

What is Libertarian Socialism? An Anarchist-Marxist Dialogue

**A Review of A. Prichard, R. Kinna, S. Pinta, & D. Berry (eds.). "Libertarian
Socialism; Politics in Black and Red".**

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“Some people believe that Marxism and anarchism are based on the same principles and that disagreements between them concern only tactics, so that...it is quite impossible to draw a contrast between these two trends....This is a great mistake....Anarchists are the real enemies of Marxism.” —J. Stalin (quoted on p. 290)

Historically, authoritarian, statist, versions of socialism have dominated the Left—and do so today. Yet, even further to the left, there have also been anti-authoritarian and anti-statist socialisms. To redevelop and rediscover this broad current of libertarian socialism requires looking at the historical interaction, overlapping, and cross-pollination of anarchism and anti-authoritarian trends within Marxism. There are various sets of ideas which challenge the status quo, such as feminism or ecological thinking, and these are very important. But I believe that anarchism and Marxism are the two concepts which offer total challenges to the existing society. This is why it is worth considering what they can learn from each other.

The editors of this book have decided to work at this task. Their original inspiration was a 2009 conference in the UK, “Is Black and Red Dead?” The book is composed of 13 essays plus an Introduction and Conclusion. The editors and contributors have a fairly wide range of Left views. There is a somewhat academic air to the chapters (all the writers, except one, are professors or other college-level teachers). Mainly they focus on reviewing the history of various interactions of Marxism and anarchism. Their focus is scholarly and not on how to build a revolutionary libertarian socialist movement. However, their approach has the utility of looking at past experience and putting libertarian socialism into historical context.

The editors regret their inability to get someone to write about the relation of feminism to libertarian socialism. The book also lacks a discussion on the struggles of People of Color in relation to anarchism and Marxism. Chap. 8, by Christian Hogsbjerg, on C.L.R. James, does not cover his important analysis of the autonomous struggle of African-Americans. Chap. 9, by Andrew Cornell, does comment on the role that anarchist-pacifists played in the U.S. Civil Rights movement. The editors promise two more volumes, which will concentrate more on current developments and on the oppressed (“non-European”) nations.

The thirteen chapters cover a wide range of topics. I am an anarchist who has argued that anarchists can learn much from aspects of Marxism (e.g., Price 2017a; 2015; 2013). I found this book exciting and fascinating throughout. I was tempted to write responses to each of the 15 chapters! Unfortunately this would require a second book. Instead I will discuss certain themes which are raised through the book’s essays

The Closest Trends of Marxism and Anarchism

There are a great many versions of Marxism as there are of anarchism. These have interacted in many positive and negative ways. The totalitarian versions of Marxism (Stalinism, Maoism, or orthodox Trotskyism) do not mix well with any type of anarchism (with one area of exemption, see below). The hyper-individualist-egotist versions of anarchism do not mix that well with Marxism. In general, the two schools closest to each other are “class-struggle anarchist-socialism” (or “anarchist-communism”) and “libertarian Marxism” (or “autonomous Marxism” or “left communism”).

Class-struggle anarchism is the historical trend from Bakunin and Kropotkin to anarchist-syndicalism and anarchist-communism (as opposed to individualist or market-based anarchism).

Libertarian Marxism is that minority set of tendencies which have oriented to the radically-democratic, humanistic, and proletarian aspects of Marxism (as opposed to social-democracy and Marxist-Leninism). Despite differences, what they both have in common is a belief in *working class revolution*. They advocate that the working class and its allies among all the oppressed overturn the existing state, the capitalist class, and all institutions of oppression—and replace them with non-state forms of cooperative social and economic direct democracy and self-management. To these ends, they reject bureaucratic methods of organizing and efforts to take over the old state or to form a new state. Instead they advocate methods of mass direct action and popular self-organization. They believe, “*The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working-classes themselves!*” This was the “first rule” of the First International, written by—but not invented by—Karl Marx. That is revolutionary libertarian socialism.

Of Marxists, the various chapters discuss William Morris (the first libertarian Marxist), Antonio Gramsci (who worked with anarchists on factory councils), Georges Sorel (described as an “anarcho-Marxist”), the council communists and other councilists, C.L.R. James (of the “Johnson-Forest Tendency”), Daniel Guerin (a libertarian Marxist who sought a synthesis with anarchism), the French *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group and its British co-thinkers in *Solidarity* (they both evolved from dissident Trotskyism to libertarian Marxism to a rejection of Marxism), the Situationists, and Italian autonomous Marxism.

To refer to these and other libertarian Marxists is not to say that they have the “correct” interpretation of Marx while Marxist-Leninists are “incorrect.” It is merely to point to the empirical reality that some Marxists have had politics compatible with anarchist perspectives. There were both libertarian and authoritarian elements in the original Marxism of Marx and Engels—so both sides have a basis to claim to hold a “correct,” even “orthodox,” interpretation.

Besides these libertarian Marxists, other Marxist trends covered include DeLeonism, which was anti-anarchist but contributed to the syndicalist movement, and Trotskyism. Two of the writers are from the unorthodox wing of Trotskyism (which rejected Trotsky’s concept that Stalin’s Soviet Union remained a “workers’ state” because it still had nationalized property). One of these is Paul Blackledge (Chap. 2), who essentially rejects anarchism for Leninism. On anarchism, Andrew Cornell (Chap. 9) covers the U.S. anarchist-pacifists and others of the ‘60s. Toby Boraman (Chap. 13) also discusses the “carnival anarchists” of 1970s Australasia (who sound a lot like the U.S. Yippies). But most of the anarchists discussed are anarchist-syndicalists or other types of class-struggle anarchist-socialists.

To say that libertarian Marxism and class-struggle anarchism are the two schools which are closest to each other does not rule out other Marxist/anarchist interactions. Boraman (Chap. 13) covers the closeness of “carnival anarchism” with cultural Marxists inspired by Situationism. As a far-left Marxist, Daniel Guerin was oriented to “*social, constructive, collectivist, or communist anarchism.*” (quoted by D. Berry, Chap. 10; p. 197) Yet he also valued Max Stirner, the ultra-individualist anarchist. As a Gay activist, Guerin appreciated an emphasis on individuality and opposition to moralism. Personally I have learned a great deal about decentralism from the anarchist-pacifist Paul Goodman (1965) and the gradualist-mutualist anarchist Kevin Carson (2010; Price 2017b). It is also important to remember that, as Cornell (Chap. 9) and Boraman (Chap. 13) point out, it became difficult for either Marxists or anarchists to maintain a revolutionary working-class, perspective during the period of prosperity which followed World War II (which is now over).

Strategy and Tactics

In 1872, the split between the Marxists and the anarchists in the First International was over various issues. The most immediately practical issue was Marx's insistence that all sections of the International form workers' parties to run in elections. (Price 2017a) The anarchists rejected this as a state-oriented strategy. Instead they proposed non-electoral, extra-parliamentary, direct action by the working class. (Both sides were already for building unions and supporting strikes.)

William Morris (a contemporary of Engels) had allied with the anarchists against the Marxists in opposition to parliamentary action. This was up to the last years of his political activities when he apparently retreated in disappointment from anti-electoralism and similar opinions (Kinna Chap. 3). Mates (Chap. 4) discusses the interaction in the pre-1914 British coal fields between anarchist-syndicalists and Marxist syndicalists from DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party. One disagreement was over the SLP's running in elections—but the SLP was, properly speaking, more left-social democratic than libertarian Marxist. Almost all libertarian Marxists felt that (whatever had been the case in Marx's day) it was now a mistake to engage in electoral action. In this they split from Lenin and the Communist International, which had insisted on their parties running in elections.

Electoralism is no longer an issue between anarchists and libertarian Marxists. But there were other issues which were not so much between the two traditions as cutting across the two. Whether to work within unions or to work solely outside the union structure, including whether to take union offices, were major areas of controversy (Mates Chap 4; Boraman Chap. 13). Guerin, for example, was strongly supportive of unions. Another issue (not covered in this book) was whether to support, however "critically," national liberation struggles against imperialism. Most anarchists and libertarian Marxists did not, and still do not. C.L.R. James did, and Daniel Guerin supported the Algerian people's war against French oppression.

Pinta (Chap. 7) covers the discussions of the Spanish Revolution (1936–1939) by the council communists, such as Paul Mattick and Karl Korsch (by then, living in the U.S.; Mattick had joined the IWW). Of all the forces in Spain, these libertarian Marxists were most supportive of the anarchist-syndicalists, their union federation (CNT) and their revolutionary organization (FAI). Mattick wrote, "*In the course of the present civil war, anarcho-syndicalism has been the most forward-driving revolutionary element.*" (p. 127)

Other far-left Marxists (such as Bordiga's followers) rejected both sides of the conflict (the pro-government Loyalists and Franco's fascists) as capitalist. But the council communists recognized that the revolutionary working class had to ally itself with the liberal Loyalists, until they were strong enough to overthrow them. The councilists admired the anarchists' federalism and their implementation of worker control in industry and agriculture. Pinta shows the similarity of the councilists' views to those of the dissident anarchist Friends of Durruti group. The FoD condemned the main anarchist organizations for joining a government coalition with the capitalist parties and the Stalinists—leading to the defeat of the revolution.

As can be seen, there is a tendency among many libertarian socialists (not all, but many) to take a sectarian, inflexible, and ultimacist approach to many struggles. There may be some truth in the Trotskyist Hogsbjerg's criticism of James (and, implicitly, other libertarian Marxists) for "*abandonment of the rich classical Bolshevik legacy of strategy and tactics....*" (Chap. 8; p. 158) This includes the united front, critical support, rank-and-file unionism, support of democratic rights,

etc. But libertarian socialists would have to be careful in evaluating how to use such tactics for different ends than the Bolsheviks.

Revolutionary Organization

Another major issue which cuts across traditions is whether a revolutionary libertarian-socialist minority should organize itself, in order to develop its ideas, and to fight for its program in broader organizations and movements (unions, workers' councils, community organizations, antiwar movements, etc.). *This would not be a "party" because it would not aim to take over the state, either through elections or revolution.*

Opinions have varied. Benoit Challand (Chap. 11) shows that Castoriadis in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* did advocate such an organization. Challand mistakenly interprets this as equivalent to an authoritarian Leninist party. Pinta (Chap. 7) shows that the council communists were divided between those who were against a special organization (Otto Ruhle) and those who were for one (Herman Gorter), with some vacillating between the two (Mattick and Pannekoek). Pinta points out that the pro-organizational councilists' view was very similar to certain views in the anarchist tradition. This stretches from Bakunin's *Alliance for Socialist Democracy* to the *Platform* (of Makhno and Arshinov) to the Spanish FAI to today's neo-platformism and *especificismo*.

Jean-Christophe Angaut (Chap. 12) summarizes "what the differences were between Leninist and situationist conceptions of the avant-garde: basically Lenin understood the avant-garde as a general staff and not as an advanced detachment." (p. 250) Libertarian socialists with "an advanced detachment" perspective see the most revolutionary and anti-authoritarian among the workers as forming groups to spread their views and to fight against authoritarian and pro-capitalist views. This is not opposed to the self-organization of the working class and oppressed people but is an essential part of it.

Democracy, Anarchism, and Marxism

Paul Blackledge (Chap. 2) and Ruth Kinna (on William Morris; Chap. 3), raise the issue of democracy, which is controversial among anarchists (see the essays in Massimino 2017). Blackledge argues that anarchism is based in individualist-egotist thinking, as exemplified by Max Stirner. Therefore it is supposedly unable to really support the collective decision-making of democracy. In a democracy, sometimes individuals have to give way to majority opinion (although this is truly democratic only if all individuals have participated in the decision-making process equally and continue to have full rights). Blackledge cites various anarchists who reject "democracy" because they see it as coercing individuals and minorities. Blackledge asserts that Marxism sees workers under capitalism as developing collective class consciousness and social awareness, which supposedly makes real (socialist) democracy possible.

Kinna cites William Morris (a contemporary of both Engels and Kropotkin) as making similar arguments. Morris connected anarchists' extreme individualism to pointless terrorism and violent-sounding propaganda—which he (rightly) opposed. The difference between Morris and Blackledge is that Morris rejected the state while Blackledge is advocating a "democratic" state—a transitional, "workers' state."

There has been a hyper-individualist and anti-democratic trend in anarchism, but it is not the whole of anarchism. Stirner was not influential in the early anarchist movement (until later individualists rediscovered him). Certainly, from Bakunin and Kropotkin onward, socialist-anarchists have rejected a view of society as nothing but isolated individuals, oppressed by collectivities. Even Blackledge admits that socialist-anarchists saw society as an interaction of individuals and social groups—holding that individuals could only exist in societies. For him, this is still too much individualism, but I see this as consistent with a basic concept of libertarian democracy.

He claims that pro-democracy anarchists (he cites me, among others) “*do not address...anarchist criticisms of democracy...*” (p. 22) This has since been done—again, see the essays in Massimino (2017), especially those by Carson, Milstein, Graeber, and myself. (For lack of space, I am not going to get into Blackledge’s use of Marxist social psychology to defend the state. For a Marxist view contrary to his—and which cites Kropotkin positively—see Struhl 2016.)

Kinna also shows that William Morris saw anarchists as extreme individualists. He was blind to the social, cooperative, views of many anarchists. He even denied that people such as Kropotkin, because of their social viewpoint, *could* “be anarchists in the true sense of the word”! (quoted on p. 38) She suggests that Morris’ presented “democracy” in a fashion which anarchists could not accept. However, in some of his works, she points out, Morris had offered a more libertarian vision of participatory democracy, one which was consistent with anarchist values. “...*Disagreements about [a] proposal are resolved through dialogue and a continuous process of direct, open balloting....Agreement is reached through...consensual and deliberative debate...a model of decision-making which assumed that individuals might reach voluntary agreement through open discussion and consensus...*” (p. 52) Many anarchists could agree with this version of radical democracy.

Writing about Daniel Guerin’s historical study of the French Revolution, Berry (Chap. 10) says, “*For Guerin, the French Revolution thus represented not only the birth of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, but also the emergence of ‘a new type of democracy,’ a form of working-class direct democracy as seen, however imperfectly, in the sections...precursors of the Commune of 1871 and the Soviets of 1905 and 1917.*” (p. 191)

Marxism: Its Weaknesses and Strengths

Oddly there is no discussion of *the limitations of the Marxist approach to democracy*. Even Marx’s most radical presentations are, at best, very democratic versions of representative democracy. This is the case with his writings on the Paris Commune of 1871 or Lenin on the original soviets (councils). There was no conception of direct, face-to-face, democracy, in the neighborhoods or in production workplaces. Direct democracy does not rule out federation of such self-managed communities or the election of delegates to other bodies—but it roots federation and election in the daily, democratic, decision-making of the people—it makes democracy literally into a way of life.

Blackledge quotes Marx’s conclusion from the Commune that the workers cannot take over the existing state and use it for their emancipation. Blackledge does not consider Marx’s statist strategy after the defeat of the Commune, namely his attempt to force the First International to form workers’ political parties to run in elections to try to take over the existing states. Similarly Blackledge cites various democratic statements by Lenin, without discussing how Lenin (and Trotsky) established a one-party police state in Russia, laying the basis for Stalin’s totalitarianism.

While the book has Blackledge's attack on anarchism for its supposed individualism, there is no comparable critique of Marxism, its weaknesses and its strengths, except for brief comments (such as on Guerin's views, p. 193). The critique of Marxism developed by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is not considered in the chapter on it. This is a lack, if anarchists are to consider Marxism as a partner in developing libertarian socialism. There is a serious question here: *why was libertarian Marxism never more than a minority trend within Marxism?* Why was most of historical Marxism either pro-imperialist social-democratic or totalitarian Marxist-Leninist? No doubt there were objective factors but what was there in Marx's Marxism which contributed to these statist, authoritarian, and mass-murdering forms? This would require a discussion of Marx's centralism, his teleological determinism, and his statist program: state ownership of the economy achieved through taking over a state by workers' parties.

On the other hand, the book does not really discuss one of *the main strengths of Marxism*, namely Marx's economics (more precisely, his critique of political economy). This was an analysis of how capitalism worked, what changes were happening, and how the working class and its allies should respond to capitalist developments. Unlike Marxism, anarchism has valuable explorations of how a post-capitalist economy might work. But it does not have an analysis of how capitalism works today. Here we have to look to Marxism. This may include even looking to authoritarian schools of Marxism (this is the exemption I mentioned above) which may have useful economic theory. For example, the council communist Paul Mattick, Sr., was greatly influenced in his writings on political economy by the unconventional Stalinist, Henryk Grossman (Kuhn 2007).

Boraman (Chap. 13) uses a Marxist political-economic approach on one topic. He challenges the common view of many anarchists (and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*) to reject the centrality of class exploitation in favor of "domination" in all aspects of society. "Domination" provides a broad-range view of the total social system, but it downplays the need of the capitalist class to rely on the surplus value squeezed out of the workers. Without that extra amount of wealth, the capitalist class cannot survive, nor can its institutions, including the state. Therefore he concludes, "*Fundamentally transforming the decision-making processes in society is not enough in itself; private property, the market, and the wage system also need to be abolished.*" (p. 262) Which leads to the working class as at least one of the central agencies needed to make a revolution.

Conclusion: Libertarian Socialism

In the Conclusion (Chap. 15), Pinta and Berry write, "*The purpose of this collection of papers has been...to rediscover the lost history of a libertarian socialist tradition—an ideological current effectively blurring the boundaries between anarchist and Marxist variants of revolutionary socialist thought—...by re-examining the relationship between Marxism and anarchism—or rather between Marxisms and anarchisms....*" (p. 295) Despite the inevitable limitations of such a collection of viewpoints, I think the book achieved its purpose.

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