

In Defense of Bakunin and Anarchism

Responses to Herb Gamberg's Attacks on Anarchism

Wayne Price

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The Marxist journal, "Platypus Review", published an article by Herb Gamberg which attacked anarchism by focusing on Bakunin. wayne price wrote a response and Gamberg replied, in PR. The following is wayne's original response plus his new reply to Gamberg's latest comments.

The Marxist journal, Platypus Review, published an attack on anarchism (focusing on Michael Bakunin) by Herb Gamberg (PR 64/March 2014): "Anarchism through Bakunin: A Marxist Assessment"

<http://platypus1917.org/2014/03/02/anarchism-bakunin-ma...ment/>

I wrote a response (PR 65/ April 2014): "In Defense of Anarchism: A Response to Herb Gamberg"

<http://platypus1917.org/2014/04/01/defense-anarchism-re...berg/>

Gamberg wrote a reply to me and another anarchist (PR 66/ May 2014):

"On Anarchism and Marxism: In Response to price and Swenson"

<http://platypus1917.org/2014/05/06/anarchism-marxism-re...nson/>

I am re-printing below my April response to Herb Gamberg, followed by a brand new reply to his last comments.

In Defense of Anarchism: A Response to Herb Gamberg

Herb Gamberg's essay "Anarchism Through Bakunin; A Marxist Assessment"¹ is not meant to be a balanced discussion of Michael Bakunin's strengths and weaknesses, nor is it a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of anarchism and Marxism. It is a direct, full-throated attack on anarchism, using Bakunin as his focus in the name of Marxism.

In this, he makes a mistake. Important as Bakunin was in initiating the anarchist movement, it is easy to overstate his significance. Anarchism has a different relationship to its "founding fathers" than does Marxism. Marxists are, well, Marxists; also Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists, etc. Anarchists are not Bakuninists, Kropotkinists, nor Goldmanites. Anarchism is more of a collective product. For example, that Bakunin had a penchant for imagining elitist, secret conspiratorial societies is true enough, but this soon dropped out of the movement. Instead, many of today's anarchists are for democratic federations of revolutionary anarchists, which openly participate in broader movements (e.g., "neo-platformism" or "especificismo"). Similarly, Gamberg may criticize Bakunin for his lack of theoretical activity, but this could not be said of Peter Kropotkin or of current anarchists.

To respond to Gamberg, it is necessary to understand what he means by Marxism, his version of Marxism. This is clarified by a tossed-off line: "20th century revolutions that created proletarian states have moved neither to classlessness nor statelessness ..." Note the plural; he is not just writing about the Soviet Union. He is referring to states that he regards as workers' ("proletarian") states. These were countries in which the working class did not play major parts in their revolutions (excepting the Soviet Union), and in which the workers (and the peasants) had no control over the government. In fact, the workers and peasants in these "proletarian states" were

¹ See Herb Gamberg, "Anarchism Through Bakunin: A Marxist Assesment," Platypus Review #64 (March 2014),

viciously exploited and oppressed, and even murdered by the millions. Such regimes are most accurately regarded as “state capitalist” rather than as any kind of “workers’ state” (whatever that would mean in practice). A person who holds such views has a different moral perspective—a different class orientation—from supporters of anarchism or other types of libertarian communism. Whether this was Marx’s view is another question. In my opinion, Marx expressed both libertarian-democratic and authoritarian views at different times and in different places.

The question of social values arise when Gamberg states (apparently as a negative) that, “[A]t the center of Bakunin’s anarchism [is] the engagement with underdogs against their more powerful oppressors ... whenever there was an issue of oppression by one group by another with power ...” Yes, anarchists are on the side of the oppressed against oppression, in all cases and on all issues. This does not mean opposition to non-oppressive “authority,” in the sense of expertise (e.g., a shoemaker or surgeon), as Gamberg misstates.

Nor does it mean rejecting the importance of the modern industrial working class. Gamberg correctly notes, “[W]ith Marx, Bakunin sometimes emphasized the centrality of class conflict ...” However, Gamberg blatantly contradicts himself on this point. He asserts, falsely, that Bakunin rejected workers’ unions: “Bakunin ... saw the very existence of such organizations [working class trade unions] as retrogressive.” But a few paragraphs later, he writes, Bakunin “... accepted the necessity of trade union organization for the working class ... He also saw trade unions as the potential building blocks of the future ...”

Oddly, Gamberg hardly mentions the one practical and strategic, difference between the anarchists and Marx, which arose at the end of the First International. While both were for labor unions, Marx wanted the International to push for workers’ parties in all countries, to run in elections. “Marx hoped to transform the International’s organizations in the various countries into political parties ...”² He stated that it might be possible for the workers to take over the state, peacefully and legally, in some cases (especially Britain). In 1880, Marx wrote an “Introduction to the Program of the French Workers’ Party,” which stated that with this party, “[U]niversal suffrage ... will thus be transformed from the instrument of fraud that it has been up till now into an instrument of emancipation.”³ To French anarchists of the time, this seemed to contradict the revolutionary lessons of the Paris Commune. With the benefit of hindsight, the history of the Marxist Social Democratic parties, and even of the recent Eurocommunist and Green parties, we see that the anarchists were right to reject electoralism.

Gamberg is wrong to claim that anarchists believe “the state is the source and origin of all evil,” as distinct from the exploitative class system and other forms of oppression. But it is certainly true that anarchists are opposed to the state (as part of the overall system of domination) and reject the Marxist program of a “transitional” or “workers’” state. He correctly quotes Bakunin as predicting that a revolution which constructs “a powerfully centralized revolutionary state would inevitably result in military dictatorship and a new master.” This does not mean a rejection of all social coordination or defense against counterrevolutionary forces. As did later anarchists, Bakunin advocated a federation of workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies tied in with an armed people (a popular militia). This would be the self-organization of the workers and

² David Fernbach, ed., “Introduction,” in Karl Marx: The First International and After Political Writings; Vol. 3 (New York: Penguin/New Left Review, 1992).

³ Ibid, 376–377.

their allies. But he opposed a state; that is, he opposes a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine over and above the rest of the working population.⁴

Gamberg and others criticize anarchists for being decentralists and advocates of “small” organizations. He asserts, “Socialism...has always been fully committed to the advantages of larger, technically proficient, enterprise.” This is to say, state socialists have accepted the capitalist development of technology and business as though it were the “rational” way to industrialize. The way capitalism develops technology and business forms is not for the most efficient way to produce useful products, but to produce and realize surplus value. This has resulted in a massive attack on the ecology and the destruction of human potentialities. A liberating socialist revolution will immediately begin to reorganize the technology to be amenable to worker self-management and ecological balance. This will include re-structuring the flow of work, the roles of order-givers and order-takers, the goals of production in terms of final goods, by-products, its effects upon the workers, and the size of units and sub-units of industry.

Gamberg claims the anarchist goal is to organize “a decentralized confederacy of small independent groups.” In fact, anarchists accept centralization when necessary, and seek to balance localism and centralization (which is the point about being a “confederacy”). However, they seek to minimize centralization, which means power being in the hands of a few at a “center,” while everyone else is out on the “periphery.” Anarchists are not against all delegation and representation in big organizations, but seek to root society in directly democratic, face-to-face, small groups in the neighborhood and at the socialized workplace.

Gamberg quotes Bakunin as warning that Marx’s supposed “scientific socialist [state] will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant, and elitist of all regimes.” Gamberg misinterprets this to mean that Bakunin had a “profound suspicion for a scientific approach.” Actually Bakunin greatly admired Marx’s theoretical achievements in historical materialism and his critique of the political economy. Many anarchists have felt similarly. (I myself have written a book presenting Marx’s economic theory from an anarchist perspective.)⁵ But what the quotation from Bakunin really means is that if a party of intellectuals who think they have all the “scientific” answers should take over a state, it will become a new, collective, ruling class!

Bakunin and other anarchists repeatedly warned that if Marx’s program was carried out, if a centralized state of self-confident theorists (whether workers or “scientific” intellectuals) took over and nationalized and centralized the economy—the result would be state capitalism, with a new, collectivized, ruling class. Gamberg has such quotations scattered through his essay. And that is why, as he says, “the 20th century revolutions that created proletarian states have moved neither to classlessness nor to statelessness...!” That is, for the extended periods that they existed before collapsing back into traditional capitalism.

It is interesting to contrast Gamberg’s wholly negative view of Bakunin with that of the Marxist David Fernbach, in his “Introduction” to Karl Marx, *Political Writings*:

“Bakunin, for all his errors, was a socialist revolutionary who aimed, like Marx...at the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the abolition of private property. Bakunin’s abstentionism [from elections], however mistaken, reflected his almost instinctive fear of reformist diversion from

⁴ See Wayne Price, *The Value of Radical Theory; An Anarchist Introduction to Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* (Oakland: AK Press, 2013).

⁵ Ibid.

the revolutionary goal, and of bureaucratic authority in the post-revolutionary society ... But however correct Marx was...Bakunin's rejection of working class participation in the bourgeois political system, and his warning of the dangers involved in the proletarian seizure of political power, raise questions that Marx did not solve altogether satisfactorily. The former leads on to the question of reformism ..."⁶

Fernbach is a Marxist and not an anarchist, yet he sees positive aspects in the legacy of Bakunin. He implies that Marxists may even learn something from anarchism (as, I believe, anarchists can learn from aspects of Marxism). This is especially true when we consider that the "first wave" of Marxism ended in reformist, counterrevolutionary, and pro-imperialist social democracy and that the "second wave" of Marxism (i.e., Leninism) ended in totalitarian state capitalism—and then its collapse. I have yet to read a Marxist with a clear explanation of this history—yet anarchists predicted it as the "first wave" was just beginning!

I am not going to review Gamberg's lengthy philosophical background to Bakunin's thought, as he thinks he understands it. He essentially insists on treating Bakunin as an individualist and egotist, when Bakunin (and Kropotkin and other anarchist-communists) rejected individualist anarchism. They did not agree with Godwin or Stirner (who had no influence on the anarchist movement). But this is a background issue.

Their key point is that, like Marx and Engels, Bakunin and those who came after him believed in a social revolution by the working class and all the oppressed. Yet they rejected Marx's program of seizing a state and centralizing the economy. They (correctly) predicted that this would result in a new exploitative tyranny. Instead they advocated the self-organization of the working people, through committees, councils, associations, and militias, to democratically self-manage society. This goal has not yet been achieved, but it is one worth fighting for.

Notes:

Once More in Defense of Anarchism and Freedom

Herb Gamberg has briefly and concisely replied to my criticism of his original attack on anarchism (and to another criticism by Liam Swenson). He does not really bother to respond to my arguments but mostly repeats old Stalinist boilerplate (while claiming that anarchists are "dogmatic"). He begins by restating Leninist propositions: "after a socialist insurrection takes power it must first abolish capitalist state power and initiate a new form of state power—a dictatorship of the working class necessary for the whole transitional period leading to a classless and stateless future.....All this has been more or less implemented by all 20th century revolutions...."

This asserts that the Communist-Party dictatorships were "dictatorship[s] of the working class" (in which the working class was completely powerless) established by "socialist insurrection[s]" (including the Russian army's conquest of Eastern Europe and North Korea). As a strategic program, it contradicts the anarchist prediction that such new states, nationalizing all industry, would not "lead to a classless and stateless future." Instead they would produce bureaucratic ruling classes running state-capitalist economies. Who turned out to be correct?

Gamberg writes that I should "have something to say about the actual history of these revolutions" but don't. Actually I wrote, "These were countries in which the working class did not play

⁶ David Fernbach, ed., "Introduction," in Karl Marx: *The First International and After Political Writings*; Vol. 3 (New York: Penguin/New Left Review, 1992), 50–51.

major parts in their revolutions (excepting the Soviet Union), and in which the workers (and the peasants) had no control over the government. In fact, the workers and peasants in these 'proletarian states' were viciously exploited and oppressed, and even murdered by the millions." That is, until their inefficiencies caused their systems to collapse back into traditional capitalism .

Is this true or isn't it? In response Gamberg writes that these statist revolutions had problems because they "took place in backward, feudal conditions surrounded by hostile, more powerful capitalist nations." This is true, but it was Stalin who declared that his party could build "Socialism in One Country." Stalin and Mao claimed to be able to create socialism in backward, isolated nations. Gamberg further points out that social democrats, liberals, and conservatives were also against the Communist Party dictatorships. (Yes, and Nazis and fascists are also supporters of one-man, one-party, dictatorships.) And he claims, Canadian tourists are impressed with Cuba! (What the Cuban people think, we do not know, since there is no freedom of speech, association, or right to chose their own representatives, by which they might assert their opinions.)

The one thing which he does not say, is that my description of Soviet Russia, Maoist China, and the Eastern European satellites is not true.

Really, he does not care that the workers and peasants of Soviet Russia, China, or Cuba have no control over their economy or state or are ruled by a bureaucratic class. To Gamberg, and to many Marxists like him, this is "socialism," this is "Marxism," and it is what he would like to see in the US and everywhere. As he says, "These differences between anarchism and revolutionary Marxism are so fundamental that I really have little else to say." He does say that anarchists and Marxists might work together on specific issues. This is true, because we are both against the US capitalist class and its state. It is in what we are for, that we differ "fundamentally."

Gamberg's Reformism

However, Gamberg makes an interesting turn at the end of his remarks. He notes that industrial capitalism confronts "all of us [with] an unprecedented environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of the human species." A "socialist revolution is the obvious solution" (true-leaving aside what he means by "socialist revolution"). But given the shortness of time, he advocates instead "a cross-class movement to save the species." He wants us to "all join together."

What does a "cross-class movement" mean? It could mean advocating that the working class ally with "middle class" forces ("white-collar workers," professionals, shopkeepers and very small businesspeople, etc.), with the unemployed poor, and with peasants/small farmers (not an issue in the US but still a lot of people worldwide). Of course, revolutionary anarchists are all for this and always have been. Or it could mean that if some section of the capitalist ruling class proposes something which would at least slow down climate change (more environmental regulation, say), that radicals might support it. This seems reasonable.

But what such language usually means, when raised by Marxists, is a strategy of allying with a "progressive" wing of the capitalist class. For example, by working for Obama and the Democrats. This would seem to contradict Gamberg's opening Leninist prescription for overthrowing the capitalist state and replacing it with a new state. But it shares the basic elitism and statism of that strategy. Such reformism has been the long-time strategy of the Communist Party in the US and other imperialist countries from the '30s to today.

Revolutionary anarchist-socialists should be exposing the liberal wing of the capitalist class. Anarchists should be showing that these politicians say the correct things about the ecological

crisis (unlike the right's denialism) but still do little or nothing about it. The climate and ecological crises are caused by capitalism, the system which they support. To the extent that catastrophe can be slowed down, short of a revolution, it will only be because of massive popular pressure upon the capitalists and their state—not by the left's allying ourselves with any faction of the ecologically-destructive capitalist class.

** Written for www.anarkismo.net*

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