

Revolutionary Socialist-Anarchism

Response to a review of my *Abolition of the State*.

Wayne Price

July 29, 2009

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| What is the State? | 3 |
| The Engels' Quotation | 3 |
| A Civil War | 4 |
| The Russian Revolution | 5 |

Marvin Mandell, co-editor of *New Politics*, has written a review of my book, *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives*. He described it as “well considered, well researched, and well written,” and says, “Price has given us much to chew on.” He concluded, “Marxists and anarchists can learn from each other, and, in fact, need each other.” I agree with this thought, and regard Mandell as a fellow believer in socialism-from-below. But limitations of space cause me to focus on our differences.

What is the State?

In my book, I define the state as a socially-alienated bureaucratic-military machine, with specialized layers of officials, police, and soldiers, which stands over and against the rest of society (Marxists should recognize the concept from Friedrich Engels). Inevitably such a social organization can only serve the interests of a minority class which exploits everyone else. Therefore, I conclude, there cannot be a “workers’ state” (a workers’ socially-alienated bureaucratic-military machine?).

In a democratic-cooperative economy, the state should be replaced by a federation of workplace and neighborhood assemblies and councils, affiliated to an armed people (a workers’ militia). The workers and oppressed would “take power,” but not establish a new state. This is the self-organization of the working class and all the formerly oppressed.

Some radical state-socialists have said that they want essentially what anarchists advocate and that it is a quibble whether to call this a “workers’ state” or not. The meaning of our difference comes out when the same radicals also use “workers’ state” to describe the one-party police state of Lenin and Trotsky or the Russian regime dominated by Stalin up until 1929 (Tony Cliff) or even 1936 (Max Shachtman).

The Engels’ Quotation

Mandell quotes from a letter by Engels, claiming that he “put his finger on the fundamental difference between anarchists and Marxists:”

“Bakunin maintains that it is the state which has created capital...it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself. We, on the contrary, say: Do away with capital, the concentration of all means of production in the hands of the few, and the state will fall of itself. The difference is an essential one: ... the abolition of capital is precisely the social revolution... Hence [for anarchists], complete abstention from all politics. To commit a political act, and especially to take part in an election, would be a betrayal of principle” (Letter to Theodor Cuno, 1/24/1872).

In his desire to score points off the anarchists, Engels makes a simplistic statement of Marx’s and his own views (as he sometimes did) and a false statement of Bakunin’s views. Actually Marx believed that the state had played a major role in creating capitalism, in the epoch of primitive accumulation of capital (looting Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the enclosure acts in England, etc.). They had studied how, in their own time, the state became relatively autonomous from the bourgeoisie (“Bonapartism”), to hold capitalism together. Their work implied that the state would become ever more central to maintaining capitalism in its epoch of decay (of imperialism and state monopoly capitalism), as Lenin, Trotsky, and others found.

Further, their strategy was for the workers to overthrow the bourgeois state, to take power, and to establish a new, “workers’ state.” It was only that state which would “fall of itself.” All of which implies that (as the anarchists claimed) the state is central to creating and maintaining capitalism and that a revolutionary strategy needs to focus on smashing the bourgeois state.

Or as Engels put it, in a different letter, “Why are we struggling for the political dictatorship of the proletariat, if political power has no economic effects[?] Force (i.e. the state authority) is also an economic power!” (Letter to Conrad Schmidt 10/27/1890).

Bakunin, and the broad anarchist tradition which came after him, have been clear on the need for a social revolution against capital and the capitalist class. Anarchists have never counterposed this to a revolution against the state. All aspects of oppression must be destroyed.

Mandell asks, “Does the state flow out of class struggle, or does class struggle flow out of the state?” Both. Class struggle is fundamental, but the state and class interact, in a reciprocal, spiral (if you wish, dialectical) fashion.

The Engels quotation claims that anarchists are for “complete abstention from all politics.” Anarchists are not anti-political but are anti-electoralist (opposed to any illusions in a “parliamentary road to socialism”).

The dismal and corrupt history of Marxist electoral parties (social democratic and Communist alike) should lead any revolutionary to reject electoralism as a strategy, with the advantages of hindsight. But anarchists are not anti-political. They have always engaged in building unions and antiwar movements and have participated in political strikes, mass demonstrations, and armed rebellions—all political activities. In the U.S., virtually all progress from the 30s on, against exploitation, racism, and war, was won through nonelectoral means: mass demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience and “riots”. But attempts at leftist electoral action have invariably been failures, whether working in the Democratic Party or building independent middle class parties, from the 60s Peace and Freedom Party to today’s Green Party.

A Civil War

To demonstrate that there is a need for a state, Mandell refers to the the U.S. Civil War and to Federal intervention to support Black civil rights in the 60s.

A stateless society would exist only after a social revolution in which the capitalist class had been overthrown, along with other oppressive institutions—that is, a libertarian socialist society. A society in the midst of civil war would replace the bureaucratic-military state with a coordinated militia and popular assemblies (as Ukraine did under Makhno) but would certainly use coercion against the counterrevolutionaries. No doubt, if the U.S. Civil War had been fought by a revolutionary anarchist federation (to be ahistorical), it would have had different institutions than the Northern capitalist state did. It would have armed the Southern slaves from the beginning, for one thing. But it would not have accepted “states’ rights” as decentralized democracy, so long as whites ruled over enslaved Africans in those states.

Similar points could be made about the civil rights struggle in the U.S. South. Had the North been anarchist-communist, it would have had other possibilities (to say the least), but anarchists would have had no compunction about using coercion against the white racists, anymore than anarchists did against fascists in the Spanish revolution. As it was, the national government was no ally of Southern Blacks, but only did half-way decent things when pressured from below. The

Black Liberation movement was organized largely on anarchist lines (decentralized, radically democratic, and flexible), as best to fight the racists and to pressure the liberals.

The Russian Revolution

Mandell criticizes my views on Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the Russian Revolution. I do not have space here to repeat what I wrote in my chapter on the Russian Revolution. (I will have more on it in my next book, *Anarchism & Socialism: Reformism or Revolution*, coming in the Fall.) But overall, he appears to agree that Lenin and Trotsky set up a one-party police state after the civil war was won, and that they should not have. That is, they definitively outlawed all other parties, as well as banished alternate caucuses in the one official party, and banned independent labor unions. He might have added that they did not describe this as a temporary measure but defended it as the proper form of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Like most whose views descend from Trotskyism, Mandell makes excuses for Lenin and Trotsky. “To quote Lenin on centralization without mentioning that he wrote many of those passages in the midst of a civil war and a struggle against foreign invasion...seems to me disingenuous.” By any reasonable evaluation, Lenin and Trotsky set up the framework for Stalin’s totalitarian state. But Mandell blames their authoritarianism on objective pressures: the poverty of Russia, the peasant majority, the foreign invasions, the civil war, and the failure of the revolution to spread. All of these factors were real; I do not deny it. Perhaps the workers’ and peasants’ revolution would have failed in any case. But they do not excuse Bolshevik authoritarian actions.

Mandell argues that the Bolsheviks were necessary for winning the revolution and implies that this excuses their undemocratic practices up to the end of the civil war, because otherwise they would have been voted out of office. These claims are dubious. Even the “danger” of the Bolsheviks losing office might have been avoided if Lenin had promoted a sincere effort toward a united front with other revolutionary groupings.

Citing objective pressures, however real, does not disprove that Lenin and Trotsky had an authoritarian conception of socialism from the start. Did they, before the revolution, (in *State and Revolution* or elsewhere) advocate a multiparty/multitendency workers’ democracy? No. Trotsky was to oppose Stalin while still defending the one-party state (up until the mid-30s, after the Trotskyists had been defeated).

Did they, before the revolution, advocate workplace democracy to manage industry? No. Instead, the conception which Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin had of a planned, collectivized, economy, was of one directed from a center by experts, with the people at most giving feedback but not managing it (a concept inherited from the social democrats). For Lenin, “workers’ management” was only a step toward centralized state planning; his model, he wrote repeatedly, was war-time Prussian state-monopoly capitalism.

Mandell quotes from various sources to show that the Makhnovists (the anarchist-led Ukrainian partisans) shot Bolsheviks. This proves only that a war developed in Ukraine, between the Bolshevik armies and the partisans. Otherwise, it says nothing about the issues in the war nor who was in the right on the matter. One side fought for free, democratic, soviets based on the Ukrainian workers and peasants, and the other fought for a one-party dictatorship, based on Russian national domination of Ukrainians. I know who I think was the better side.

The question here is not one of historical accuracy. It a question of how to make a revolution which will overthrow traditional capitalism but does not result in a new statist tyranny.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Wayne Price
Revolutionary Socialist-Anarchism
Response to a review of my *Abolition of the State*.
July 29, 2009

<http://anarkismo.net/article/13906>

theanarchistlibrary.org