

# **Anarchist Theory – Use it or Lose it**

Anarcho

December 6, 2011

# Contents

Critique of Capitalism . . . . .	4
Socialism from Below . . . . .	5
The Paris Commune . . . . .	7
The State . . . . .	7
The Russian Revolution . . . . .	8
On looking forward... . . . . .	9
Libertarian Marxism, syndicalism and primitive accumulation . . . . .	10
Kropotkin and Mutual Aid/Reciprocal Altruism . . . . .	11
Conclusion . . . . .	12

This is a write up of a talk given at the 2011 London Anarchist bookfair. Its blurb was: “Why bother with dead anarchists? For some, while anarchists may do beards well we don’t do theory. This is wrong. We do have theory, as my *An Anarchist FAQ* and *Property is Theft!* show. Anarchism is a rich source for analysing and transforming society. Join me in exploring why dead anarchists are worth reading.”

I’ve tried to keep it as close as possible to what I remember of what I said, based on the same notes. There will be differences but I hope I’ve got most of it right. Some of it may be better than on the day, some perhaps worse. Some bits have been expanded upon. I’ve also provided references for further reading.

---

I’m going to do something unusual at the Anarchist bookfair, I’m going to praise anarchism and its contributions to socialism. I’m going to show some of the reasons why anarchists should be proud of anarchism. This I hope will combat the unnecessary sense of inferiority some anarchists seem to display.

The title of this talk is *Anarchist Theory – Use it or Lose it*. This was inspired by the research I did for *An Anarchist FAQ* for its appendix on *The Symbols of Anarchy*.<sup>[1]</sup> I still remember the email sent to the anarchy list nearly two decades ago asking the apparently simple question of why do anarchists wave the black flag. I remember being flummoxed by this – yes, why *do* we wave the black flag? We just took it for granted, the reason *why* had been lost.

After much research, I discovered that it was associated with Louise Michel who used it during a demonstration in March 1883. However *she* used it because it was a recognised symbol of working class struggle, proclaiming: “*The Black Flag is the flag of strikes.*”

Hence the importance of reading anarchist books even those written over a hundred years ago – so we remember why we hold certain ideas and ideals. And I should note that we really have no excuse for the leading Anarchist thinkers wrote for working class people. There are no “What Bakunin really meant” books because there is no need as anarchists writers are (almost always) clear and comprehensible.

More importantly, we were the first to advocate many of the ideas the so-called revolutionary left take for granted (or, more correctly, pay lip-service to).

This can be seen when a SWP member in Glasgow and an ICC member in Ghent at anarchist meetings pointed to the need for workers councils, the general strike, workers seizing their workplaces, and so on as necessary aspects of a social revolution. The one in Glasgow even went so far to say that these represented the *Marxist* vision of revolution and wondered what the anarchist one was. I had to respond to both these comments by agreeing that these were, indeed, all needed but that they were but just repeating what Bakunin had argued – not Marx!

In short, *we* anarchists had argued for all these so-called “Marxist” positions first. For example, and most obviously, when we compare Engels/Luxemburg on the General Strike with what anarchists actually advocated we see that Engels distorted the anarchist position while Luxemburg was repeating the “Bakuninist” position while denouncing Bakunin!<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See section H.3.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* ([www.anarchistfaq.org.uk](http://www.anarchistfaq.org.uk)) for a comparison what Engels wrote about the “Bakuninist” general strike and what the “Bakuninists” themselves actually advocated.

Ironically, we have reached the stage of historical ignorance that if you gave non-attributed quotes by Marx/Engels and Bakunin to a Marxist, most Marxists would agree with Bakunin not Marx/Engels!

Hence the importance of reading the source material. I still remember a Trotskyist coming up to me about a meeting on Stirner we were going to have at a Glasgow Anarchist Summer School. He very proudly announced he was preparing for the talk by reading *The German Ideology*. The look on his face when I innocently asked whether this was before or after reading *The Ego and Its Own* said it all – the idea had never crossed his mind!

Yet can many anarchists say otherwise? This can be seen from comments (by libertarians!) that the Chicago Martyrs “synthesised” anarchism and Marxism or that syndicalism takes “class struggle” from Marxism. As if Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Berkman, Goldman, and so on were not advocates of class struggle or revolutionary unions!<sup>2</sup>

As another example, we have a meeting today entitled **“Is Capitalism destroying itself? And can we replace it?”** This has *Marxists* discuss the crisis of capitalism and what to do. At the Anarchist bookfair! Could they not find any anarchists to discuss that?

Worse, one of the invited speakers is Trotskyist Hillel Ticktin, whose ideological guru advocated (and practised!) party dictatorship<sup>3</sup> and who crushed strikes<sup>4</sup> (and anarchists!) to remain in power – and will, I am sure, happily do the same! This can be seen from one of his articles on the nature of socialism<sup>5</sup> which saw him, after invoking the holy name of Marx and his two stages of transition, inventing another three. One of which allows the rule by a single party as long as it has factions. Why? Simply to avoid the obvious conclusion that the Bolshevik regime was a state-capitalist party dictatorship!<sup>6</sup>

Surely we can do better? Particularly as Marxists have spent much of *their* time playing catch-up with *us*, as I will show

## Critique of Capitalism

Marxists like to proclaim that Marxism proves that capitalism is riddled with contradictions, contradictions that can only resolved by transcending capitalism. In addition, they argue it creates the seeds of what will replace it and that it is only latest in series of economies. Which are all correct and all positions Proudhon raised first!

This ignorance of Proudhon is striking and can be ironic at times. Thus we discover Marxist economist Gary Mongiovi proclaiming:

“By the time of his critique of Proudhon, Marx had arrived at many of the essential elements of his account of exploitation. He recognised that workers can be exploited because they have been alienated from the means of production through a historical process of expropriation and

---

<sup>2</sup> Section H.2.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ* discusses the links between revolutionary anarchism and syndicalism while section H.2.2 discusses revolutionary anarchism and class struggle.

<sup>3</sup> See section H.1.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*. See section H.3.8 for a critique of the Leninist theory of the state and the need for party power.

<sup>4</sup> See section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

<sup>5</sup> “What will a Socialist Society be like?”, pp. 145–167, *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, No. 25 (1993)

<sup>6</sup> See section H.3.13 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for a discussion of why state socialism is just state-capitalism. The anarchist analysis should not be confused with Tony Cliff’s “state-capitalist” analysis of Stalinism (which section H.3.13 also discusses the flaws of).

technological transformation. This insight, and the method of analysis by which he arrived at it, are impressive scientific achievements. But they have nothing to do with the labour value analysis of *Capital*, which Marx did not formulate until at least a decade and a half later.”<sup>7</sup>

Yes, I would agree that these *are* “impressive scientific achievements” but if you read Proudhon’s *What is Property?* and *System of Economic Contradictions* you will discover that he had said it first! Moreover, Proudhon had also produced an analysis of exploitation that predates Marx’s in *Capital* by 2 decades.

First, the worker’s “dependence is upon the benevolence” of the proprietor to “whom he has sold and surrendered his liberty.” If the owner “refuses to employ the worker, how can the worker live?” The worker “has produced all, and can enjoy nothing” because “[w]e who belong to the proletarian class: property excommunicates us!”<sup>8</sup>

Second, labour did not have a value but what it created did and so produces value only as *active* labour engaged in the production process. Labour is “qualitatively defined by its object, — that is, it becomes a reality through its product.”<sup>9</sup>

Third, as the proprietor secures a profit by controlling both product *and* labour (workers have “sold their arms and parted with their liberty”), wages *cannot* equal product as boss keeps both “the collective force” and the “surplus of labour” produced by the wage-worker – “the value he creates, and by which the master alone profits.”<sup>10</sup>

It is this “hierarchical organisation” between employer and wage-worker which allowed exploitation to occur and will “make the chains of serfdom heavier” and “deepen the abyss which separates the class that commands and enjoys from the class that obeys and suffers.” Property means “another shall perform the labour while [the proprietor] receives the product” and so “free worker produces ten; for me, thinks the proprietor, he will produce twelve.”<sup>11</sup>

So under capitalism “a worker, without property, without capital, without work, is hired by” the capitalist “who gives him employment and takes his product.” In mutualist society the “two functions” of worker and capitalist “become equal and inseparable in the person of every worker” and so he “alone profits by his products” and the “surplus” he creates.<sup>12</sup>

## Socialism from Below

As is well known, the SWP use “socialism from below”, a term derived from Hal Draper (who really is a numpty<sup>13</sup>) who coined the phrase in the 1960s. In reality, Anarchists have long argued for change/revolution “from below” or the “bottom up” for over a hundred years before Draper appropriated the term.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Gary Mongiovi, “On the Concept of Exploitation in Marxian Economics”, a paper presented at the International Conference *Sraffa’s Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities 1960–2010*, 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Roma Tre University, Faculty of Economics.

<sup>8</sup> *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (AK Press, Edinburgh/Oakland, 2011), p. 117, p. 104

<sup>9</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 176

<sup>10</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 212, p. 117, pp. 253, p. 114

<sup>11</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 193, p. 195, p. 100, p. 124

<sup>12</sup> *Op. Cit.*, pp. 534–5

<sup>13</sup> Numpty is a Scots word meaning “Someone who (sometimes unwittingly) by speech or action demonstrates a lack of knowledge or misconception of a particular subject or situation to the amusement of others.”

<sup>14</sup> Section H.3.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ* discusses claims that Marxism is “socialism from below” while section H.3.3 refutes the suggestion that Leninism can be considered so.

Thus we find Proudhon in 1846 arguing that while utopian socialism makes “social life descend from above, and socialism maintains that it springs up and grows from below.” He repeated this in the 1848, arguing that “[f]rom above... signifies power; *from below* signifies the people... the initiative of the masses” and so “revolution *from below*” was “by the experience of the workers” by “means of liberty.”<sup>15</sup>

For Proudhon, the “organisation of popular societies was the pivot of democracy” and argued for the creation of proletarian committees in opposition to bourgeois state. Thus “a new society be founded in the heart of the old society” as a means towards a “vast federation” of “democratically organised workers’ associations” based on “*social* ownership” of land and industry. Nationalisation he rightly dismissed as simply “wage-labour”, with the state replacing the boss.<sup>16</sup>

Revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin echoed this. Bakunin argued that a “popular revolution” would “create its own organisation from the bottom upwards and from the circumference inwards... not from the top downwards and from the centre outwards, as in the way of authority.”<sup>17</sup> For Kropotkin, “new social forms can only be the collective work of the masses.”<sup>18</sup>

Compare Proudhon to Marx’s comments from 1850 (repeating, I stress, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*). Marx argued for “the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority... the strictest centralisation” as “revolutionary activity” must “proceed with full force from the centre.” He warned workers “must not allow themselves to be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government.” Economically he advocated “the concentration of... productive forces... in the hands of the state.”<sup>19</sup>

Precisely the kind of “from above” revolution and state capitalism Proudhon had denounced two years previously.

Interestingly, Engels in the 1895 introduction to Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850* discussed the demands raised during the revolution and quotes Marx’s comments that “but behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the *appropriation of the means of production*, their subjection to the associated working class and, therefore, the abolition of wage labour, of capital and of their mutual relations.” He then gushes that “here, for the first time, the proposition is formulated” of “modern workers’ socialism” and gives Marx the credit for this.<sup>20</sup> This seems doubtful for had not Proudhon proclaimed in 1848:

“We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers’ associations ... We want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic social Republic.”<sup>21</sup>

If subjecting capital to the associated working class is “modern workers’ socialism” then, surely, Proudhon advocated it two years before Marx?

---

<sup>15</sup> *Property is Theft!*, p. 205, p. 398

<sup>16</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 407, p. 321, pp. 377–8

<sup>17</sup> *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1973), p. 170

<sup>18</sup> *Words of a Rebel* (Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1992), p. 175

<sup>19</sup> “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League”, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Second Edition, W.W. Norton & Co, London & New York, 1978), pp. 509–10

<sup>20</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 559

<sup>21</sup> *Property is Theft!*, pp. 377–8

## The Paris Commune

Needless to say, Marx changed his tune in 1871 and apparently agreeing with Proudhon. And it is unsurprising that *The Civil War in France* is usually considered Marx's most appealing and libertarian work, given that it is reporting on a *libertarian* influenced revolt – after all, the Paris section of the *International Working Men's Association* and the minority in Commune's Municipal Council were mutualists.<sup>22</sup>

In fact everything Marx praised the Communards for doing can be found in Proudhon and Bakunin. Mandating and recalling delegates? Proudhon advocated this during the 1848 revolution while Bakunin had argued for it in the 1860s. Creating “working bodies” which fused executive and legislative functions? Found in Proudhon and Bakunin. The same can be said of a bottom-up federation of Communes as well as a federation of workers associations.

Indeed, if you compare Proudhon's November 1848 election manifesto and Marx's *Civil War in France* you discover an extremely close similarity in the positive vision each expresses.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that while there are obvious anarchistic elements to the Paris Commune, the anarchist analysis argues it did not go far enough. It stressed the need for federalism outwith and within the commune for while Paris was isolated in France, the communal council also became isolated from masses. As one Marxist notes, it was “overwhelmed” by suggestions, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.”<sup>24</sup> He draws no conclusions from these facts, but anarchists recognised the problem and stressed the need for mass participation/initiative instead of waiting for a few leaders from Bakunin onwards. In addition, anarchists noted that the Commune made no attempt at economic transformation, such as the expropriation of property.<sup>25</sup>

## The State

The Paris Commune is usually pointed to as the event which, to quote Tony Cliff, that “basic Marxist conclusions” were arrived at, namely that “the workers cannot lay hold of the bourgeois state machine but must smash it and establish a new state based on proletarian democracy (soviets, etc.).”<sup>26</sup>

Sadly for Cliff, if Marx did conclude state had to be smashed thanks to the Paris Commune, this was quickly forgotten. This can be seen from Marx and Engels repeatedly suggested that the working class *could* seize hold of the bourgeois state and (to use Engels' word) “refashion” it.<sup>27</sup> This, I stress, was before *and* after the Paris Commune, which showed them, according to Cliff, that “the working class must smash the capitalist state machine and build a new state”!<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See the introduction to *Property is Theft!* for more details of Proudhon's influence in the *International Working Men's Association* (pp. 36–9) and the Paris Commune (pp. 40–4)

<sup>23</sup> “Election Manifesto of *Le Peuple*”, *Property is Theft!*, pp. 371–81

<sup>24</sup> Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune: A Revolutionary Democracy* (Bookmarks, London, 2006) pp. 47–8.

<sup>25</sup> See my “The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism” (*Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 50) for the anarchist analysis of the Paris Commune based on a critique of Gluckstein's work.

<sup>26</sup> *Trotskyism after Trotsky* (Bookmarks, London, 1999), p. 27

<sup>27</sup> See section H.3.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 7

Here is Engels explaining Marx's words which Cliff suggests show the "working class cannot take the old state machine to use it to build socialism"<sup>29</sup>:

"It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes: whereas all bourgeois republicans since 1848 inveighed against this machinery so long as they were in the opposition, but once they were in the government they took it over without altering it and used it partly against the reaction but still more against the proletariat."<sup>30</sup>

This was repeated by Engels in 1891: "If one thing is certain it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown."<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, Lenin quotes this in *State and Revolution* and then comments that "Engels repeated here in a particularly striking form the fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx's work, namely, that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>32</sup> Yet clearly Engels does not speak of a "commune-republic" or anything close to a soviet republic, as expressed in Bakunin's work, say. He explicitly states that the "democratic republic" *could* be seized and reformed by voting – unlike, say, Proudhon who argued that the state is "inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat."<sup>33</sup>

In this we can say the anarchists have been completely vindicated – few Marxists these days argue that workers can use "political action" (voting) to seize "political power" and introduce socialism. Instead they agree with Proudhon and Bakunin.

This flows from our different views on the state. Unlike Marxists, Anarchists have an evolutionary analysis of the state. It is a specific form of social organisation which exists to ensure *minority* power and so marked by certain features such as hierarchy, centralisation, being top-down, and so.<sup>34</sup> This means that we have long recognised that it cannot be captured and instead, to quote Proudhon, "an agricultural and industrial combination must be found" to fight and replace it.<sup>35</sup> So, unlike Bakunin, there is no call for workers organisations (unions/councils) to be the basis of a socialist society in Marx and Engels. We would need to wait *five decades* for Marxists to draw the same conclusion.

## The Russian Revolution

This recognition finally came about in the 1917 Russian Revolution and is expressed in Lenin's *State and Revolution*. A work which, I must stress, completely distorts anarchism<sup>36</sup> (and Marxism, but that is another story!). This can be seen from the awkward fact that most of what it argues is "Marxism" was expounded *first* by Bakunin!

---

<sup>29</sup> Cliff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7

<sup>30</sup> *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 47, p. 74

<sup>31</sup> *Op. Cit.*, vol. 27, p. 227.

<sup>32</sup> *The Lenin Anthology* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1975), p. 360

<sup>33</sup> *Property is Theft!*, p. 226. Significantly, Proudhon quotes this conclusion in 1849's *Confessions of a Revolutionary* and argues that the 1848 revolution confirms his predictions of 1846. (*Op. Cit.*, p. 423)

<sup>34</sup> See section H.3.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

<sup>35</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 225

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, section H.1.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.



For example, the soviets have a distinct similarity to Bakunin's argument that "the Alliance of all labour associations" will "constitute the Commune" with delegates subject to "binding mandates... accountable and revocable." The same can be said of the necessity for councils to join together, form a workers' militia to defend the revolution, and so on.<sup>37</sup>

However, as well as confirming anarchism's positive vision of social revolution the Russian Revolution also confirmed our critique of Marxism. Bolshevism in power quickly became the dictatorship *over* the proletariat.

This should not be too surprising, as Lenin was very clear in 1917 (and before) that the aim was for *party* power.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the first act of the Bolshevik's was to create a Bolshevik executive over the soviets. In short, *State and Revolution* did not last the night.<sup>39</sup>

With the party in power, Bolshevik ideology now played a key role and their politics and policies made a bad situation much, much worse.<sup>40</sup> The reality of state power quickly resulted in the Bolsheviks becoming isolated from the masses. From top to bottom, soviet executives accumulated more and more power. To maintain their position, the Bolsheviks gerrymandered/packed soviets – including the Fifth All-Russian Congress, which denied the Left-SRs their rightful majority. When gerrymandering could not be done or was unsuccessful, they simply disbanded by force any soviet elected with non-Bolshevik majorities.<sup>41</sup>

The economy collapsed as the new bureaucracy mismanaged it. As anarchists had predicted, the economy *was* disrupted by revolution<sup>42</sup> but our warnings that a "strongly centralised Government" running the economy *was* "undesirable" and "wildly Utopian" (to quote Kropotkin<sup>43</sup>) were also confirmed. At its most basic, the centralised structure created by the Bolsheviks did not even know how many workplaces it was managing! In short, the Bolsheviks recreated the problems of the Commune but on a far bigger scale.

Suffice to say, the Bolshevik regime proved Bakunin right on his critique of Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, just as Social Democracy had proven he had been right on the reformist results of electioneering.<sup>44</sup> Now, if Marxism *were* a science, then it surely would have accepted the obvious conclusion that anarchism, not Marxism, has been vindicated. But, of course, it is an ideology, not a science.

## On looking forward...

Murray Bookchin was right in *Listen, Marxist!* when he argued:

"When the hell are we finally going to create a movement that looks to the future instead of the past? When will we begin to learn from what is being born instead of what is dying? Marx,

---

<sup>37</sup> *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Daniel Guérin (Ed.), AK Press, Oakland/Edinburgh, 2005), pp. 181–2. Bakunin, it should be said, is following Proudhon from 1848.

<sup>38</sup> Section H.3.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* discusses Lenin's urging for party power while section H.3.11 discusses Trotsky's retrospective account of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917.

<sup>39</sup> See section H.1.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

<sup>40</sup> See section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

<sup>41</sup> See section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

<sup>42</sup> *The Conquest of Bread* (Elephant Editions, Catania, 1985), pp. 69–70, pp. 72–3; *Act for Yourselves: Articles from Freedom 1886–1907* (Freedom Press, London, 1988), pp. 56–60

<sup>43</sup> *The Conquest of Bread*, pp. 82–3

<sup>44</sup> See section H.1.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

to his lasting credit, tried to do that in his own day; he tried to evoke a futuristic spirit in the revolutionary movement of the 1840's and 1850's."<sup>45</sup>

However, Bookchin was wrong to suggest that this was Marx's contribution from 1852's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*. Marx was simply repeating Proudhon who, in April 1848, wrote that radicals to be forward looking:

"It is by '93 and all of its discord that we are being ruled... What we have here is a phenomenon of social psychology that is deserving of further exploration... So what is this queer preoccupation which, in time of revolution, bedazzles the most steadfast minds, and, when their burning aspirations carry them forward into the future, has them constantly harking back the past? ... Could [Society] not turn its gaze in the direction in which it is going?"<sup>46</sup>

This applies today. Chris Harman<sup>47</sup> of the British SWP, for example, wrote of the Argentinean revolt against neoliberalism and its neighbourhood assemblies that they were "closer to the sections – the nightly district mass meetings – of the French Revolution than to the workers' councils of 1905 and 1917 in Russia." He complained that a "21<sup>st</sup> century uprising was taking the form of the archetypal 18<sup>th</sup> century revolution!" Did the Argentineans not realise that a 21<sup>st</sup> century uprising should mimic "the great working class struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century"? Specifically the one which took place in a mostly pre-capitalist Tsarist regime which was barely out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century itself. Did they not realise that the leaders of the vanguard party know better than they do how they should organise and conduct their struggles?

That the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knew best how to organise their own revolts is lost on Harman who prefers to squeeze the realities of modern struggles into the forms which Marxists took so long to recognise in the first place.

Still, *some* progress has been made – rather than focus on 1793 most on the so-called revolutionary left today look back to 1917!

## **Libertarian Marxism, syndicalism and primitive accumulation**

This tendency for Marxism to play catch-up with anarchism can be seen in its libertarian forms.

Council communism, ironically, reached the anarchist conclusions Marx thought so hard against in the First International. Autonomist Marxism breaks decisively with the Marxist mainstream and embraces the key role of class struggle in invalidating all deterministic economic "laws." Yet this was stressed by French syndicalists at the start of the twentieth century:

"By way of evidence of the relentless operation of this law of wages, comparisons were made between the worker and a commodity...so the law of wages may be taken as right... for as long as the working man is content to be a commodity! For as long as, like a sack of potatoes, he remains passive and inert and endures the fluctuations of the market...But things take a different turn the moment...the worker wakes up to his worth as a human being and the spirit of revolt washes over him... then, the laughable equilibrium of the law of wages is undone."<sup>48</sup>

And Marx, indeed, had compared the worker to a commodity, stating that labour power "is a commodity, neither more nor less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter

---

<sup>45</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (AK Press, Edinburgh/Oakland, 2004), p. 108

<sup>46</sup> *Property is Theft!*, pp. 308

<sup>47</sup> "Argentina: rebellion at the sharp end of the world crisis", *International Socialism* no. 94, pp. 3–48

<sup>48</sup> Emile Pouget, *Direct Action* (Kate Sharpley Library, London, 2003), pp. 9–10

by the scale.”<sup>49</sup> So what libertarians have argued for decades previously becomes cutting-edge Marxism!

Another area where the cutting-edge of Marxism is just repeating anarchists can be seen in the recent flurry of papers and articles on how neo-liberalism is pursuing new enclosures as well as practising other forms of “primitive accumulation.” This is hardly surprising for anarchists. Here is Kropotkin:

“What, then, is the use of talking, with Marx, about the ‘primitive accumulation’ — as if this... were a thing of the past?... nowhere has the system of ‘non-intervention of the State’ ever existed... The State has *always* interfered in the economic life in favour of the capitalist exploiter... *And it could not be otherwise.* To do so was one of the functions — the chief mission — of the State.”<sup>50</sup>

This, incidentally, refutes the sadly typical Marxist claim that anarchism thinks the state is the “main” enemy — as can be seen, Kropotkin recognises the symbiotic nature of the state and capital in modern society and opposes *both*.<sup>51</sup>

## Kropotkin and Mutual Aid/Reciprocal Altruism

Moving away from politics, it is important to note the Kropotkin made a ground-breaking contributing to science, specifically evolutionary theory. A reading of *Mutual Aid* shows that Robert Trivers and his theory of “reciprocal altruism” was simply repeating Kropotkin’s arguments seven decades later. Two decades after commentators mentioned *Mutual Aid* to him, Trivers had still not read Kropotkin.

This is unfortunate because, if he had he would have discovered a theory identical to his own. To use Richard Dawkins’ terminology Kropotkin did not think animals were “indiscriminate altruists” (or “suckers”) but rather “grudgers” — individuals who co-operate but “if any individual cheats them, they remember the incident and bear a grudge.”<sup>52</sup> In *Mutual Aid*, and elsewhere, Kropotkin noted how individuals who do not co-operate with their fellows are penalised.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, Trivers states that a “very agreeable feature of my reciprocal altruism, which I had not anticipated in advance, was that a sense of justice or fairness seemed a natural consequence of selection for reciprocal altruism.”<sup>54</sup> However, if he *had* consulted Kropotkin, he would have discovered that his unanticipated feature had been anticipated in *Mutual Aid*:

“it is evident that life in societies would be utterly impossible without... development of social feelings, and... of a certain collective sense of justice growing to become a habit... feelings of justice develop, more or less, with all gregarious animals.”<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps we should not be that surprised given that Kropotkin was an internationally well-respected scientist as well as one of the foremost anarchist thinkers of his time.

---

<sup>49</sup> “Wage Labour and Capital”, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 204

<sup>50</sup> “Modern Science and Anarchism”, *Evolution and Environment* (Black Rose, Montreal, 1995), pp. 97–8

<sup>51</sup> See section H.2.4 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

<sup>52</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006), pp. 184–5

<sup>53</sup> See my *Mutual Aid: An Introduction and Evaluation* (second edition, AK Press, Edinburgh, 2011)

<sup>54</sup> *Natural Selection and Social Theory: Selected Papers of Robert Trivers* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 16–7

<sup>55</sup> *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Freedom Press, London, 2009), pp. 68–9.

## Conclusion

So I think we anarchists have a lot to be proud of. We have contributed greatly to the socialist project and, unlike some tendencies, scientific theory. So Proudhon had a point when he noted in his copy of *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

“what Marx’s book really means is that he is sorry that everywhere *I* have thought the way *he* does, and said so before he did. Any determined reader can see that it is Marx who, having read me, regrets thinking like me. What a man!”<sup>56</sup>

Much the same can be said of many so-called “Marxist” positions. As I hope I’ve proven, we usually said it first!

But there is another way anarchism has an advantage over Marxism. As you know, the London Bookfair is getting bigger each year. When looking for a larger venue one year, its organisers approached ULU (the *University of London Union*) as a venue. ULU initially refused the booking, prompting the organisers to ask why. Anarchists want revolution, they replied. The organisers pointed out that the SWP hold Marxism there every year. To which ULU replied – yes, but *you* mean it!

Yes, indeed – we mean it and we (usually) said it first. That I think sums up the importance of anarchist theory well and why we should read dead anarchists.

[1]“Appendix: The Symbols of Anarchy”, *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 1 (AK Press, Edinburgh/Oakland, 2008), pp. 550–5

---

<sup>56</sup> *Property is Theft!*, p. 70

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho  
Anarchist Theory – Use it or Lose it  
December 6, 2011

Retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2021 from [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)