

Left Communism: an anarchist perspective

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Anarchists are often interested in a minority trend in Marxism (or set of trends) which was neither social-democratic (reformist) nor Marxist-Leninist. These views have been called “libertarian Marxist,” “autonomist Marxist,” “ultra-leftist,” “libertarian communist,” and “left communist.” Lenin wrote a famous pamphlet against these views, “Left-wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder.”

While such views go back to William Morris, the Britisher who knew both Engels and Kropotkin, the people I am writing about were active in the left of the social democratic parties before World War I. Unlike the social democrats, they opposed the imperialist war. They were thrilled by the October 1917 Russian Revolution; they were inspired by Lenin to split from the social democrats; and they formed revolutionary, Communist, parties, affiliated to the Third (Communist) International.

In the Communist International, perhaps most of the revolutionary workers who joined were politically to the left of Lenin and Trotsky (I will soon discuss just what this meant in terms of program). This is why Lenin wrote his pamphlet. Left oppositionists existed inside the Russian party (the Workers’ Opposition, the Democratic Centralists, the Workers’ Truth, etc.), all of which were banned in 1921. Far-left oppositionists existed elsewhere, such as the group around Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain. But the most significant, I think, were the German-Dutch left communists and the Italian left communists (see the historical studies by the International Communist Current, 1992; 2001). Today’s far-left Marxists are still influenced by the traditions of these left communists.

The German-Dutch left was deeply influenced by Rosa Luxemburg (although she would not have agreed with all their opinions). Their most well-known leaders were Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter, and Otto Ruhle. Paul Mattick, Sr., moved from Germany to the US, where he was active in the IWW. Karl Korsch was close to them. The Leninist leadership of the German Communist Party got rid of this left wing by expelling the majority of their own party.

The Italian left communists, or “Italian Fraction,” was led, at first, by Amadeo Bordiga. He was a founder of the Communist Party of Italy, merging his grouping with that around Gramsci. He became the first General Secretary of the C.P.I., supported by the majority of the membership. Under the pressure of the International, Bordiga and his co-thinkers were forced out the party, the leadership being given instead to Gramsci and Togliatti. Under close supervision by the fascist police, Bordiga dropped out of politics for an extended period. But the groupings which followed his teaching were still called “Bordigists,” at least by others.

These two left communist tendencies were expelled from the Communist International. They were to the left of Lenin and also of Trotsky and the Trotskyists (who were also expelled from the International and its parties, not that long after). The two “ultra-left” tendencies had much in common politically, as I shall show. Yet they never merged, because of a major difference, namely that the German-Dutch trend wanted the capitalist state to be replaced by the rule of associated workers’ councils (which led to their being called “council communists”), while the Italian Fraction wanted it to be replaced by the dictatorship of their party (discussed below).

The following is not a history of these two left communist groupings, such as the organizations in which they were incarnated (for that, see the I.C.C. books). Instead, I will discuss some of the major issues raised by the communist left which are of interest to revolutionary anarchists—at least I find them interesting (also see Barrot & Martin, 1974; Goldner, 1997; Mattick, 1978; Pannekoek, 2003; Rachleff, 1976). Naturally this will be a simplification, since individuals differed in their interpretation of common ideas, since they changed their minds over time (over decades

of tumultuous events), and since there were splits and (more rarely) unifications within each tendency.

Issues of the Left Communists: The Epoch of Capitalist Decay

Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky believed that they were in the final epoch of capitalism, its epoch of decline and decay. The left communists fully agreed. Not that there could not be periods of upturn or areas of lop-sided growth (Lenin believed that imperialism would cause the industrial development of the colonized countries and the de-industrialization of the imperialist countries, which would become parasitic upon the colonized nations). But the overall direction was downhill, with continuing stagnation, periodic deep economic crises, recurrent wars of great devastation, and political attacks on bourgeois-democratic liberties. (They did not know much about ecological dangers.)

This perspective underlay and justified revolutionary politics. Reformism would no longer work. An international working class revolution was necessary to save humanity.

The left communists had various Marxist theories to explain this decline. Some followed Rosa Luxemburg's concept that capitalism could not realize its surplus value without exploiting non-capitalist countries. Others followed Lenin and Bukharin's version of imperialism. Paul Mattick was influenced by the unconventional Stalinist, Henryk Grossman, to focus on the falling rate of profit (Mattick, 1981; Grossman, 1992). Generally they expected a Second World War, if there were no successful revolution. Mostly they did not expect the extended period of apparent prosperity after the world war, but "*...in 1945, [Bordiga] had predicted a long period of capitalist expansion and workers' reformism, due to end in the next world crisis, beginning in 1975*" (Goldner, 1997; p. 4)—which I find remarkable. Some lived to see the post-World War II boom and to develop theories about it (especially Mattick, 1969).

As much as they examined the mechanics of capitalist decline, they emphasized that there was no automatic end to capitalism, and certainly no guaranteed workers' revolution. There was an essential need for class consciousness and political awareness among the workers.

Aspects of the epoch of capitalist decay included the growth of monopolies and of integration of firms with the state. Recognizing this made it possible to understand the Soviet Union, not as a "workers' state," but as state capitalism—in which they were basically correct, as opposed to the Trotskyists. The left communists developed various theories of state capitalism, as well as of the nature of the Russian revolution. For example, Bordiga worked out a somewhat peculiar theory in which Soviet Russia was not state capitalist but a form of society developing into capitalism, without a current ruling class as such (Goldner, 1997; van der Linden, 2009).

Elections

In the First International, the main practical difference between Marx and the anarchists was Marx's advocacy of building working class parties to run in elections. Under certain circumstances, he maintained, such parties could be legally elected into power; but in most cases they will eventually need a revolutionary uprising. The anarchists rejected this whole electoral approach in favor of independent mass action.

Lenin insisted that parties affiliated to the Communist International had to engage in elections to their parliaments. It was one of the twenty-one points required for membership. Not that he expected this to result in peaceful, legal, roads to power, but it would serve as a forum for propaganda and influence.

The left communists all rejected electoralism (the German-Dutch councilists on principle, the Italians more on tactical grounds). Bourgeois democracy, they argued, was a fraud, a form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Electoralism misdirected the workers, giving them the message that even the revolutionaries believed in parliament. It led to passivity for the workers as they voted for someone to “represent” them and be political while they went back to work. Living as parliamentary deputies corrupted elected socialists, no matter how radical they started out. It corrupted radical parties, as they modified their programs to reach the workers at their present, reformist, level of consciousness in order to get elected. Running in elections meant developing programs for managing the capitalist state. All these were lessons from the history of the Marxist social democratic parties. Whatever had been the case in Marx’s day, they said, running in elections and serving in parliament were no longer viable methods. In effect, the left communists had come around to the anarchist position.

Unions

Here the two trends differed. The German-Dutch left communists were opposed to working in the established unions, seeing them as simply an enemy to be destroyed. They recalled how the reformist-led unions had mobilized their workers for the imperialist World War I and then had sabotaged the revolution which broke out in Germany. The unions, they decided, were nothing but (repeat: nothing but) agents of the bourgeoisie for controlling the workers. The leftists either advocated forming new, revolutionary, unions, or rejected unions altogether, expecting workers’ councils to develop in the run-up to the next revolution.

The “Bordigist” left communists disagreed. They supported working in bureaucratic, reformist-led, unions and insisted that their members join them. For example, “*Communists have a duty to fight within reformist unions which are today the sole unitary organizations of the masses. But it is on the condition that they must not renounce their activity, which is the safeguard of the proletarian struggle, that communists legitimize their presence in these unions*” (“Declaration of principles of the Belgian Fraction of the International Communist Left,” I.C.C.1992; p. 182).

This was necessary in order to reach the large number of workers, when in combat with the bourgeoisie, who still had illusions in the reformists—instead of deliberately self-isolating the revolutionaries from the workers (which the reformists were delighted to see happen) by withdrawing from the unions. But they insisted that revolutionaries should raise their intransigent communist program inside the unions and fight for it, against the reformist misleaderships.

On this point, I agree with the “Bordigists” rather than the councilists. Joining unions is not the same as running for parliament (or congress). The latter is part of the state while the unions are working class institutions, however deformed. There is a distinction between the union as such, an organization of workers (and only workers—bosses do not join) and the bureaucratic officialdom, which is an agency of the bourgeoisie within the workers’ organization. However, even the worst bureaucrats must try to win something for the workers, so the membership will support them and therefore they have something to sell to the capitalist class and its state. This

is why US unionized workers generally have higher wages than non-unionized workers. (But when the union officials are unable to win anything, then there is a real crisis.)

In any case, history has settled the issue. If the unions were nothing but agencies of the capitalists, then the capitalists would want to keep them around, to serve their useful purpose of controlling the workers. But instead, when the economy weakened, the capitalists have engaged in a bitter class-war attack on even the “best-behaved” business unions. In the US, first private sector unions were whittled down (from a third of the work force to about 7%), and then public sector unions came under a vicious assault. Clearly, while the capitalists might have made the best of it when they felt they had to put up with unions, now they feel that they cannot afford the unions anymore—that (on balance) unions are too much in the interests of the workers rather than the bosses. Naturally the liberal bureaucrats have no idea how to deal with this situation!

National Liberation

The communist left’s focus was almost entirely on the working class and its economic fight against exploitation. They had little to say about non-class issues and oppressions, such as gender or race (except for war, which was impossible to ignore). They did not deal with democratic issues, being focused on exposing the similarities between bourgeois democracy and formal bourgeois dictatorship. They had no conception of seeking to win allies for the working class among other oppressed sectors of society. They did not raise nonclass issues which might also be directed against the state and the ruling class.

A major example, although not the only one, was their opposition to national liberation (self-determination) struggles. They insisted that these were inevitably bourgeois, statist, and capitulatory to imperialism. They agreed with Luxemburg that national struggles could not win in the present epoch of imperialism and capitalist decline. However, this was not literally true; since that time many nations have won political independence from their colonial overlords. There is no absolute guarantee today that Puerto Rico, Palestine, or Tibet might not yet win national independence.

However, no people can win complete national freedom given the dominance of the great powers in world politics and given the domination of the world market by the imperial corporations (multinationals). But this only strengthens the case that libertarian socialists can make that “nationalism,” as a program to create new capitalist national states, will not work. “Nationalism” as a program and ideology is not the same thing as national liberation. Only the program of international revolution by the working class and its allies can really win full national self-determination. That is a reason for revolutionaries to support national struggles, and to find ways of showing solidarity with oppressed peoples, while opposing their nationalist, pro-capitalist, statist, misleaders. (For the history of anarchist involvement in national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles, see *Black Flame* [Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009], chapter 10, pp. 309–321.)

Oddly, the left communists of the Netherlands, despite their program, gave support to the Indonesian national struggle against Dutch colonialism. They were right to do so.

The United Front and the Popular Front

The communist left was opposed, in principle, to working with other working class political trends, particularly the social democrats. These had betrayed the revolutions in Italy, Germany, and Russia and were therefore, they said, (nothing but) agents of the capitalist class. The “ultra-leftists” rejected any United Front with other working class parties which did not advocate communist revolution. This ignored the reality that millions of European workers, who thought of themselves as socialists, supported the social democratic parties. It should have been a question of how to reach these noncommunist workers.

At the same time, the left communists rejected support for bourgeois democracy, which they regarded as just as bad as fascism. They ignored the reality that bourgeois democracy permitted the existence of workers’ unions, parties, a workers’ press, and other organizations, such as those of the left communists. The fascists would (and did) destroy all of these, while grinding the working class into the dirt. Like the fascists, the social democrats opposed socialist revolution. But unlike the fascists, the social democrats, with their parties and unions, required bourgeois democracy in order to exist. The existence of workers’ organizations laid the basis for workers’ democracy.

How did this work out in practice? In the early 1920s in Italy, with the aid of big business, Mussolini organized his fascist forces. Gangs of former army officers, gangsters, and thugs were given fascist uniforms and sent to cities, towns, and villages, to smash up union halls, socialist and communist party headquarters, and left-wing presses. At first this was unopposed, but former rank-and-file soldiers and others formed a popular militia, the Arditi del Popolo. They included workers from the whole range of the left: anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, communists, socialists, left republicans (opposed to the monarchy), etc. They were effective in defending union headquarters and “red” villages, driving the fascists off the streets and out of town.

But the Socialist Party decided to sign a “Pact of Pacification” with the fascists (which was immediately broken by the fascists) and withdrew its members. And—this is the point—the Communist Party, then led by Bordiga, also withdrew its members from the Arditi (passing up the chance to pressure the social democrats). For reasons, they said that they did not want their workers following non-CP leadership and that the Arditi were for “democracy” but not for communist revolution. No one remained but the anarchists and the syndicalists (and the republicans). They continued to fight against the fascists, as best as they could, but were eventually defeated (Anarchist Federation, 2006; ASP, 1989; I.C.C. 1992, pp. 20-21). And so was the whole of the working class, as the Italian fascists came to power and demonstrated that there was a practical difference between fascism and bourgeois democracy. This was the cost of following the left communist approach.

The German left communists would have repeated the same disaster with the rise of Nazism, if the lefts had been influential enough (I.C.C., 2001). They had the same approach, opposing any United Front with the social democrats against the Nazis and insisting that Nazi rule would not be all that much worse than bourgeois democracy. Instead it was the German Communist Party, under the control of Stalin and his agents, which carried out the “ultra-left” program. As Bordiga had before, they denounced any idea of allying with the Social Democratic Party to fight the Nazi attacks. They denied any distinction for the workers between parliamentary democracy and Nazi dictatorship.

The German anarchists were too weak to speak for revolutionary sanity. Leon Trotsky, then in exile from the Soviet Union, produced a series of pamphlets urging the Communists to call for a United Front with the Social Democrats (Price, 2007; Trotsky, 1971). He proposed a practical, military, working class alliance to fight the fascists, break up their meetings, and drive them from the streets, instead of letting them do this to the left. He was denounced and ignored. (I am leaving aside a broader analysis of Trotsky.) Once again, the strategy of the left communists (if followed by others) led to disastrous consequences for the working class and the world.

After the victory of Nazism in Germany, the Stalinists were shocked by the results. They jumped away from their sectarian, “ultra-left,” stance, right over the United Front of workers’ organizations. Instead they dashed to the right, to the idea of the “People’s Front” (in France, Spain, and elsewhere). This was an alliance of workers’ organizations together with liberal bourgeois parties (which guaranteed that the alliance would stay within the limits of capitalism). Most of the left accepted this. Even the mainstream of the Spanish anarchists, leading the syndicalist union federation, eventually joined the Spanish Popular Front government to fight Franco’s fascism during the civil war/revolution (Price, 2007). In this way, they betrayed their program and the working class.

The left communists, who had not supported the idea of United Fronts, certainly did not support these Popular Fronts. In this they were correct. But the rigidity of their program and their insistence on their sectarian purity, made it impossible for them to combine firmness of principles with tactical flexibility. In the Spanish revolution, they insisted that both the fascist side and the Republican (bourgeois democratic) side were equally to be opposed and urged soldiers on both sides to desert. They did not see the value of fighting on the Republican side (but not supporting the Popular Front government) until the workers were strong enough to overthrow it. During World War II, they opposed the Resistance in France and elsewhere and the Italian partisans, on the grounds that these were furthering Allied imperialism. They did not see the possibility of such forces leading to revolution (as they did, under Stalinist leadership, alas, in several countries). The communist left was extremely isolated after the war.

Democracy, the Party, and the State

The biggest difference between the “Bordigists” and the council communists was over their interpretation of the goal of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” *“What really differentiated the two lefts was that one advocated the dictatorship of the party and the other the dictatorship of the councils”* (I.C.C., 1992; p.36).

Bordiga always regarded himself as a Leninist, and was accused of being more Leninist than Lenin. Unlike the council communists, *“He proudly defined himself as ‘anti-democratic’.... He completely missed, and dismissed, the role of soviets and workers’ councils in Russia, Germany, and Italy....Bordiga...was oblivious to the historical significance of soviets, workers’ councils, and workers’ democracy and...placed everything in the party”* (Goldner, 1997; pp. 9, 11, & 18; Goldner admires Bordiga, although disagreeing with his anti-democratic views).

In 1951, Bordiga summed up his views (Bordiga, 2003). The party represented the workers’ class consciousness (some Bordigists declared that the working class did not exist as a class without a party). It is a “unitary and homogeneous party” (p. 8). Its goal is to take power and keep power. Once in power, he wrote, the party would not rely on having a “statistical majority” in elections.

It would not rely on “class democracy” or “workers’ democracy” or “*abdicate for lack of having a majority of votes....The communist party will rule alone, and will never give up power without a physical struggle*” (p. 7). The economy would not be managed through “economic democracy,” but would be organized by specialists who would focus on “*general data and...their scientific study*” (p. 8). In short, there would be “*a revolutionary and totalitarian apparatus of force and power...[instead of] the deceitful cry of Freedom!*” (pp. 10–11). Bordiga may have made some contributions in theory and practice, but overall his politics are monstrous. In reality, he was an advocate of state capitalism.

The German-Dutch left communists on a number of issues, but differed on this key matter of workers’ democracy. It was not their original dispute with Lenin but it became their key issue, as they came to oppose the party-state in favor of the rule of the workers’ councils. Since then, history has repeatedly given examples of revolutionary situations where workers’ and popular councils were created by the popular classes as an alternative to the bureaucratic state of capitalism.

Bordiga and some others counterpose the goal of workers’ democracy to the aim of creating a society without the law of value (for example, Gilles Dauve; Barrot & Martin, 1974). But the law of value expresses a chaotic society of commodity exchange on the market. It cannot be abolished unless the freely associated producers themselves consciously organize and plan the economy. That requires the fullest producers’ self-management, which begins as workers’ democracy.

However, the councilists had to deal with the relationship between the revolutionary minority (organized in a party or not) and the workers’ councils. They had already rejected the idea of the party being elected to power in the bourgeois parliament. They came to reject the idea of the party merely using the councils in order to take power. Some continued to see the need, however, for a party, or some sort of organization of the revolutionary minority, which would fight for the councils against various reformist and statist forces. Others decided that there was no need for any sort of party or organization, that any such structure would lead to the party-state. Otto Ruhle influenced a trend with this view. In general, the council communists seem to have waffled in a confused way when dealing with this issue.

Many anarchists have been in a similar ambiguous situation. The anarchist tendency I identify with also rejects the idea of a party as an organization which aims to take power, but believes that there is a need for those revolutionaries who agree on a common program to organize themselves in order to spread their ideas. Organizing helps them to coordinate their activities and to develop their ideas, while opposing trends which advocate party-states or reformism.

Conclusion

As an anarchist, what I like about the left communists is that they used Marx’s economic theory, and other aspects of Marx’s thought, while advocating a program which was close to anarchism (at least the councilists). I find much of Marx’s thought to be useful and see this as evidence that some of it can be integrated with anarchism. However, in many ways left communism is deeply flawed and must be rejected.

In particular, the left communists were right about basing the revolutionary program on the epoch of capitalist decay, and about analyzing the Soviet Union as state capitalist. Strategically, they were right to oppose electoralism in favor of mass strikes and direct action. They were right

to oppose the Popular Front strategy of alliance with liberal bourgeois parties. The “Bordigists” were right to advocate working inside reformist unions. The council communists were correct to emphasize the development of the workers’ councils in revolutionary periods and to advocate the replacement of the bourgeois state by the rule of the councils.

On the other hand, the left communists were rigid and ideologically blinded. They did not look for ways for the working class to build alliances and to mobilize the people against all forms of oppression. The councilists were wrong to oppose working in the reformist-led unions. All left communists were wrong to oppose giving solidarity to people in national liberation struggles and to oppose United Fronts. Their sectarian strategy resulted in a disaster for the world’s working class when it held back the fight against Mussolini in Italy, and would have had the same effect in Germany against the Nazis. The authoritarian, state capitalist, politics of Bordiga are not a version of libertarian communism. Meanwhile the councilists have vacillated about whether to form special organizations of the revolutionary minorities to fight for their program. This has greatly weakened their effectiveness. Anarchists can learn from left communists but should not become left communists.

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