracy) even if the “primary” fault lies with the Communist regime (which chose to massacre the sailors). This choice was a bad mistake, not a counterrevolutionary crime (no one is perfect). Still, both sides were “revolutionary currents.”

It has been argued that the Russian Communists dared not permit several political tendencies to compete in free elections. Given the poverty and destruction which followed World War I and the Civil War, the workers and peasants were unhappy with the Communists. They would likely have voted them out, supposedly with disastrous consequences. The authors quote the Trotskyist (and ex-anarchist) Victor Serge: “If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant uprising, the massacre of the Communists...and, in the end...another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian.” (p. 97) They agree with this view. “A Bolshevik defeat would have opened the path to counterrevolution.” (same)

Whether this is true or not, the Bolshevik victory opened the path to (internal) counterrevolution. The one-party Communist dictatorship (assuming it ever was a “proletarian dictatorship”) led to the “anti-proletarian” dictatorship of Stalin and the Stalinist bureaucracy. Along with the super-exploitation of the workers and peasants, it engaged in “the massacre of the Communists” in the purge trials of the ‘thirties—not to mention the massacre of millions of workers and peasants. Somewhat contradicting themselves, Lowy and Besancenot agree. For “the apparatchiks in the Kremlin...the crushing of the marines at Kronstadt was a service...to their ascension to power, a power that from then on could not be contested.” (p. 100) A somewhat similar view is given of the Ukrainian independent revolutionary army organized by the anarchist Nestor Makhno—allied with, and then betrayed by, the Communists.

Policy Issues

The final part of the book is titled “Policy Issues.” It covers more theoretical, strategic, and programmatic topics. Its first section is on the “Individual and [the] Collective.” The authors declare, “the anarchist movement has held the flag of individual emancipation much higher than the Marxist family.” (p. 122)

They then go on to criticize the anarchists for being too much individualistic. They cite Max Stirner, the early-19th century German philosopher of extreme egoist-individualism. Actually Stirner had no influence in the development of anarchist theory or movement, so citing him is irrelevant. Even so, the authors admit, “he foresaw the threat that the specter of the state could potentially hang over the project of individual rights in Germany.” (p. 123) They note that Guerin referred positively to Stirner. As a gay man, Guerin liked Stirner’s opposition to moralism and puritanism, without accepting his extreme individualism.

Similarly, the writers claim that “the old tenets of anarchism [are] poorly suited to such a level of overarching political organization” as was needed in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution. (p. 103) Actually the anarchist-led Makhnovist movement did a good job of organizing in the Ukraine, in the brief time allowed it. This was despite the need to fight off the Austrian, Polish, Ukrainian nationalist, White counterrevolutionary, and Russian Communist armies.

In any case, Michael Bakunin, among the first revolutionary anarchist-socialists, had a view of liberated individuality as social, productive, and interactive. (So did Marx, especially expressed in his earliest writings.) They summarize, “If it is essential to ‘re-individualize’ the communist project, it is just as necessary to ‘collectivize’ anarchist ideas.” (p. 125) They believe “a revolutionary humanist path remains open,” which they think (bizarrely) is exemplified by “Che Guevara”! (same)

Besancenot and Lowy have a section titled “Making Revolution without Taking Power?” In effect they argue that it is wrong for a revolution to establish a new state (to take state power) but necessary to establish the self-organization of the workers and oppressed (to empower the people). Their examples are the 1871 Paris Commune and the early soviets. They call the Commune “a new form of power that was no longer a state, in the conventional sense, but was nonetheless a government, democratically elected...” (p. 131) Without quibbling over terms (Kropotkin sometimes made the same distinction between “state” and “government”), anarchists can mostly agree, I think.

In a section on “Autonomy and Federalism,” the writers say that their vision of “Communism...intends to entrust as many powers as possible to the base and foster local initiatives.” (p. 132) This is the anarchist conception of decentralized federalism. “From the idea of federalism developed by the anarchists, we can retain the focus on power to the base and voluntary solidarity between collectives.” (p. 135)

There is a section on “Democratic Economic Planning and Self-Management.” Their proposal “does not correspond in the least to what is often described as ‘central economic planning,’ for the economic and social decisions are not made by any kind of ‘center,’ but determined democratically by the populations concerned.” (p. 139) Like Michael Albert’s “participatory economy” or “Parecon,” their “democratic socialist economic planning...[includes] opposition to the capitalist market and to bureaucratic economic planning, confidence in workers’ self-organization, and anti-authoritarianism.” (p. 140) However, they have some valid criticisms of the Parecon program. They also give credit to Anton Pannekoek of the “council communists” / libertarian Marxists “for opting for the socialization of the means of production under the control of the producers themselves, rather than for their nationalization from above.” (p. 150)

The theme of decentralist federalism is continued in “Direct and Representative Democracy.” In this section, the authors recognize that anarchists and Marxists have had important differences on these topics. But they claim that “some significant convergences can still be found. For example, both are favorable to forms of direct democracy in social struggles: general assemblies, self-organized strikes and pickets, etc.” (p. 142)

This may be true. But it covers-over an important difference. Anarchists can accept election of delegates to higher federal councils, but they insist that the base assemblies must have face-to-face direct democracy. Marx and Engels, even in their most radically democratic writings (for example, on the Paris Commune) advocated an extremely democratic form of representative democracy. They had no conception of basing this in face-to-face direct democracy. This is the anarchist tradition.

There is also a very brief discussion of whether revolutionary socialists should run and/or vote in bourgeois elections. They accept the view of both traditions that socialism cannot be achieved through elections. However, they still believe that it may be useful to run and vote, for various reasons. “Our point of view in this debate is closer to the Marxist tradition” than to the anarchist tradition of anti-electoralism. (p. 143) They do not mention that council communists and other

“ultra-left” libertarian Marxists have been opposed to participation in elections. Anarchists would argue that history has demonstrated the failures of an electoralist/parliamentary strategy.

In “Union and Party,” Besancenot and Lowy summarize the lessons of the Russian Revolution and other revolutions and near-revolutions. They argue that the struggle needs radical parties and organizations (including anarchist federations) as well as mass organizations, such as labor unions and also popular councils. Parties are formed on agreements about particular programs. They are necessary to fight for a revolutionary program against reformists, liberals, conservatives, and fascists (for these will certainly have their parties). There is a historical tendency among anarchists of revolutionary federations. This includes Bakunin’s “Brotherhoods,” Makhno and others’ advocacy of the “Platform,” the Spanish FAI, and the current especificismo of Latin Americans.

The mass organizations provide “the framework of regular and sovereign general assemblies, open to all workers who want to mobilize...[in] the natural organ of the struggle....They can also...elect delegates, also dismissible, to participate in a coordination where the delegates from different assemblies meet to unify their activities....The power to make decisions belongs to the base.... This democratic option for organization prefigures today the way society could function tomorrow.” (p. 151)

A number of important topics are not covered in this book. These include feminism and the dominance of straight males. Also issues of white supremacy and racism, colonialism, imperialism, and national self-determination. Economic developments of world capitalism are not discussed. The writers themselves mention that they have not covered education of children, nor the vital issue of opposing fascism.

But there is consideration of the very important topic of environmentalism. This is in the section, “Ecosocialism and Anarchist Ecology.” The authors base much of their ecosocialism on the anarchist writings of Murray Bookchin, although they note that Bookchin also used concepts from Marx. Bookchin analyzed capitalist commodification, competition, and, above all, its drive to accumulate, as destroying the ecology. Bookchin wrote about the need for a new, noncapitalist, society, decentralized and directly democratic, with a liberatory transformation of technology. “...We can only admire Murray Bookchin’s coherence and clear-sightedness.” (p. 154)

They make some criticisms of Bookchin. They deny his view that there is a “post-scarcity” world. While agreeing with Bookchin on the need for economic, technological, and political decentralization, they insist on federalist coordination and planning on regional, continental, and world levels. Considering their proletarian perspective, it is odd that they do not express disagreement with Bookchin’s rejection of the major role of the working class in a revolution. Also, surprisingly, there is no reference to research about ecological themes in Marx’s works by ecological Marxist theorists. This includes John Bellamy Foster and others. (See Foster 2009.)

Revolutionary Conclusion

Besancenot and Lowy conclude with “Toward a Libertarian Marxism.” They state that “Our point of departure...is Marxism.” (p. 158) That is where they come from. They do not believe that there can be a final definition of “libertarian Marxism.” They do believe that “Marxists have much to learn from...the anarchists.” (p. 158)

Their aim, they declare, is not to create a better Marxism, with tips from anarchism. (Similarly, my goal is not to replace anarchism with a nicer version of Marxism.) Instead, “The future

emancipatory battles of our century will also see this convergence, in both action and thought, of the two great revolutionary currents of the past, of the present, and of the future—Marxism and anarchism, the red flag and the black flag.” (p. 159)

The basis of this convergence is that both revolutionary class-struggle anarchism and libertarian (autonomist) Marxism share a goal. This is an international revolution by the working class and its allies among all oppressed—to overthrow the state, capitalism, and all oppressions, and to replace them with the self-organization of the workers and oppressed.

The issue is not an immediate merger of anarchism and Marxism. This is especially true when there is so much variation within each school. As I pointed out in the beginning, Lowy and Besancenot and many others see an authoritarian such as Che Guevara as within their “libertarian” version of Marxism. They may find the Communist suppression of the Kronstadt rebels as justifiable, or perhaps a tragic if understandable error. Such views must limit their dialogue with anarchism. As a revolutionary anarchist, I still find matters of interest in this book. But its limitations are also real.

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