

Anarchism, Syndicalism and Workers Councils

Anarcho

June 13, 2019

Contents

Laying the Foundations: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon	3
“Universal Association”	4
Why not the State?	5
Confessions of a Statesman	5
Association internationale des travailleurs	6
Mutualists and Collectivists	6
Revolutionary Anarchism: Michael Bakunin	7
The Paris Commune	9
The Federalist International	11
The Spirit of Revolt: Peter Kropotkin	11
“The Chicago Idea”	12
The Rise of Syndicalism	13
Russian Revolution, 1905	14
Russian Revolution, 1917	15
The Fate of the Revolution	16
A lesson for the world?	17
“how not to introduce communism”	17
Conclusions	18

This is a write-up of a talk I gave in Edinburgh in April 2019 on anarchist ideas on social change and organisation. I have used the slides I created for the talk as the basis of this write-up, although as usual I am sure this is not the same as what was said on the night but close enough. Hopefully this talk gives a useful summary of anarchist ideas on organisation and their development from the birth of anarchism to around 1920.

First, thank you for coming. As you know, this talk was advertised as follows:

We know what anarchists are against: capitalism and the State. We know what anarchists are for: libertarian socialism.

But how to get from one to the other, by means compatible with the ends?

Anarchy is organisation, organisation, organisation.

Here I was sketch the origins of anarchist support for workers' councils – a new form of socialist democracy based on elected, mandated and recallable delegates in both the social and economic spheres. This will involve discussing various anarchist thinkers along with key organisations – primarily the First International – and events – such as the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolutions.

Laying the Foundations: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

While some like to portray anarchism as dating back many centuries, this I think misunderstands both its origins and nature. Yes, before 1840 many thinkers and movements had ideas which can be described as anarchist. This is to be expected, for it would be staggering if those subjected to the evils produced by the state and property would not conclude the need to get rid of both and act accordingly.

However, as a named socio-economic theory anarchism dates from the 1840s and the works of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to self-identify as an anarchist. This is where we must start to be historically accurate – for earlier movements can now respectively be claimed as anarchist (although a few were attacked as such by their enemies!) because of Proudhon and that part of the labour and socialist movement he helped to create. Not, of course, that he was an isolated intellectual for he was a worker who took an active part in the socialist movement, with a mutual influence and interaction.

So what is anarchism? These comments from an unpublished 1847 manuscript by Proudhon summarise its basics well:

“We want legislation of the people by the people, without representatives;

“government of the people by the people, without that supernatural person called the prince or the state;

“industrial centralisation, administrative, without hierarchy;

“guarding of the people by the people, without any other army than a citizen militia;

“justice of the people by the people, without unremovable magistrates;

“education of the people by the people without university monopolies and without Jesuits;

“finally we want the organisation of labour by the workers, without capitalists or masters”

While some of the terminology changed – most obviously, the use of “federalism” to better describe the idea of an “administrative, without hierarchy” centralisation – the vision remains the foundations of both Proudhon’s anarchism and subsequent forms.

“Universal Association”

In *What is Property?*, Proudhon called his aim the “universal association” and association – “the organisation of labour by the workers, without capitalists or masters” – remained a key aspect of his ideas and those who followed him. Thus we discover him arguing for what could be now called social and economic dual-power in 1846:

“a war of labour against capital; a war of liberty against authority; a war of the producer against the non-producer; a war of equality against privilege [...] to combat and reduce power, to put it in its proper place in society, it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found”

Thus capitalism had to be challenged and replaced by means of an economic (non-political) organisation, “an agricultural and industrial combination.” He repeated this call during the 1848 Revolution, arguing that “a body representative of the proletariat be formed in Paris [...] in opposition to the bourgeoisie’s representation [...] a new society be founded in the heart of the old society” for the “organisation of popular societies was the pivot of democracy, the cornerstone of republican order [...] Under the name of clubs [...] it is a matter of the organisation of universal suffrage in all its forms, of the very structure of Democracy itself.”

This would be the means to create a society of “possessors without masters” in which “leaders, instructors, superintendents [...] must be chosen from the workers by the workers themselves, and must fulfil the conditions of eligibility”. He even coined the phrase “Industrial Democracy” (1857) to describe this vision of workers associations within an “agricultural-industrial federation”. (1863)

This would now be labelled federal market socialism and would be based on social-economic association to ensure the “abolition of capitalism and wage labour, the transformation of property [...] governmental decentralisation, the organisation of universal suffrage [...] the substitution of the contractual regime for the legal regime”. In such a system, democratic rights would extend to all aspects of life, including economic relations, for there would “no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland [...] only places of birth. Whatever a man’s race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen’s rights everywhere.”

Thus an anarchist society would be based on free association and free access, for genuine freedom needed social equality:

“Free association, liberty – whose sole function is to maintain equality in the means of production and equivalence in exchanges – is the only possible, the only just, the only true form of society.”

This would be a functional self-management as “each citizen in the sphere of his industry, each municipal, district or provincial council within its own territory, is the only natural and legitimate representative of the Sovereign [...] workers to form themselves into democratic societies, with equal conditions for all members”. Such an association would be based on the election of *delegates* and not *representatives* for the “choice of talents, the imperative mandate, and permanent revocability are the most immediate and incontestable consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program of all democracy”

Why not the State?

Which raises an obvious question, why not use the State as many socialists – both then and now – assert? Proudhon was quite clear that this was not possible for two reasons.

First, the modern State was a bourgeois body which cannot be captured. It was “nothing but the offensive and defensive alliance of those who possess, against those who do not possess; and the only part played by the citizen is to pay the police”. It was structured as it was – a centralised, unitarian body – for a reason:

“And who benefits from this regime of unity? [...] the upper classes [...] bourgeois exploitation under the protection of bayonets. [...] the cornerstone of bourgeois despotism and exploitation”

In short, as he put it in 1846, the State was “inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.”

Second, it was power apart with its own interests. Thus we “do not want the State, because the State [...] no sooner exists than it creates an interest of its own, apart from and often contrary to the interests of the people [...] it makes civil servants its own creatures, from which results nepotism, corruption, and little by little to the formation of an official tribe, enemies of labour as well as of liberty”. The State was “that alienation of public power for the profit of a few ambitious men” and so to “concentrate all public powers in the hands of a single authority [...] only created despotism”. It did not empower the many but always the few for the “President and the Representatives, once elected, are the masters; all the rest obey.”

So even if the current State was somehow captured or replaced by a new self-described people’s or workers’ State, then liberation would be short-lived as a new set of masters – the State officialdom – replaced the old bourgeois ruling class.

It is perhaps unnecessary to note every “successful” so-called “socialist” revolution has confirmed this, as has the failure of every elected so-called “socialist” government to go beyond managing capitalism.

Confessions of a Statesman

For those with an appreciation of irony, Proudhon is described as a “Statesman” in Montparnasse cemetery. He was, after all, an elected representative in 1848 – before having his parliamentary immunity stripped due to his prophetic criticisms of President Louis-Napoleon seeking to become Emperor like his uncle. His account of the 1848 revolution, entitled *Confessions of a Revolutionary*, summarises his experiences of isolation and ignorance within the Chamber:

“Since I first set foot on this parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in contact with the masses: by absorbing myself in my legislative work, I had completely lost view of current affairs [...] One has to experience this isolation called a national assembly to understand how the men who are the most completely ignorant of the state of a country are nearly always those who represent it.”

Thus the State, even if we ignore its class and hierarchical nature, was simply not up to the task of social transformation, new organs were needed which were better suited – organisations created by the working class itself.

This confirmed his earlier critique of the State and he reaffirmed the need for a socialism *from below*. Indeed, he seems the first to embrace the term and stress its importance:

“*From above* [...] signifies power; *from below* signifies the people. [...] the initiative of the masses. [...] Revolution on the initiative of the masses is a revolution by the concerted action of

the citizens, by the experience of the workers, by the progress and diffusion of enlightenment, revolution by the means of liberty.”

He also critiques those on the left who seek to utilise the state, so “Louis Blanc represents governmental socialism, revolution by power, as I represent democratic socialism, revolution by the people. An abyss exists between us.” This was because “the organisation of labour must not emanate from the powers-that-be; it ought to be SPONTANEOUS”. It was only by moving beyond bourgeois (political) democracy and bourgeois (economic) tyranny can a genuinely free system be created, one in which “the masses are actually, positively and effectively sovereign: how could they not be when the economic organism – labour, capital, property and assets – belongs to them entirely”.

It was with these ideas that French trade unionists travelled to London and, with British ones, create the International Workers’ Association – now often called the First International.

Association internationale des travailleurs

I have deliberately put the full name of the First International in French, as you really cannot understand anarchism and its development unless you are familiar with the ideas raised by the non-British – particularly the French-speaking – sections. Indeed, many of the debates have not been translated and the little which has usually suffers in translation. So, for example, the official English-translation of the 1868 resolution on collective property completely misses out certain phrases which show the very obvious influence of Proudhon on its authors.

This is important, for it is in the French-speaking sections of the International – France, Belgium, the Jura – that we see the idea of system of workers’ councils arise. Thus the Report to the Basle Congress on Resistance Societies in 1868 argued:

“resistance societies be established to prepare for the future and to ensure as far as possible the present [...] how the ideas we have on the organisation of labour in the future can help us to establish resistance societies in the present [...] labour is organised for the present and the future, by eliminating wage-labour [...] grouping of different trade unions by town and by country [...] forms the commune of the future [...] Government is replaced by the councils of the assembled trades unions [...] regulating the labour relations that will replace politics”

These ideas soon became the majority perspective within the International, being championed elsewhere, such as in Spain and Italy. This also reflected a development in economic perspectives, a change which is somewhat misrepresented by Marxists seeking an inflated role for Marx within the Association.

Mutualists and Collectivists

One of the key debates within the International was over collective ownership, a debate which has all-too-often been portrayed as one in which Proudhon’s influence is replaced by Marx’s. In reality, these debates were primarily between those influenced by Proudhon (“mutualists”) and focused on extending collective ownership to land. Collective ownership for workplaces was the common position, as noted by leading collectivist César de Paepe in 1868:

“I am just as much a mutualist as Tolain [...] but I do not see that the collective ownership of land is opposed to the mutualist program”

Tolain, usually considered an orthodox mutualist, was as in favour of workers' associations to run industry as de Paepe but hesitated over applying workers' associations to the land due to fear of a peasant backlash similar to that experienced under the Second Republic. Other mutualists shared this perspective, although Proudhon himself repeatedly indicated support for collective ownership of both industry and land – as he put it in 1848:

“under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership [...] handed over to democratically organised workers' associations”

The key difference between the collectivists and Proudhon – other than their opposition to Proudhon's patriarchal notions – was that they saw trade unions as Proudhon's “agricultural and industrial combination” while he opposed both strikes and unions. Thus we find Parisian trade unionist Jean-Louis Pindy arguing in 1868:

“Resistance Societies have already defined the practical application of the principle of solidarity between workers. It is again to their influence that emancipation must be achieved through the takeover of tools, the abolition of bosses, the organisation of credit and exchange, and the transformation of the social order”

The Belgium section of the International likewise popularised this idea, with César de Paepe reiterating the next year that the International “bears social regeneration within itself [...] the International already offers the model of the society to come, and that its various institutions, with appropriate modifications, will form the future social order [...] the International contains within itself the seeds of all the institutions of the future”. Eugène Varlin stressed the importance of this perspective in 1870:

“Unless you want to reduce everything to a centralising and authoritarian state [...] the workers themselves must have the free disposal of their instruments of labour [...] trade associations [...] are the natural elements of the social construction of the future; it is they who can easily become producer associations”

Sadly, these perspectives are often ignored in favour of the conflict between Bakunin and Marx, although the former's influence was very much dependent on championing the collectivist ideas already raised in the International before he joined.

Revolutionary Anarchism: Michael Bakunin

So this is the intellectual context for the Bakunin and Marx conflict, with Michael Bakunin championing Direct Action, Unions and Workers Councils while for Marx the focus was Political Action, Political Parties and Parliament. Thus we find Bakunin arguing for a syndicalist or councilist position:

“Workers, no longer count on anyone but yourselves [...] Abstain from all participation in bourgeois radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The basis of that organisation is entirely given: the workshops and the federation of the workshops [...] instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie [...] The creation of Chambers of Labour [...] the liquidation of the State and of bourgeois society.”

In contrast, Marx sought to move the International into embracing social-democratic tactics, as summarised later by Engels:

“In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy [...] its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class

fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power, in order to become enabled to change existing laws in conformity with their own interests and requirements. Thus the working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People's Charter, which was to give it that political power."

Bakunin rightly predicted that such Social Democratic tactics would produce reformism for "worker deputies, transferred into bourgeois surroundings and an atmosphere of entirely bourgeois political ideas, ceasing in fact to be workers by becoming Statesmen, will become bourgeois [...] For men do not make situations, on the contrary it is situations that make men". Moreover, Marx ignored the dangers associated with centralised power for the State equals *minority* rule, not people power:

"No state, however democratic [...] can ever give the people what they really want, i.e., the free self-organisation and administration of their own affairs from the bottom upward [...] because every state [...] is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals, who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves"

Echoing Proudhon, Bakunin stressed that the State "has always been the patrimony of some privileged class" and if economic classes are abolished it simply "becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class". This meant that Marx's socialism would be, in reality, the rule of officialdom, "concentrating in their own hands all [...] production [...] under the direct command of state engineers, who will form a new privileged scientific and political class." A regime in which the State would become the sole capitalist, state-capitalism in short.

Thus Bakunin's opposition to Marx's "workers' State" had nothing to do with not recognising the need for defending a revolution. Indeed, he was very clear that "to defend the revolution" it was necessary to "form a communal militia" and "federate [...] for common defence." I mention this simply because so many Marxists have suggested otherwise.

So, as Kropotkin later noted, modern – revolutionary – anarchism was born in the International. It was based on three key ideas.

First, direct action and not political action. The International must have, as Bakunin put it, "at first as its sole basis the exclusively economic struggle of labour against capital [...] only a single path [...] *emancipation through practice* [...] the struggle of the workers in solidarity against the bosses. It is *trades unions, organisation and the federation of resistance funds*." This meant socialism would be created "by the development and organisation, not of the political but of the social (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses as much in the towns as in the countryside".

Second, unions as a means to both fight and replace capitalism. Bakunin reiterated the position of the Federalist-wing – that is, the majority – of the International by stressing that the "organisation of trade sections, their federation [...] and their representation by Chambers of Labour" meant "uniting practice with theory" and "carry the living seeds of the *new social order* that is to replace the bourgeois world. They create not only the ideas but the very facts of the future."

Third, the general strike as a means to start the revolution. For Bakunin, as "strikes spread from one place to another, they come close to turning into a general strike" and this "can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin." However, he also recognised the need to go beyond simply the withdrawal of labour: "Liberty can only be created by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward."

The Paris Commune

While debates about revolutionary strategies took place in the International, an actual revolution took place in Paris. It began on 18th of March, after troops refused to fire on civilians on the Butte of Montmartre. The government evacuated the city and the Central Committee of the National Guard called elections. Thus the Paris Commune was created.

Was it a soviet (workers' council)? Well, the short answer is no but that has not stopped some who you would think would know better claiming otherwise. Thus we find John Rees, then of the British SWP, proclaiming in a so-called theoretical journal that "since Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, a cornerstone of revolutionary theory" is "that the soviet is a superior form of democracy because it unifies political and economic power." Sadly, Marx suggested no such thing in *The Civil War in France*:

"The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by [male!] universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms."

So, no, it was not a soviet but it was federalist and bottom-up. As its famous *Declaration to the French People* put it, the Commune wanted the "absolute autonomy of the Commune extended to all the localities of France, and assuring to each one its full rights, and to every Frenchman the full exercise of his faculties and abilities as man, citizen and worker [...] Political unity, as Paris wants it, is the voluntary association of all local initiatives". As feminist mutualist Internationalist and communard André Léo put it at the time:

"it affirms more than ever, against Jacobin doctrines, the revolutionary principle: FEDERATION [...] We, citizens of Paris, want to govern, administer, organise our city as we wish".

In short, it was a libertarian Revolution. This is why Marx's *The Civil War in France* is his most appealing work, for he is reporting upon a revolution heavily influenced by Proudhon. We can show this by comparing Marx's account from 1871 with Proudhon's earlier writings:

- Marx: "each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents"
- Proudhon: "choice of talents, the imperative mandate [*mandat impératif*], and permanent revocability are [...] the inevitable program of all democracy"
- Marx: "The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time."
- Proudhon: "It is up to the National Assembly, through organisation of its committees, to exercise executive power, just the way it exercises legislative power"
- Marx: "The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organised by Communal Constitution"
- Proudhon: "In the federative system [...] central authority [...] has a quite restricted part [...] concerning federal services [...] subordinate and entrusted to an Assembly [...] of delegates"
- Marx: "it wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour."

- Proudhon: “democratically organised workers’ associations [...] core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic [...] property restored to its proper limits [...] free disposition of the fruits of labour”

Needless to say, Marx made no mention of the awkward fact almost all of the Internationalists active within the Commune, whether elected to the municipal council or not, were mutualists or collectivists. Little wonder that Bakunin proclaimed that “Revolutionary socialism has just attempted its first demonstration, both splendid and practical, in the Paris Commune.”

Yet Bakunin did not simply uncritically embrace the Commune. Like later anarchists – most obviously, Kropotkin – Bakunin sought to learn lessons from the revolt.

The key one was that while it was federal outwith, it was centralised within. It was essentially the municipal council and so the rebels had, as Bakunin noted, “set up a revolutionary government and army” and “organise[d] themselves in a Jacobin manner, forgetting or sacrificing the first conditions of revolutionary socialism.” This caused problems from the start as the centralised body was unable to meet the challenges the revolution faced. Thus we find Donny Gluckstein, another member of the British SWP, admit that the Commune’s council was “overwhelmed” by suggestions from other bodies, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.” Sadly, he mentioned this confirmation of the anarchist critique in passing and made no attempt to draw any conclusions from this.

The second lesson was related to the first, namely the failure of the Commune within bureaucratic processes. This can best be seen by the Commune’s Decree on workers associations:

“Workers trade councils are convened to establish a commission of inquiry [...] To compile statistics on abandoned workshops, as well as an inventory [...] To present a report on the practical requisites for the prompt restarting of these workshops [...] by the co-operative association of the workers who were employed there [...] must send its report to the Communal Commission on Labour and Exchange, which will be required to present to the Commune [...] the draft of a decree [...]”

This was written by the person closest to being a Marxist within the Commune, namely Leó Frankel acting as the Delegate for Labour and Exchange. So in the face of a major economic crisis which had caused numerous workshops to close, the Commune’s official response was... a commission of inquiry to look into drafting a decree so that, at some stage in the unspecified future, closed workshops may have been reopened as co-operatives.

Unsurprisingly, anarchists concluded the pressing need for direct action to expropriate the means of production. As Kropotkin later stressed, workers will “not wait to expropriate the holders of social capital by a decree [...] They will take possession on the spot and [...] organise themselves in the workshops to continue the work”.

The third lesson was the need for workers’ councils. While there were community organisations (the clubs) these were pressurising the Commune Council rather than directly managing public affairs. Economically, workers needed to take over not just the closed workplaces, but all of them. In this way the municipal council would be replaced by an organisation better suited to building socialism, based on the organisations created by the workers themselves in struggle. Thus, as Bakunin stressed, the “future social organisation” must be “from the bottom upwards, by

the free [...] federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international” in scope.

The Federalist International

The conflict in the International intensified after the bloody destruction of the Paris Commune by French troops. Communard refugees fled into exile, with many ending up in the Jura and joining – like André Léo – the emerging Federalist revolt against the structural and political changes Marx was pursuing within the International. The most famous response was the Sonvillier Circular of 1871:

“The future society must be nothing else than the universalisation of the organisation that the International will give itself. We must therefore take care to ensure that this organisation is close as possible to our ideal. How could an egalitarian and free society emerge from an authoritarian organisation? It is impossible. The International, embryo of the future human society, must from now on be the faithful reflection of our principles of federation and liberty, and reject from its midst any principle tending towards authority, towards dictatorship.”

The following year saw the Saint-Imier Congress and whose resolutions reflected the core conclusions of the libertarian-wing of the International:

“the establishment of an absolutely free economic organisation [...] this federation can only be the outcome of the spontaneous action of the proletariat itself, of trades unions and autonomous communes [...] the worker can never free himself from age-old oppression unless he replaces [...the State] with the free federation of all producer groups based upon solidarity and equality [...] The strike [...] a product of the antagonism between labour and capital [...] strengthening the workers’ organisation, and preparing, as a result of ordinary economic struggles, the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary struggle”

Ultimately, the tactics and structures of the bourgeoisie cannot be used by those seeking to end their rule. André Léo summarised it well: “If we act like our adversaries, how will the world choose between them and us?”

The Spirit of Revolt: Peter Kropotkin

Which brings me to Peter Kropotkin, who joined the International in 1872. Rejoining it after escaping a Tsarist prison he soon became a leading advocate for the ideas of its federalist wing. While he played a key role in the rise of libertarian communism within anarchist circles, in terms of both strategy and tactics he remained committed to the ideas popularised by Bakunin. As he summarised in 1913’s *Modern Science and Anarchy*:

“what means can the State provide to abolish this [capitalist] monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? [...] Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these [capitalist] privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in *their* unions, *their* federations, completely outside the State?”

Like the Federalist-wing of the International, he advocated syndicalism before the word.

Thus the expression “direct struggle against capital” appears repeatedly in his works across the decades. He saw, to use his words from 1881, the need to build “a force that will crush capital,

come the day of revolution: the revolutionary trades association. Trades sections, federations embracing all the workers in the same trade, federation of all the trades of the locality, of the region [...] constitute the structures of the revolutionary army". This was key, for "to make revolution, the mass of workers must organise themselves, and resistance and the strike are excellent means by which workers can organise." Thus the need to "build resistance associations for each trade in each town [...] federate across France [...] federate across borders".

Unsurprisingly, he also argued for the general strike to start a revolution and expropriation to ensure its success. The London Dock Strike of 1889 saw the power of the general strike and "the day when those anarchists who exhaust themselves in empty discussions will act [...] the day when they will *work* amongst the workers to prepare the stopping of work" then "they will have done more to prepare the social, economic, Revolution, than [...] the socialist party." This was to be no passive withdrawal of labour, but an occupation for workers "will not wait for orders from above before taking possession of land and capital. They will take them first, and *then* — already in possession of land and capital — they will organise their work."

Like Bakunin, he exposed "the fallacy of a 'One-day Revolution'" — not least because we build the new world by fighting the old. Thus unions, he noted in 1906, are "*natural organs for the direct struggle with capital and for the organisation of the future order* — organs that are *inherently necessary* to achieve the workers' own goals". Also, revolutions are complex and difficult events — for the social revolution was no overnight affair:

"an *uprising* can overthrow and change a government in one day, while a *revolution* needs three or four years of revolutionary convulsion to arrive at tangible results [...] if we should expect the revolution, from its *earliest* insurrections, to have a communist character, we would have to relinquish the possibility of a revolution"

The revolution meant the creation of new forms of social organisation, ones better suited than the State to involve the masses in the task of transforming and running society. Indeed, to "make a revolution it is [...] necessary that after the risings there should be left something new in the institutions, would permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established." The need was to "*smash the State* and rebuild a new organisation starting with the very foundations of society—the liberated village commune, federalism, groupings from simple to complex, the free workers union"

This would of course also mean the "mutual protection against aggression, mutual aid, territorial defence" — a free society would create both self-managed groupings to eliminate rule by the few (whether they were elected or not) and the means to fight attempts to recreate it, whether from within or outwith.

"The Chicago Idea"

The next raising of the idea of workers' organisations as the means to fight and replace capitalism appeared in North America, with the International Working People's Association. As leading member Albert Parsons put it:

"Trades Unions [are] the embryonic group of the future free society [...] an autonomous commune in the process of incubation. The Trades Union is a necessity of capitalistic production, and will yet take its place by superseding it under the system of universal free co-operation"

This was echoed by others in the association, including his wife Lucy Parsons: “We hold that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labor assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society”.

The links with the libertarian wing of the First International are clear. However, some claim that they were not Anarchists but Syndicalists. Carolyn Ashbaugh, in her extremely flawed *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*, seems to be the first to claim this, asserting that they were “syndicalists [...] they had given up political work for work in the unions which [...] would provide the social organisation of the future”. Given that this was the position of Bakunin and Kropotkin, we can easily dismiss this claim as being based on little more than ignorance of anarchism – as confirmed by Ashbaugh proclaiming in all seriousness that Kropotkin was the “gentle anarchist theoretician of non-violence”!

Some, not to be undone, go further and claim they were not Anarchists but Marxists. For example, James Green in his book *Death in the Haymarket* proclaimed that the Chicago Internationalists “turned away from electoral competition and adopted Karl Marx’s strategy of organising workers [...] building class-conscious trade unions as a basis for future political action.” Enough has been said to show that this was Bakunin’s position, not Marx – an awkward fact which can be seen from Marx’s own words:

“Bakunin’s programme [...] The working class must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions. One fine day, by means of the *Internationale* they will supplant the place of all existing states.”

So if you cannot bring yourself to believe Bakunin, you can fall back on Marx and his mocking dismissal of the strategy later adopted by the Chicago Anarchists.

The Rise of Syndicalism

So by the time revolutionary syndicalism (usually shortened to just syndicalism in English) became better known internationally, most of its key elements had long been advocated by anarchists. As such, the all-too-common suggestion that it arose in the mid-1890s after the failure of “Propaganda by the deed” is false. This flawed perspective can, for example, be found in George Woodcock’s *Anarchism*:

“from 1881 to 1894 had been a time of isolation [...] anarchists [...] sought the way to a millennium in desperate acts [...] The period from 1894 [...] saw a fruitful equilibrium between the visionary and the practical [...] Anarcho-syndicalism [...] showed anarchism seeking constructive solutions.”

Yet we find Kropotkin arguing for economic direct action in 1881:

“We have to organise the workers’ forces — not to make them into a fourth party in Parliament, but in order to make them a formidable MACHINE OF STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITAL. We have to group workers of all trades under this single purpose: “War on capitalist exploitation!” And we must prosecute that war relentlessly, day by day, by the strike, by agitation, *by every revolutionary means.*”

He likewise argued for unions to organise production years before syndicalism raised the same notion, for example in 1892 when he rightly argued that “[n]o one can underrate the importance of this labour movement for the coming revolution. It will be those agglomerations of wealth pro-

ducers which will have to reorganise production on new social bases. [...] They – the labourers, grouped together — not the politicians”

Echoing Kropotkin’s words, Louise Michel in 1890 also argued for the “general strike, whose purpose was to destroy capitalism and usher in world liberty”.

Thus the ideas associated with syndicalism in the mid-1890s had been raised by anarchists in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s – that the organisations created by workers in their economic and social struggle against capitalism would form the structural base of the system which would replace it.

Russian Revolution, 1905

The Russian Revolution of 1905 saw this idea develop in a new way, in the shape of workers’ councils or soviets. These were made up of elected, mandated and recallable delegates (or deputies) from workplaces and organised the general strikes which brought the Tsarist regime to its knees.

Faced with these spontaneous organs, the Bolshevik reaction is telling. Simply put, they demanded that the soviet adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband. In the words of the St. Petersburg group:

“only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.”

In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers’ interests because they were elected by... the workers!

When Lenin returned from exile, he managed to get the Bolsheviks to soften their hostility to the soviets. However, this was purely instrumental for, as he put it in 1907, the Bolsheviks should “participate [...] provided this is done on strict Party lines for the purpose of developing and strengthening the Social-Democratic Labour Party [...] if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous”.

The Anarchist reaction was completely different, with Kropotkin arguing that “the workers’ Council [...] very much reminds us of the Central Committee which preceded the Paris Commune of 1871, and it is certain that workers across the country should organise on this model [...] these councils represent the revolutionary strength of the working class.” This is confirmed by historian Paul Avrich:

“Syndicalists [...] regarded the soviets [...] as admirable versions of the *bourses du travail*, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions [...] the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised ‘from below’”

Indeed, the soviet and the trades council (the British equivalent of the *bourses du travail* or the Chambers of Labour advocated in the International by Bakunin amongst others) had distinct similarities. Both were councils made up of delegates elected from the workplace.

Moreover, while the Bolsheviks – like other Marxists – saw the immediate goal of the revolution as political in nature (a bourgeois republic), anarchists saw the need to raise socio-economic demands so that working class people would make the most of the opportunity. To quote Kropotkin:

“The land — to the peasant; the factory, the workshop, the railway and the rest — to the worker. And everywhere the Commune [...] taking into its hands the economic life of the people.”

It would take 12 years before the Bolsheviks came – or paid lip-service – to similar conclusions.

Russian Revolution, 1917

After the women-led protests brought down the Tsar in February 1917, the soviets were recreated – this time with delegates elected from the troops. Both wings of the Social-Democratic party, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, repeated their positions of 1905, until Lenin returned from exile and reformulated Marxism in the *April Theses* and *State and Revolution*. He won over his party, in spite of opposition from its bureaucracy, to the idea of the soviets as the basis of a new “workers’ State,” which would be modelled on the Paris Commune.

This new State would ensure the abolition of “parliamentarianism” by the fusion of legislative and executive functions in soviets, with “all officials, without exception, to be elected and subject to recall *at any time*” and the abolition of the standing army by the “armed masses,” with no “special bodies of armed men”. This would secure “an immense expansion of democracy [...] for the poor, democracy for the people”.

By October 1917, the party felt confident of enough support to seize power (“the seizure of power through the soviets,” to use Trotsky’s later summary of Lenin’s position in *Lessons of October*). Yet, this event saw the immediate creation of the Council of People’s Commissars, an executive *over* the Soviet Congress, which, four days later, unilaterally gave itself legislative power. As a Bolshevik statement put it, “a purely Bolshevik government” was “impossible to refuse” as “a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets” had “handed power over to this government”.

So much for “all power to the soviets” modelled on the Paris Commune – the promises Lenin made in *State and Revolution* did not survive the night! Subsequent events followed the same pattern, with the soviets quickly becoming marginalised in new, centralised State built by the Bolsheviks on the pattern advocated by Marx in 1850:

“a single and indivisible [...] republic [...] the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority [...] the path of revolutionary activity [...] can proceed with full force only from the centre”

Unsurprisingly, as historian Carmen Sirianni summarised, “[e]ffective power” in the soviets “relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.”

Simply put, it was the so-called “Soviet Power” versus the power of the soviets, of the Bolshevik party and its State against the working class and its ability to manage society. This is shown when the Bolsheviks started to lose influence in the spring of 1918. While initially having popular support (and so October can be classed as a revolution, of sorts, rather than a coup), the failure of the new regime to tackle the mounting problems facing Russia saw workers turn away from them. This was expressed in soviet elections and – as historian Israel Getzler recounts – “the Bolsheviks felt constrained to dissolve Soviets or prevent re-elections where Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had gained majorities”. Historian Alexander Rabinowitch summarises events in Petrograd:

“demands from below for the immediate re-election [...saw] new regulations [...] to help offset possible weaknesses [in] electoral strength in factories [...] the makeup of the new soviet was that numerically decisive representation was given to agencies in which the Bolsheviks had overwhelming strength [...] Only 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance.”

Thus, to secure “Soviet power” (i.e., Bolshevik rule), the soviets were systematically packed, gerrymandered and disbanded. This reached its climax at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets at the start of July 1918, where Rabinowitch shows “electoral fraud gave the Bolsheviks a huge majority of congress delegates [...] Bolsheviks delegates whose right to be seated was challenged by the Left SR minority in the congress’s credentials commission.” Denied of their majority, the Left-SR leadership assassinated German Ambassador to provoke “revolutionary war” – they were quickly repressed, and joined the Mensheviks and Right-SRs in being expelled from the soviets.

So while many anarchists stress the Kronstadt uprising of 1921 as marking the end of the revolution, this is not the case. Indeed, the key struggles over soviet democracy occurred three years earlier – as can be seen from the fact that Kronstadt’s soviet was first disbanded by the Bolsheviks on 9 July 1918 in the wake of the Left SR “revolt,” not after its bloody crushing in March 1921.

The Fate of the Revolution

The fate of the soviets reflects the fate of the Revolution.

By July 1918, the regime was a *de facto* one-party dictatorship and soon this reality was reflected in the ideology of the ruling elite. Thus we find ex-anarchist Victor Serge later lamenting that “at the start of 1919 I was horrified to read an article by Zinoviev [...] on the monopoly of the party in power.” It must be noted, as he failed to do, that *at the time* he happily defended this as a necessity for every revolution in the anarchist press, urging libertarians to join him in recognising this.

The onslaught was not limited to the Soviets, for the armed forces Trotsky proclaimed in March 1918 that “the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree.” A secret police force, the Cheka, had already been created in December 1917. Thus within a few months the new regime had its own “special bodies of armed men,” something *State and Revolution* had explicitly rejected. Unsurprisingly, these “special bodies” were soon being used like all previous ones – a secure minority rule by repressing the waves of worker and peasant protests and strikes that occurred from the spring of 1918 onwards.

A similar authoritarian process occurred in the economy. The Bolsheviks established the *Supreme Economic Council* which was, as libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton notes, “widely acknowledged by the Bolsheviks as a move towards ‘statisation’ [...] of economic authority.” It began “to build, from the top, its ‘unified administration’ of particular industries”. It “gradually took over” the Tsarist state agencies such as the *Glavki* “and converted them [...] into administrative organs subject to [its] direction and control.” In the workplace, capitalist social relations were imposed from April 1918 onwards, with Lenin arguing for “[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors [...] vested with dictatorial powers.”

In addition, this political and economic centralisation simply resulted in “All Power to the Soviets” becoming “All Power to the Bureaucracy” as – in the words of historian Richard Sakwa – the “old state’s political apparatus was ‘smashed,’ but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity [...] As the functions of the state expanded so did the bureaucracy”.

A lesson for the world?

The creation of a party dictatorship on the ruins of the soviets was not seen as an issue at the time by leading Bolsheviks. Indeed, they were quite happy to proclaim that this was an inevitable aspect of any revolution, one to be followed elsewhere. Thus Zinoviev at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920 stated:

“Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class [...] the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party”

Lenin, likewise, argued this in *‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder* written expressly for that Congress. He praised the “*non-Party workers’ and peasants’ conferences*” as these allowed the party “to be able to observe the temper of the masses, come closer to them, meet their requirements”. He also noted that the “district congresses of Soviets are *democratic* institutions, the like of which even the best of the democratic republics of the bourgeois world have never known,” yet failed to ponder why, if that were true, the former were needed... Perhaps unsurprisingly, as with the soviets in early 1918, these conferences were soon disbanded when opposition started to be raised within them.

Not that Lenin was too bothered by the lack of genuine democratic institutions, for he lectured the world’s revolutionaries that Russia was “directed by a Central Committee of nineteen [...] This, it would appear, is a full-fledged ‘oligarchy’. No important [...] question is decided by any state institution [...] without the guidance of the Party’s Central Committee.” From this he concluded that “all this talk about ‘from above’ or ‘from below’, about the dictatorship of leaders or the dictatorship of the masses, etc., as ridiculous and childish nonsense”.

Yes, when you are at the top it may seem “nonsense” but for those at the bottom – the workers and peasants – the difference is vital. Still, even the rise of Stalinism did not stop Trotsky proclaiming in 1936 that the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party [...] is an objective necessity”!

“how not to introduce communism”

Needless to say, anarchists and syndicalists across the world rejected these lessons, agreeing with Kropotkin that the Bolsheviks had simply shown “how not to introduce communism”. As Emma Goldman later summarised, the regime was “absolute despotism politically and the crassest form of state capitalism economically” – both under Stalin and Lenin.

Goldman saw first-hand “the inefficiency of the centralised bureaucratic machine [...] Moscow had ordered [these products] made [...] and six months already had passed without the ‘central

authorities' making any effort to distribute [...] one of the countless examples of the manner in which the Moscow system 'worked,' or, rather, did not work." Thus, to use Kropotkin's words, the "usual vices of every centralised State gnaw away at this administration, the mass of the people is excluded from reconstruction, and the dictatorial powers of the communist bureaucrats, far from alleviating the evils, only aggravate them."

The cause of the problem lay not in civil war or foreign intervention (Bolshevik authoritarianism had started long before either) but rather in Bolshevik ideology and the structures it favoured. Thus, Goldman argued, "the Communists began their process of elimination [...] of all independent organisations. They were either subordinated to the needs of the new State or destroyed altogether." This undermined "the Soviets, the trade unions and the cooperatives — three great factors for the realisation of the hopes of the Revolution." Political and economic centralisation combined with the Bolshevik desire for power ensured the failure of the revolution, a failure not to create an immediate socialist "utopia" — as some claim anarchists think — but rather a failure to build the beginnings of socialism. As Goldman stressed, such "criticisms [of her critique] would be justified had I come to Russia expecting to find Anarchism realised [...] I do not therefore expect Anarchism to follow in the immediate footsteps of centuries of despotism and submission" but rather the "hope to find [...] the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought."

This had not happened. The promise of the revolution, its vision of a council system in which working people could manage their own affairs, was crushed under a regime which paid lip-service to it.

Conclusions

As can be seen, revolutionary Anarchism has always been "syndicalist". Hence Kropotkin's comments from his justly famous article on Anarchism from *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

"since the foundation of the *International Working Men's Association* in 1864–1866, [the anarchists] have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation."

Anarchists had long seen workers' councils — under various names — as the means of both fighting and replacing capitalism and its State. They would be the new organs required for the new functions a free society needed. This a "Soviet State" is a contradiction in terms for, as Kropotkin noted, the State "cannot take this or that form at will" for it is "necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian—or it ceases to be the State." Hence the need for a new form of social organisation, one based on the oppressed own groups created in our struggle against exploitation. As Bakunin summarised:

"Alliance of all labour associations [...] will constitute the Commune [...] delegates [...] invested with binding mandates and [...] revocable at all times [...] found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces [...] organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction"

The history recounted above shows that Anarchism has been vindicated time and again. The debates within the International between Bakunin and Marx confirmed the former was correct.

Electioneering confirmed Bakunin's predictions, as Rudolf Rocker memorably summarised in his classic book *Anarcho-Syndicalism*:

“Participation in the politics of the bourgeois States has not brought the labour movement a hair's-breadth nearer to Socialism [...] Socialism has almost been completely crushed and condemned to insignificance [...] destroyed the belief in the necessity of constructive Socialist activity, and, worse of all, the impulse to self-help, by inoculating people with the ruinous delusion that salvation always comes from above”

The Russian Revolution likewise confirmed Bakunin's critique, showing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in practice is simply “the dictatorship over the proletariat.” The State evolved to secure minority rule, it cannot be used to end it. A new form of social organisation is needed.

In short, history shows that Rocker was right: “Everything for the councils or soviets! No power above them!”

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho
Anarchism, Syndicalism and Workers Councils
June 13, 2019

Retrieved on 24th April 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

usa.anarchistlibraries.net