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Libertarian Socialism: Beyond Anarchism and Marxism?

Anarcho

February 28, 2014

The links between the two schools of revolutionary socialism – Marxism and class struggle anarchism – have produced much debate, some more helpful than others. Into the helpful pile comes *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) edited by Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Saku Pinta and Dave Berry. Twelve excellent chapters and a terrible one are sandwiched between a useful introduction and conclusion. Overall, it is essential reading for all those seeking to enrich libertarian socialism in the 21st century.

It is a shame that after clear introduction exploring its aim, the book starts with a terrible chapter by Leninist Paul Blackledge. Words cannot express how arrogant, superficial and wrong this chapter is. His case is that anarchist concerns that power corrupts shows “a shared model of human essence” (18) with liberalism and this limits anarchism’s potential to fully liberate humanity. Only Marxism and its “historicised conception of human nature” (28) can do this by ensuring we embrace democracy.

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

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Which raises a question: what kind of democracy? Blackledge quotes Malatesta arguing that “democracy is a lie” and “in reality, oligarchy” (22) yet further reading shows Malatesta was referring to representative democracy (“the parliamentary system”¹). The “ambiguous relationship” (21) of anarchism to democracy reflects the ambiguity of the term “democracy” and the multiple ways it has been used. It also reflects anarchist awareness that majorities are not always right – they can make bad, not to mention oppressive, decisions. Blackledge ignores this, along with Marxism’s own (very) “ambiguous relationship” to democracy (to mention one obvious example, the Bolshevik advocacy of party dictatorship and one-man management).

It is a decentralised, federal, bottom-up anti-statist democracy that is found in Proudhon and Bakunin (self-management). For anarchists “a real democratic alternative to alienated capitalist politics” (30) means destroying the state and creating a new form of social organisation run “not from above downwards, as in the state, but from below upwards, by the people themselves”: a federation of workers’ associations and communes. If all govern then “there will be no state.”² Only those who have not read Bakunin could assert there was “no evidence” that for him democracy could have “a deeper social context than bourgeois democracy”. (21)

Given that *no* state has ever empowered the many, it is best to avoid the confusion using the same word to describe different things produces. That Marxists are vaguely aware of this can be seen from Blackledge’s comments on a “novel form of state”. (28) Yet the assertion that the “dictatorship of the proletariat [is] a form of extreme democracy” (22) is hard to square with Marx’s support for representative government (reflected in Bakunin’s

¹ “Democracy and Anarchy”, *The Anarchist Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1995), 78

² Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33, 178

critique). And best not ask how “anti-statism” can be stretched to include “temporarily” holding state power. (23)

Blackledge starts with Stirner, who had no impact on anarchism until the 1890s, but his individualism allows the raising of *The German Ideology*. He then tries to discuss Proudhon, focused on *General Idea of the Revolution* (wrongly referenced as *What is Property?*). He ignores Proudhon’s discussion of the state as instrument of class rule, his arguments that centralised democracy was no democracy at all and calls for industrial democracy to end wage-labour in favour of the usual attempts to portray him as backward looking ideologue unaware of the rise of the proletariat and what it means for socialism. He does find time to accuse him of complaining that capitalism was not “the ‘natural order’” (26) while Proudhon stated it was not “a natural order,” a different thing completely.

That Proudhon’s ideas were expressed in the Paris Commune and taken up by Marx goes unmentioned, but Blackledge does suggest that the supporting the Commune presents a “problem for Bakunin” (28) as it was a government. Yet Bakunin noted a key problem was *precisely* that it “set up a revolutionary government” and so organised “in a Jacobin manner” instead of by workers’ councils.³ So rather than present an “immanent critique” (28) of Bakunin, Kropotkin simply extended his analysis and the notion that there are “anarchist difficulties with the Commune” (28) cannot be sustained, although there are Marxist ones.⁴ How can the Commune being “formed of municipal councillors, chosen by [male] universal suffrage in the various wards of the town”⁵ be the “smashing of the old state”? (28)

³ *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980) , Sam Dolgoff (ed.), 267, 270

⁴ see my “The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* no. 50

⁵ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 22: 331

He even quotes Engels on “our party” comes to power “under the form of a democratic republic” and that this “is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat” on the very same page as moaning anarchists fail to understand the “novel social content of Marx’s anti-statism” and so “conflate” it with social democracy. (29) Like most Leninists, he confuses destroying the “state machine” (its bureaucracy) with “smashing” the state⁶ and ignores that for Engels⁷ and Lenin⁸ Social Democracy *was* Marxism (at least until 1914 for the latter). He also moans that Bakunin attacked Marx’s “top-down politics” (27) but seems unaware that for Lenin “the organisational principle” of Marxism is “to proceed from the top downward.”⁹ He also asserts (25–7) Bakunin linked Marx to Blanqui yet it is Louis Blanc who is mentioned, unsurprisingly given the shared support for parliamentarianism (“political action”) and state socialism.¹⁰ Bakunin was *not* “manifestly false” (27) on this as Marx talked of “peaceful agitation” to conquer political power in July 1871,¹¹ re-iterated after the Hague Conference of the First International the following year.¹²

So much for “Bakunin’s failure to understand Marx”! (29) Yet in spite of being proven correct on both Social Democracy and Bolshevism, Blackledge asserts that “Bakunin’s criticism does not begin to rise to the level demanded of the theoretical breakthrough under-

⁶ Section H.3.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

⁷ For Engels the Brussels Congress of the Second International in 1871 was “a brilliant success for us... And, best of all, the anarchists have been shown the door, just as they were at the Hague Congress. The new, incomparably larger and avowedly Marxist International is beginning again at the precise spot where its predecessor ended.” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 49: 238)

⁸ In August 1913 Lenin stated Social Democracy was “the complete victory of Marxism” and it showed the “fundamentals of parliamentary tactics” (*Collected Works* 19: 295, 298)

⁹ *Collected Works* 7: 396–7

¹⁰ *Statism and Anarchy*, 142–3

¹¹ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 22: 602

¹² *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 23: 255

of the chapter on 1970s Anarchism and Councilism in Australasia, where the obvious conclusion seems to be that Situationist influenced ultra-revolutionaries can only exist as a result of the post-war social democratic consensus. The disappearance of these “revolutionaries of everyday life” across the globe with the rise of neo-liberalism shows the limitations of revolution on the dole. Andy Cornell’s essay on the U.S. civil rights movement highlights an anarchist involvement which many will not be aware of but Bates’ chapter on “Situating Hardt and Negri” holds few surprises (they are Leninists), as does Levy’s one on Gramsci.

The book ends with a conclusion by Berry and Pinta which addresses the core issues well. So is a libertarian socialism which combines the best of Marxism and anarchism possible? As the chapter on Sorel suggests, revolutionary anarchists have long advocated “the best” of Marxism and rejected “the worse” (and proven right over parliamentarianism, statism, partyism, etc.). So from a revolutionary anarchist perspective, it is tempting to conclude that Black and Red have been united since the 1860s.

That Marx’s contributions to our understanding of capitalism are important as are the ideas of libertarian Marxists need to be placed against the fact that Marxism has failed. While some cannot bring themselves to acknowledge this, hopefully others will be less ideologically narrow-minded. For while there are multiple anarchisms (as Marxists note), there are multiple Marxisms: a Kautsky is different from a Lenin who is different from a Pannekeok who is hardly a Stalin. Are there overlaps between anarchism and Marxism? It depends. Marxists can draw revolutionary anarchist conclusions as Lenin acknowledged when he labelled the council communists “semi-anarchist elements.”¹⁶ So engaging with libertarian Marxists is worthwhile but we must never forget that they moved towards revolutionary anarchism conclusions. This book shows why others should take this path.

¹⁶ *Collected Works* 28: 514

chapter on C.L.R. James, which recounts James dismissing Bakunin as “an aristocrat” and Proudhon as “the petty-bourgeois economist of a capitalism controlled by the state.” (159) We can conclude that he studied neither in any depth, if at all. What, then, was his basis for preferring Marxism given its descent into Stalinism and Social Democracy? This is not explored.

This brings us to the book’s outstanding contribution, David Berry’s chapter on Daniel Guérin. As Berry makes clear, Guérin actually read Bakunin and Proudhon and this had a positive impact with Proudhon being “central” (198) to Guérin’s ideas due to his advocacy of self-management. While Guérin’s tendency to call himself a libertarian Marxist at times was unfortunate, it is understandable for two reasons: first, the ignorance about class struggle anarchism in Marxist circles; and, second, the people who proclaim themselves anarchists when, in fact, they are just radical liberals. This chapter is an excellent summary of Guérin’s ideas and makes you wonder why so little of his work has been translated into English while giving you the hope that this will soon be rectified.

Unfortunately, we did not have an English-speaking equivalent to Guérin. *Solidarity* in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s approximated this by uniting anarchists and Marxists in the same organisation (although although many Marxists split off while others like Maurine Brinton eventually eschewed both labels). But what is the best of Marxism? Much of it was first advocated by anarchists, but this is unknown by most Marxists (and, to be fair, many anarchists!). Can Marxists overcome, for example, Marx’s unfair mocking of Proudhon and have their eyes opened? No, if Blackledge is anything to go by but Guérin gives us hope!

Given the influence of Cornelius Castoriadis on *Solidarity*, it good to report that the chapter on *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is excellent as is Angaunt’s one on the Situationists (another group Castoriadis influenced). It is telling, though, that both are best remembered in anarchist circles rather than the Marxist ones they desired to change. Equally telling is the time-warp quality

pinning Marx’s position”. (28) Why? It appears because Bakunin did not read *The German Ideology*, first published in the 1930s. Does the lack of engagement with *The German Ideology* also explain the failure of Bolshevism, given Lenin’s comment in *State and Revolution* that “we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now... who cannot dispense with subordination, control”?¹³ Such comments are hard to square with Blackledge’s account but apparently the power of Marxist ideology knows no bounds. Thus the iron law of oligarchy “misses its target” as genuine Marxist parties do not aim to seize power in the old state. (29) So simply having the correct ideology insulates from the pressures of reformism and bureaucracy – that the Bolshevik party was subject to both is best unmentioned.

Still, it is refreshing to see anarchism attacked for having a too pessimistic perspective on human nature! Blackledge’s “historicised conception of human nature” is very much at odds with our evolved nature. True, the defender of the status quo often “falsely universalises” (30) a perspective on “human nature” which reflects dominant (liberal) assumptions but that does not mean that millions of years of natural selection are overturned by a few lines of Marx. Nor has any anarchist ever suggested that how our nature expresses itself is fixed. Indeed, our critique of Marxism notes that giving power to a few people *changes* all involved for the worse, even the best.¹⁴

This shows a real difference which Blackledge ignores. The anarchist perspective on “human nature” logically implies the need for a decentralised federalism rooted in elections, imperative mandates and recall and, unsurprisingly, we discover both Proudhon and Bakunin arguing for these long before 1871. Blackledge’s position implies no such thing and Marx is silent on mandates and recall before libertarians in the Commune implemented them. Ul-

¹³ *Collected Works* 25: 425

¹⁴ Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 136

timately, if the anarchists are wrong then no big deal – recall is never needed – but if Marxism is wrong and power *does* corrupt then you end up with Stalinism.

It would be easy to continue this critique as there are so many mistakes. Suffice to say, Blackledge clearly is trying to criticise something he simply cannot understand. Anarchists do not need to “re-engage with [Marx’s] political theory to develop its own” (31) but it would be helpful for Marxists to seriously engage with anarchism before writing about it. Instead, Blackledge presents superficial cherry-picking riddled with mistakes, incomprehension, dubious assertions and selective quoting on both Marxism and anarchism: he is not even wrong.

Some of the issues Blackledge tries to address are covered well in Ruth Kinna’s article on William Morris. She shows how Morris seemed unable to see anarchism as anything other than individualism, regardless of the facts, and usefully explores the interrelationships between individualism, anarchism and Morris before critiquing his views to anarchism. This is a welcome addition to our understanding of this period.

The next chapter on syndicalism in the Durham Coalfield is also excellent, although its assertion that the rise of syndicalism saw a turn “away from Kropotkin’s anarcho-communism” towards an “emphasis on workplace and trade union struggle” (61) is hard to square with Kropotkin’s many articles on anarchist involvement in the trade union movement.¹⁵ Similarly, the suggestion that anarchist “rejection of any form of constitutional office” (69) within the Miners’ Union limited its influence is contradicted by the anarchist discussed ending his career “as a right-wing national miners’ leader”. (68)

Llorente’s chapter on “Georges Sorel’s Anarcho-Marxism” gets to the heart of the matter by discussing the overlap between the

¹⁵ Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

two theories. Yet his discussion of what Marxism offers anarchism (84–5) shows that part of the problem is an unawareness of basic anarchist ideas: Proudhon argued most of these (“the state as an instrument of class domination and advocates its abolition”; “rejects utopias and utopian socialism”; “the primacy of production”; “proletarian self-emancipation”) while Bakunin added “the centrality of class struggle in social life and social development, and its role in the fight for socialism” as well as “cataclysmic [sic!] social revolution that abolished capitalism.” It is doubtful that “the material preconditions of socialism and the philosophy of history” adds much, particularly given its use to postpone radical struggle indefinitely due to the “stages” perspective it lends itself to so easily. This can be seen from the general strike debates which Llorente rightly notes was “first popularised by Bakuninites” and mocked by Engels. (88) As for the aim that workplaces be “collectively owned and managed by the workers themselves”, (85) it can be found in Proudhon’s *What is Property?* while *The Communist Manifesto* suggests state ownership and control – Daniel Guérin concluded Marx, unlike Proudhon, “hardly mentioned workers’ control or self-management at all.” (198)

So it is not the case that revolutionary anarchists “could endorse all of these views” (87) as they did and do. So “Sorel’s anarcho-Marxism” (87) seems a stretch, like proclaiming Bakunin an “anarcho-Marxist”, but Llorente does introduce Sorel to a new generation and that is to be thanked.

Pinta’s account of council communist perspectives on the Spanish revolution was enlightening reading, showing as it does how sympathetic the council communists were to the CNT and the real difficulties it faced. (128) Unlike later-day councilists who use an (ignorant) account of anarchist ideas to denounce the CNT’s decisions and activities, those in the 1930s saw that it was caught between the rock and a hard place. His account of Paul Mattick and Karl Korsch reminds us that Marxists can and do discuss anarchism in an informed manner. This is in contrast to Høgsbjerg’s