

On Saving Marxism From Itself

(A Response to Mustapha Mond)

Anarcho

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Anarchists, I hope, would read Mustapha Mond's "A Brief Question of Syndicalism" with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it is always nice to see other socialists apparently searching for common ground with their libertarian "frienemies" and implicitly admit that we were right. On the other, there is a substantial element of wishful thinking about it which limits its usefulness.

If syndicalism and its advocacy of "workers' self-management, organisation, direct action and unionisation in order to abolish the capitalist order" has been "forgotten and stamped into tragic irrelevance" then this, in part, was the product of the hostility of Marxists – such as Lenin or Trotsky – who spent a great deal of time attacking both it and workers' self-management as "petty bourgeois". Combined with the apparent "success" of the Russian Revolution which drew many militants away from it (and the overt hostility of the new Communist Parties) and the rise of fascism in many of its strongholds (Italy, Portugal, Spain, etc.), syndicalism no longer had the influence in after the Second World War as it had before the First.

The question arises as to why workers' control was viewed as "petty bourgeois" and this takes us to the heart of the contradiction in Mond's suggestion that syndicalism is a cure for the ills of Marxist socialism. This, in turn, breaks down into three sub-questions: what is syndicalism? What is Marxist socialism? And, are both consistent with each other?

Syndicalism is, I would suggest, a tactic to achieve socialism rather than a vision of socialism. This explains why we find a range of people – anarchists (mutualists, collectivists, communists and even a few individualists) and Marxists (James Connolly and Daniel De Leon spring to mind) – advocating it while having differing visions of a future society. Yet almost all were agreed that "proletarian ownership of the workplace" was not desired – ownership would be *social* but *control* of production would rest in the producers' hands. Ownership has to be social so that anyone joining a workplace automatically becomes a member of the association running it, otherwise a class of workers who happened to be there when the workplace was first collectivised would employ another class of workers as their wage-workers.¹

Social ownership can take many forms. Marx and Engels, however, continually stressed *State* ownership and rarely, if ever, mention workers' control of production. Rather, nationalisation –

¹ Iain McKay (2016), "Proudhon, Property and Possession", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 66 (Winter). Available at: anarchism.pageabode.com

“centralisation ... in the hands of the State”, to quote *The Communist Manifesto* – is stressed, along with establishing “industrial armies” (quoting the *Manifesto* again). As Marxist Bertell Ollman admits:

Marx’s picture of life and organisation in the first stage of communism is very incomplete. There is no discussion of such obviously important developments as workers’ control. We can only guess how much power workers enjoy in their enterprises.²

Compare this with Proudhon’s 1848 election manifesto and its call for a federation of democratically-run workers’ associations. This explains why, when it comes to showing that Marx favoured workers’ control, his few positive comments on co-operatives are utilised.³ Yet such comments on co-operatives could fill, perhaps, a page, while Proudhon’s include often extensive discussions over many books and articles from 1840 to 1865. In this, Bakunin and Kropotkin followed Proudhon’s lead while Lenin paid only lip-service to (a very limited form of) workers’ control in 1917 before quickly dropping it in favour of State control and “dictatorial” one-man management.⁴

This perspective drove the Bolshevik’s systematic undermining of the factory committees after October within the centralised, statist economic regime they created reflecting their vision of socialism. A key part of this process was denunciation of the particularistic, parochial interests which they claimed factory committees expressed, as reflected in the “petty-bourgeois” perspectives in the “anarchist utopia” of socialism in one workplace. The economy, they claimed, was interlinked and this required a central body to control it, reflecting the orthodox interpretation of Marx and Engels then and now.

The idea that “syndicalism” – worker-owned and run workplaces – is Marxist has been explored by Marxists for many years in their debates over “market socialism”.⁵ Mond refers to “contemporary theorist Richard Wolff” who advocates a market socialism based on co-operatives which would, to use Mond’s words, “directly democratise the places in which they work, and would grant them the ownership of the means of production which has historically evaded them so heinously. It could be the very essence of socialism”.⁶ Suffice to say, those who argue against market socialism in favour of planning have little difficulty proving their orthodoxy by means of numerous quotes from Marx and Engels (that the market socialists have little difficulty showing that these quotes are irrelevant for any real economy is equally true). With this in mind, I turn to this comment by Mond:

Perhaps a syndicalist society is the one which most truly conforms to the original conceptualisation of socialism by Marx, as it would necessarily entail the means of production being directly in the hands of the working classes, the proletarians, through worker co-operatives, unions, boards and committees rather than in the hands of the state through bureaucrats, autocrats, politicians and dictators. History’s “socialist” experiments have too often resulted in the

² Bertell Ollman (1978), *Social and Sexual Revolution: Essays on Marx and Reich* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), pp. 65–66.

³ Bruno Jossa (2005), “Marx, Marxism and the cooperative movement”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 29: 1, pp. 3–18.

⁴ Maurice Brinton (2020), “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control”, in David Goodway (ed.) *For Workers’ Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (Edinburgh: AK Press).

⁵ Ollman Bertell (ed.) (1998), *Market Socialism: The Debate Among Socialists* (London: Routledge).

⁶ On Wolff, see Iain McKay (2015), “Democracy At Work Review essay”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 64/5 (Summer). Available at: anarchism.pageabode.com

exaltation of authoritarianism and a lack of direct democracy, handing the means of production to the state as so-called “public ownership” rather than directly to the people.

Yet handing the means of production to the State was *precisely* what Marx and Engels (repeatedly) advocated. Only later, once classes had disappeared, would society become one of “associated producers”. It is in this context that we need to evaluate any positive comments by Marx and Engels on co-operatives and how these contradict their wider views of a socialist economy. This can be seen in *The Civil War in France*, rightly considered Marx’s most appealing and libertarian work (for it is mostly reporting on a libertarian influenced revolt which owed next to nothing to Marxism). He praises the attempts at co-operative production made during the Commune:

Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. 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. But this is communism, “impossible” communism! (*The Civil War in France*)

So far this describes mutualism and collectivism rather than communism (“impossible” or not) given that Marx had not previously stressed associations to run the means of production but rather concentrating these “into the hands of the State”. After this somewhat disingenuous assertion, he continues:

If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, “possible” communism?

Now we get to the uniquely Marxist vision, the need for “a common plan” for “national production” as the means of the workers “taking it under their own control”. There are numerous issues associated with national – never mind international – planning which neither Marx nor Engels seemed aware of. In their writing, the task of identifying, gathering, processing and presenting the millions of inputs and outputs of any such plan are either ignored or assumed to be a simple matter.⁷ Marx, to use a pertinent example, considered a few sentences on two workers producing two goods as sufficient in his deeply dishonest polemic against Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*.⁸ While a “common plan” is easy to envision with two inputs and two outputs, one involving millions of products and producers is less so.

This, while important, should not distract us from the key contradiction here – namely that such planning ends meaningful workers’ control at the point of production.

⁷ See, for example, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1987), *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 25: Engels: Dialectics of Nature* (London: Lawrence & Wishart) pp. 294–295. For commentary, see Iain McKay (2018), “David Harvey on Proudhon”, *Anarchist Writers*, 26th November. Available at: anarchism.pageabode.com

⁸ See Iain McKay (2017), “Proudhon’s Constituted Value and the Myth of Labour Notes”, *Anarchist Studies* 25:1. Available at: anarchism.pageabode.com

Let us assume that all the informational, knowledge and processing issues of planning the economic (and social) activities of millions of people have been solved. A common plan has been somehow drawn up and agreed by the people by referendum.⁹ The task is now to implement it. A plan – to qualify as such – has to have decided upon outputs and inputs. To be coherent, this has to apply at every level otherwise the agreed outputs cannot be delivered (we will ignore the question of whether the implicit assumption of perfect foresight is feasible). Thus, once a plan has been decided, each workplace has to be given its allocated outputs to produce (and when to produce them) and informed of which inputs they can expect (and when to expect them). If this is not done, then there is no plan and no regulation of national production: a “common plan” has to be a central plan.

This means that any “workers’ control” or “economic democracy” within a given workplace would be within these tight constraints. Indeed, unless the plan allows it, workers cannot even paint their cafeteria a different colour (the volume of green paint would be determined by the plan and so any such request would have to be pre-approved in order for the correct inputs to be specified for the expected demand). Being one vote in millions (billions!) would make the workplace a site of alienation, albeit a different form than under capitalism. It would mimic the same “democracy” expressed in bourgeois elections to parliament (albeit perhaps more often). As with centralised political democracy, centralised economic democracy would not secure for people meaningful control over their own lives, quite the reverse as the conscious allocation of resources is also the conscious allocation of work (consider the impact on “the common plan” if people decide to change jobs).

The orthodox Marxist argument against economic federalism and workplace autonomy is, firstly, that workers would gain a narrow, proprietorial interest and use whatever advantage they had against society as a whole. Second, that there is a pressing need to coordinate economic activity to ensure efficiency in identifying and achieving social goals. Third, that within a market-socialist economy, there would be pressures from the market which would force the workforce to cut conditions, increase the hours and intensity of labour, etc. in order to survive (this is often described by the somewhat self-contradictory terms “self-exploitation” and “self-managed capitalism”).

The first issue is a potential danger but it ignores that the officials at the top of the economy can also gain a narrow, proprietorial interest, *but over the whole economy*. While the anti-social activities of a few workplaces can easily be challenged by others, those of bureaucrats are far harder to challenge.

The second is valid and explains why anarchists have never denied that a complex economy is interlinked and needs appropriate federal bodies to manage appropriate social needs. However, we are also aware that it is precisely this complexity and interwovenness that means that no central body – no matter how big or powerful – could manage it.¹⁰ Autonomy is needed precisely because of the numerous unexpected problems any *real* economy would face, and to generate the essential information and knowledge only free agreement exposes (and which is inevitably lost in the aggregation needed for the plan).

⁹ Market socialist David Schweickart (1993) explores the difficulties in any such referendum in his discussion of an early form of Parecon in *Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 329–334.

¹⁰ Peter Kropotkin (2014), “Message to the Workers of the Western World”, in Iain McKay (ed.) *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press), pp. 489–490.

The third is valid, but applies to mutualism rather than libertarian communism and likewise ignores the threat implied by placing economic decision making – and so power – into the hands of central bodies. The challenge for libertarian communism is to secure meaningful workplace autonomy and to coordinate diverse plans without the positive and negative influences of markets.¹¹ This rejection of the centralisation inherent to a “common plan” does *not* mean rejecting coordination, just that this must be achieved by means of federalism for appropriate activities and at appropriate levels.

Mond is right in a sense, for there *is* an overlap between market socialists and their orthodox opponents. Market socialism becomes acceptable for the latter during the “transition period” immediately after a revolution. Thus the market socialists are denounced as advocating a utopian project due to the inherent incompatibility of markets and socialism, and markets are recognised as an essential aspect of the transitional economy: how being unworkable *and* a necessity is left to the magic of dialectics to explain.

It is the mirror image of the Marxist position of the State. “Yes, we agree with you anarchists that the State is a horrible institution, and we, too, want to get rid of it”, Marxists say, “but we need it for a little while (with us in control of it, naturally) until it withers away”. In this case, it is “Yes, we agree with you anarchists that workers’ control of workplaces is a vital institution which we support, but only for a little while until capitalism withers away”. Yet the withering away of workplace management occurs at the same time as the State (allegedly) withers away, but the former requires a strengthening of the very central power the latter suggests is disappearing.

Thus we have the paradoxical situation of the central authority both withering away *and* expanding its control over the economy (and so society). This is resolved by suggesting that, as classes disappear, so does the State, but this is simply due to the way the latter is defined. Indeed, no class exists which “owns” the means of production, but as economic decision making becomes increasingly centralised as part of the process of creating “the common plan”, a new class which controls the means of production, the labour process and the output develops. We are assured this is not a State because it is merely administering things, but this is not so:

Engels ... was merely playing with words. Whoever has power over things has power over men; whoever governs production also governs the producers; who determines consumption is master over the consumer.

This is the question; either things are administered on the basis of free agreement among the interested parties, and this is anarchy; or they are administered according to laws made by administrators and this is government, it is the State, and inevitably it turns out to be tyrannical.¹²

Thus it was not, as Mond suggests, an “unwillingness to lend more direct control to the workers” that “led to paradoxically renewed class antagonisms: an irreconcilable friction between workers and bureaucrats”. Rather, it was the contradiction between the decentralising and de-centring of power required for meaningful workers’ management of production and the centralising and centring of power required for “a common plan”. As the State gathers to itself and

¹¹ George Barrett (2019) sketches aspects of such a system in “The Anarchist Revolution”, in Iain McKay (ed.) *Our Masters are Helpless: The Essays of George Barrett* (London: Freedom Press), pp. 25–26.

¹² Errico Malatesta (1993) in Vernon Richards (ed.) *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press), p. 145.

centralises more and more economic functions, it does not become less and less a State, because while existing classes may steadily disappear as a result of this process, the empowering of a centralised structure with more and more functions creates a new ruling class (the working class returns to its place as order-takers after a brief moment of economic freedom). This can only be viewed as the withering away of the State if we assume, as Marxism does, that ownership alone creates classes.

From an anarchist perspective, while the former class division between capitalist and proletarian may, indeed, disappear, a new one between bureaucrat and proletariat grows. There is nothing paradoxical about it at all, which Mond seems to recognise:

These failures of history were due to the fact that state-monopolised property is simply Bourgeoisie property in new clothing ... Private property has never truly been abolished and entrusted to the proletarians directly, yet this is what syndicalism would achieve.

Yet here he merely echoes Proudhon's critique of what he termed "Community" (usually somewhat inaccurately translated as "communism") in *What is Property?* that the "members of a community, it is true, have no private property; but the community is proprietor, and proprietor not only of the goods, but of the persons and wills". While capitalism divided ownership and use, Community (State socialism) saw ownership and use undivided and both resulted in exploitation and oppression. The USSR, Cuba, China, etc. prove the validity of this analysis.

So these arguments are hardly original. Bakunin sketched them in his conflict with Marx in the International. Yet Mond still suggests that "Marx once wrote that the dictatorship of the proletariat 'begins with the self-government of the commune'. That is to say such a dictatorship would be a bottom-up system of direct democracy, rather than top-down control". The irony here is that Mond is quoting Marx from his marginal notes to Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* which dismissed, to quote Mond, Bakunin's "prediction that Marxism would lead to a new despotic 'red bureaucracy', more dictatorial than a capitalist system, played out through history as if prophecy".

As such, it is bizarre to see Marx's marginal notes on Bakunin quoted as if it were an irrelevance that every Marxist revolution (indeed, every Marxist movement) has seen the rise of a new class of rulers within it. Yes, indeed, Marx did proclaim that the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat "begins with the self-government of the commune" yet this has *never* come to pass – for precisely the reason Bakunin sketches but which Marx clearly does not understand. Surely, the experience of over one hundred and fifty years of an ideology's practice should count more than mere words? Mond does mention this sorry history when he admits:

It has been evident in the USSR, Cuba, China and other nations, that once a new elite had established power, there was a lack of motivation to move beyond the dictatorship of the proletariat. This eventually resulted in the creation of, as Trotsky termed it, "degenerated workers' states".

Yet the new elite "established power" in the USSR when Trotsky was in charge – as experienced by Emma Goldman in 1920 – and while he viewed it as a "workers' state" in spite of party dictatorship and one-man management in production. The formation of this new class, as Goldman also explained, was a *direct* product of the Bolshevik vision of socialism based on nationalisation

and centralisation – and the millions of bureaucrats this generated.¹³ Of course, many Marxists – like Ollman – suggest that Russia cannot be used to draw *any* conclusions about Marxism due to its economic backwardness but that seems to forget that Marx was without telephones – never mind computers! – when he put pen to paper. Given this, I would suggest that “the concept of syndicalism” is “dependent on the absence of a state”, if by syndicalism it is meant meaningful workers’ control: any centralised economic body would systematically undermine it by its very nature.

Yet we must never forget that powerful role the term “transition” plays in Marxist ideology. This allows Marxists to claim that Marxism is “anti-State” while, simultaneously, arguing for the necessity to build a new State. Thus “syndicalist” self-management of production can be simultaneously opposed and supported depending upon whether we are talking about the transitional period or not. Yet the direction is clear – the aim is to move away from such workers’ management and towards central regulation and control.

All too often, anarchist criticism of Marxism is dismissed as sectarian (although that does not stop other Marxists, usually of the same group, writing disgracefully inaccurate attacks on anarchism). No matter, for we should be proud of the fact we correctly predicted the fate of Marxism. Yes, social democracy became as reformist as Bakunin predicted. Yes, State Socialism simply replaced the boss by the bureaucrat as Proudhon predicted. Whether economically or politically, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” became the “dictatorship *over* the proletariat”.

Still, it is hard not to agree with Mond that the socialist and labour movement would be in a better position “had we listened to Bakunin during the First International and followed a path of syndicalism”. So why bother to seek in “syndicalism” an antidote to bureaucratic dangers within Marxism? Why not simply embrace syndicalism? After all, syndicalism became popular in part because Marxism – in its Social-Democratic incarnation – proved to be the rule of party and union officials within socialist and labour groupings.

Yes, by tracking down the pitifully few positive comments by Marx and Engels on co-operatives and ignoring the lack of commitment to workers’ management in their most famous programmes, it could be possible to present an image of them as advocates of “syndicalism”. However, this is not convincing nor would it account for the systematic opposition of most Marxist movements to such a vision. Given the Marxist prejudices in favour of centralisation, the few scattered remarks of its founding fathers will be of little use and, worse, counterproductive. As Mond shows, they would blind those who invoke them to the dynamics produced by their other, more representative, perspectives on State ownership and central control.

This can be seen today when orthodox Marxists, rightly, label the market socialists *Proudhonists* (which appears to be amongst the worst insults any Marxist could call somebody). Perhaps, then, rather than seek to cobble together a few scattered sentences into a quasi-coherent notion which hides more than it exposes, can we not just admit that the anarchists were right? That Marx, while he may have enriched socialism by his (incomplete) analysis of capitalism, did not have a coherent vision of a socialism that could work in practice?

Which, I think, explains this unconvincing attempt to link Marx and syndicalism. Goldman long ago indicated how syndicalism was the only alternative to the Bolshevik industrial State but

¹³ Emma Goldman (2017), *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London: Active Distribution), pp. 62, 66, 67, 107. Also see her pamphlet “The Crushing of the Russian Revolution” (2013) in Andrew Zonneveld (ed.) *To Remain Silent is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia*, (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority!).

she rightly saw the latter as expressing Marxist ideology rather than the former.¹⁴ Mond suggests that “Marx was profoundly prophetic and correct in his analysis of capitalism, its exploitation, and class struggle, with the dialectically inevitable remedy of socialism as strikingly obvious today”. Ignoring the “dialectically inevitable remedy” comment for obvious reasons, the question is, do we need Marx to provide an “analysis of capitalism, its exploitation, and class struggle”? In terms of the last, the answer is surely “no” as Marx argued that the class struggle must move from the economic terrain onto the political, the net effect of which was for the socialists who followed this advice to become reformists. What of his “analysis of capitalism, its exploitation”? This is less clear cut as he definitely made contributions to this, but we must never forget that in 1867 he built upon the foundations laid by Proudhon after mocking his analysis and methodology in 1847.¹⁵

We must view Marx as we view others who enriched our understanding of capitalism, whether socialists like Proudhon or those seeking to save capitalism from itself like Keynes and Minsky. Once we do that, then perhaps the socialist movement can escape the deadweight of the past which seems to force some to link *everything* to Marx – even when trying to save socialism from his legacy.

So, should we use syndicalism to save Marxism from itself? Why, when we have anarchism?

¹⁴ Emma Goldman (2017), *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London: Active Distribution), pp. 249–250.

¹⁵ Iain McKay (2017), “The Poverty of (Marx’s) Philosophy”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 70 (Summer). Available at: anarchism.pageabode.com

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