

On the Bolshevik Myth

When Leninists attack anarchism in their press

Anarcho

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I always have mixed feelings when I see Leninists attack anarchism in their press. On the one hand, I despair as I know they will waste a lot of space getting it wrong. And that a lot of time will be required to correct the errors, distortions and stupidities they inflict on the world (as I have already done in “An Anarchist FAQ”). I also feel hope as it shows that anarchism is growing so much that they feel they have to spend time attacking us. We have three classic examples of this in *International Socialist Review* issue no. 53.

For some reason, while attacking anarchists and anarchism Marxists feel they have to take our best ideas, experiments and activists. Often they discuss anarchist activists and strangely fail to mention they were anarchists. Louise Michel has suffered this fate, as have the Haymarket Martyrs. The latter have now suffered an even worse fate, with an academic, James Green, trying to appropriate them for Marxism!

In an interview in ISR and a recent book, Green tries his best to turn the Haymarket Martyrs into Marxists. He asserts that “*Albert Parsons believed a strong socialist movement needed to follow the prescription put forward by Karl Marx: that is, such a movement needed a mass working-class following.*” As if that were not Bakunin’s position: “*for the International to be a real power, it must be able to organise within its ranks the immense majority of the proletariat of Europe, of America, of all lands.*” (**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 293) (see “An Anarchist FAQ”: H.2.7)

Green states that because the Martyrs were “*busy organising their own unions*” they “*didn’t stop being Marxists.*” Yet Marx had mocked Bakunin for arguing that (to quote Marx) the working class “*must only organise themselves by trades- unions*” and “*not occupy itself with politics.*” (Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 48) Like the Martyrs, Bakunin argued that “*the natural organisation of the masses ... is organisation based on the various ways that their various types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association*” and once “*every occupation ... is represented within the International, its organisation, the organisation of the masses of the people will be complete.*” Moreover, Bakunin stressed that the working class had “*but a single path, that of emancipation through practical action*” which meant “*workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses*” by “*trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*” (**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 139 and p. 103) So attempts to portray the ideas of the Martyrs as Marxist requires ignoring Bakunin’s syndicalism and Marx’s consistent opposition to it. (H.2.8)

The Martyrs did come to see that both the state and capitalism had to be abolished at the same time and, as Green says, “*the working class had to have its own institutions and its own militia, its own communal forms of decision-making.*” That is, they came to the same conclusion as Bakunin had and is why they called themselves anarchists:

“the Alliance of all labour associations ... will constitute the Commune ... there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council ... [made up of] delegates ... invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times ... all provinces, communes and associations ... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all ... invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... and to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction ... it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution ... will emerge triumphant.” (Bakunin, **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, pp. 155–6)

As Lucy Parsons (the wife of Albert) put it “*we hold that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labour assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society ...*” (contained in Albert R. Parsons, **Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis**, p. 110) Compare this to Bakunin when he argued that the “*organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour, ... [allow] the workers ... [to] combin[e] theory and practice ... [and] bear in themselves the living germs of **the social order**, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.*” (quoted by Rudolf Rocker, **Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 45)

Clearly, Green’s attempt to expropriate the Martyrs for Marxism runs aground on the shores of reality.

It is one of the ironies of Marxism is that attempts of working class people to organise communally have always been repressed not only by traditional ruling classes but also by the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat.” This has always been an embarrassment for modern day Leninists, who seek to defend such repression. If this means ignoring or denying well known facts then so be it.

Phil Gasper (in an article ironically entitled “Critical Thinking”) does precisely this when he defends Trotsky against bourgeois criticism, arguing as regards the crushing of Kronstadt that “***the sailors were threatening an armed rebellion and demanding that the Bolsheviks be purged from the soviets.***” One slight problem, though, it is not true. As Paul Avrich proved long ago, “*Soviets without Communists’ was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan.*” In fact, the Kronstadt program “*did allow a place for the Bolsheviks in the soviets, alongside the other left-wing organisations ... Communists ... participated in strength in the elected conference of delegate, which was the closest thing Kronstadt ever had to the free soviets of its dreams.*” (**Kronstadt 1921**, p. 181)

It is true that the soviet democracy the Kronstadt rebels actually demanded would have resulted in the Bolsheviks losing power as few people would have voted for them. Yet the results democratic process can hardly be termed a “purge.”

Was it “***an armed rebellion***”? Well, the Kronstadt rebels were sailors and soldiers and so had access to arms. That is true, but the actual revolt was peaceful. It was the Bolsheviks who fired

the first shots and the Kronstadters defended themselves. In this the Kronstadt rebellion differed from other rebellions by other working class people — being unarmed, they had no means of defending themselves against Bolshevik repression.

Thus, for example, the Petrograd general strike which immediately preceded and inspired the Kronstadt revolt was put down “peacefully” by means of a three-man Defence Committee which “*proclaimed martial law*” which was enforced by the Communist officer cadets (as the local garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government’s orders). “*Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked ... the curfew [was] strictly enforced.*” The Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests. (Avrich, p. 39, pp. 46–7)

It would have been nice if Gasper had bothered to find out the facts. May I suggest the appendix on Kronstadt in “An Anarchist FAQ”?

It is important to remember that the Bolshevik response to Kronstadt was not an isolated event. In fact, their attack on soviet democracy dates back to the spring of 1918 when they had began disbanding any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority. Significantly, this started before the start of the civil war and was driven by lack of popular support. (Vladimir Brovkin, “*The Mensheviks’ Political Comeback: The Elections to the Provincial City Soviets in Spring 1918*”, **The Russian Review**, vol. 42, pp. 1–50; Charles Duval, “*Yakov M. Sverdlov and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK)*”, pp. 3–22, **Soviet Studies**, vol. XXXI, no. 1). Thus Russia had become a one-party dictatorship before the start of the civil war. Needless to say, party ideology was adjusted to reflect this reality soon after and the necessity of party dictatorship became official dogma by the start of 1919. (H.3.15)

This helps explain why, as Gasper notes, the soviets “*became little more than talking shops*” yet this had happened long before the start of the civil war (a fact he fails to note). As for a “*disintegration of the working class*” which “*left the Bolsheviks suspended in air, controlling the state machine but lacking a social base,*” this fails to note the systematic repression of working class protest by the Bolsheviks between 1918 and 1921. In fact, Gasper’s argument dates back to Lenin who, significantly, first formulated it “*to justify a political clamp-down*” and was developed in response to rising working class protest rather than its lack: “*As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin ... began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated ... workers had become ‘declassed.’*” (J. Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 18 and p. 90)

A disintegrated working class does not need martial law, lockouts, mass arrests and the purging of the workforce to control it. So, clearly, the Leninist argument can be faulted. Somewhat ironically, given the last anti-Anarchist article in ISR, Gasper concludes his piece as follows:

“Today the technique of the big lie is apparently alive and well ... But the fact that he was moved to level his absurd accusations is an indication that Trotsky’s life and ideas continue to resonate with a layer of political activists. And that, at least, is cause for a little optimism.”

Replace Trotsky with Makhno and you get a feel for the quality and inspiration for Jason Yanowitz’s “*On the Makhno Myth.*” Like Monty Python’s King Arthur faced with a searing anarcho-syndicalist critique of Monarchy, Yanowitz’s response to the awkward fact of the Makhnovist refutation of Leninist dogma is to mutter “Bloody peasant!” and trust that the

faithful will not actually read the source material his numerous footnotes he selectively references.

Space precludes any detailed critique of Yanowitz's article but, luckily, I do not have to as he repeats the usual Marxist attacks I debunk in detail in "*An Anarchist FAQ*" (see the appendix on the Makhnovist movement). For some strange reason Yanowitz does not mention that. He obviously hopes his silence will convince those ignorant of the subject that anarchists have no answer to the points he raises. As such, you have to laugh when he asserts that "*Makhno was not the saint his supporters suppose.*" As if anarchists thought he was! In fact, most anarchist accounts of the Makhnovist movement discuss its failings and problems as well as the personal failings of Makhno. Yanowitz is aware of this as he quotes them! The best that can be said of his account is that acknowledges that the Makhnovist "*leadership was principally against anti-Semitism or alliances with the Whites*" yet strangely fails to note that the Bolsheviks and their followers repeatedly claimed otherwise. (Makhno appendix: 9 and 12) While the subjects may have changed, the approach has not.

Suffice to say, Yanowitz presents the same lack of common sense, distortion and lack of understanding of anarchism and the Makhnovists I have come to expect from Marxists and refuted before. The only real new development is that Yanowitz relies heavily on another Marxist's PhD thesis on Makhno by Colin Darch. Yet this new source leaves much to be desired. To get a taste of Darch's perspective, we can point to his first essay on the subject ("*The myth of Nestor Makhno*", *Economy and Society*, 14(4)) where he considered "*Makhno's role as a leader of peasant counter-revolution in the USSR*" as "*a significant one, and merits careful investigation.*" That suggests his Marxism may get in the way of his objectivity. His PhD thesis relies on Soviet sources for many of his key attacks on the Makhnovists (it is on the basis of these that Yanowitz states the anarchist "*timeline and version of events is well refuted by Darch*"!). Significantly, for all Darch's rummaging around in Soviet sources, non-Marxist scholars like Michael Palij (*The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918–1921*) and Christopher Reed (*From Tsar to Soviets*) confirm the anarchist version of events.

Yet even reading Darch's obviously biased account shows that the main Bolshevik complaints about the Makhnovists were simply that they refused to stop spreading their own political ideas countering Bolshevik propaganda ("*the political commissar of the Trans-Dnepr Division complained that anarchist and Left SR agitation was making his work very difficult*"); they involved the general population in discussing social and military affairs by organising soviet conferences ("*the reaction of the Bolshevik commanders to ... the summoning of yet another anarchist [sic!] congress ... at a time of military crisis — was decisive and harsh*"); and generally not allowing themselves to be treated like canon fodder for the Bolshevik dictatorship ("*Despite the seriousness of the military situation for the Red Army and for the revolution in general, the Congress apparently felt no compunction about adopting and endorsing an anarchist platform that the Bolsheviks inevitably viewed as a provocation*").

Which raises an obvious question: Does being a Leninist make you stupid? I ask because Yanowitz simply cannot see the obvious replies to his attacks on the Makhnovists. In a footnote, he seriously wonders why, if the Makhnovist accounts of Bolshevik betrayal were true, then why did the Whites manage to breach the front (and it should be noted that both he and Darch take the Bolshevik claims on this as gospel). However, it is hardly difficult to work out why the Whites breached the front if the Bolsheviks refused to arm the Makhnovists. Troops without weapons

or ammunition can hardly fight. That Yanowitz cannot see this shows that discovering the truth about the Makhnovists was the last thing on his mind.

Then there are the numerous factual errors. An example is his claim that *“parties were banned from organizing for election to regional bodies.”* That hardly fits with the fact that they had SR, Menshevik and Communist delegates. What the Makhnovists opposed were “party lists” in soviet elections, not delegates that were members of a political party. It is this aspect of “soviet” elections which allowed the Menshevik leader Martov to be picked as a factory “delegate” over Lenin in early 1920. The Makhnovists argued that delegates had to be workers from the village or workplace which elected them. Rather than *“obliterate existing state structures before moving on,”* they organised soviet congresses in both liberated towns and countryside and only left when forced to by military necessity. As for them *“regulat[ing] the press,”* it seems ironic that an **increase** in press freedom under the Makhnovists compared to the Bolsheviks becomes a rod with which to beat them! Much the same applies to Yanowitz’s other examples of Makhnovist so-called authoritarianism.

Then there is Makhno’s advice to the railway workers. Well, that is the key thing – it was **advice** as he thought that working class people had to solve their own problems by themselves, through their own organisations. In contrast, Trotsky **imposed** martial law on them along strict military and bureaucratic lines. One-man management or workers’ control? Which is more socialist? And which the railway workers preferred? And which worked better, given the railway network totally collapsed after Trotsky got his way with it? Needless to say, in spite of the Bolshevik track record of breaking strikes, disbanding soviets, suppressing freedom of organisation, assembly and speech and imposing political and economic dictatorship onto the working class, Yanowitz still tries to argue that it was the Makhnovists who were anti-working class rather than the Bolsheviks! (Makhno appendix: 10)

Yanowitz’s assertions to the contrary, in reality, it was the lack of *“local autonomy”* which led the Bolshevik *“coordinated, centralised plan for war production and defence”* into inefficiency, waste and bureaucracy, i.e. it made matters much worse (see Silvana Malle’s **The Economic Organisation of War Communism 1918–1921**). This mismanagement started early. One historian summarises the situation in 1918:

“it seems apparent that many workers themselves ... had now come to believe ... that confusion and anarchy [sic!] at the top were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic ... Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council... issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs.” [William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, p. 116]

Significantly, the one-man management imposed by the Bolsheviks made things worse. On the railways, for example, abolishing the workers’ committees resulted in more confusion, isolation and ignorance of local conditions. It got so bad that *“a number of local Bolshevik officials ... began in the fall of 1918 to call for the restoration of workers’ control, not for ideological reasons, but because workers themselves knew best how to run the line efficiently, and might obey their own central committee’s directives if they were not being constantly countermanded.”* (William G. Rosenberg, **Workers’ Control on the Railroads**, pp. D1208-9) Leninist wishful thinking and fantasy

aside, the destruction of the Russian economy under the weight of centralisation confirmed the anarchist argument on the importance decentralisation, from the bottom-up organising and federalism.

As for the old myth “*anarchists ignore the objective difficulties facing the revolution,*” that is debunked in AFAQ (there is a whole appendix on it). Strangely Yanowitz could not bring himself to discuss that. It is as perplexing as his silence over the Bolsheviks disbanding any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority since **before** the Civil War started, how they had been advocating party dictatorship since the start of 1919 and how this influenced their relations with the Makhnovists. The identification of party dictatorship with *the dictatorship of the proletariat*” helps explain the Makhnovist “**hostility**” which Yanowitz finds so puzzling (As one delegate to a Makhnovist soviet congress put it, “*No party has a right to usurp governmental power into its own hands ... We want life, all problems, to be decided locally, not by order from any authority above; and all peasants and workers should decide their own fate, while those elected should only carry out the toilers’ wish.*” (quoted by Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 154)). And who, precisely, decides when “**objective circumstances**” cannot permit a social transformation? The Bolsheviks never asked working class people or peasants their opinion on this. Perhaps, as seems likely, they took their rejection in soviet elections as the sign?

Space also excludes much discussion of the political issues Yanowitz raises as much as the factual ones. As he repeats the standard Marxist attacks anarchists have been debunking for decades, I can simply recommend visiting AFAQ for the anarchist critique to Marxism, our vision of social revolution and how to defend it (see section H). A few basic points can be made, however.

The central fallacy of his critique is to assume that abolishing or resisting authority is somehow authoritarian. Few people would consider stopping someone trying to kill or enslave you as being “authoritarian.” They would rightly consider your actions as self-defense. This applies to his examples of Makhnovist “authoritarianism.” He seems to assume that the true “libertarian” approach is to let others impose their rule on you as stopping them is “authoritarian”! As Malatesta put it, some “*seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again, because of respect for the **freedom** of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas.*” (**Anarchy**, p. 41)

The next fallacy is his assumptions about anarchism and his curious interpolations about what opposing authority means – inspired no doubt by Engels’ “*On Authority*” (H.4). Rather than some individualistic notion which makes collective decision making impossible, anarchist opposition to authority logically implies the importance of collective decision making by those who are affected by the decision. Bakunin argued that “*the principle of **authority***” was the “*eminently theological, metaphysical and political idea that the masses, **always** incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed from above.*” (**Marxism, Freedom and the State**, p. 33)

Clearly, by the term “*principle of authority*” Bakunin meant **hierarchy** rather than organisation and the need to make agreements (what is now called self-management). And note the collective nature of Bakunin’s definition – “*themselves*” and “*the masses.*” Thus the “*principle of authority*” refers to the elimination of collective decision making by the people and its replacement by the power of the few who govern them on their behalf. This support for self-management (collective freedom) has its roots in individual freedom, of course, as its rationale is that only in self-managed organisations can individuals express their freedom. It also explains anarchist sup-

port for dissent within free organisations as the majority can be wrong and minorities have the right to point this out and resist if need be. (H.2.11)

Underlying his attack is the assumption that self-management is impossible, that we cannot manage our own affairs and need someone to rule us. Usually, Leninists argue that self-management is possible – when the state withers away. For Yanowitz, any complex organisation seems to be a state because it necessitates, at best, collective decision making, or, at worse, hierarchy and so anarchism is impossible. Yet if that is the case, then Marx and Lenin were wrong – the state will never “wither away.” Yet anarchists have long pointed out that government is not the same as collective decision making. We are also aware that a delegate body and any associated administrative organs may, by force of circumstances or by design, start to act like a state. That is why we have always argued for instant recall of mandated delegates rather than representatives who elect a government. However, to argue that we should just give up trying to organise in this way because of this possibility makes as much sense as becoming reformists because of the possibility that a revolution will fail.

Which brings us to the next fallacy: the assumption that any form of social organisation equals a state. As he puts it:

“But left in control of territory that they wanted to secure, the Makhnovists ended up forming what most would call a state ... They organized regional legislative conferences. They controlled armed detachments to enforce their policies ... They banned authority with which they disagreed to ‘prevent those hostile to our political ideas from establishing themselves’ ... The Makhnovists used their military authority to suppress rival political ideas and organizations.”

Yet there is a fundamental difference between a social organization based on self-government from the bottom up and one based on top-down, centralized power held by a minority. The latter has what has always been rightly termed a state and its structure has evolved precisely to exclude the majority from decision making. The former is not a state as it empowers the many to govern themselves. This can be seen under “primitive communism.” Tribes practiced communal decision making and used delegates to form federations to co-ordinate their joint interests (“**legislative conferences**”). They had war bands to fight their enemies (“**armed detachments**”) and defended their liberty by force (“**banned authority with which they disagreed**”). Even Engels and Marx acknowledged that these were **not** states. States came later when the masses were subjected to minority rule, a rule which required a state to impose.

So to call the communal system anarchists aim for a “state” when its role is to promote and ensure mass participation in social life is nonsense. (H.3.7) That Leninists are vaguely aware of this obvious fact explains why they sometimes talk of a “semi-state” or a “new kind of state.” This not a matter of mere “**labels**” as Yanowitz asserts, but rather revolves around who has the real power in a revolution – the people armed or a new minority (a “revolutionary” government). Anarchists argue for the former, the Leninists for the latter (hidden, usually, under democratic rhetoric).

Failing to understand that anarchists and Leninists do not share the same definition on what constitutes a state, Yanowitz bolsters the anarchist analysis:

“Why did self-proclaimed anarchists create a state? They were not confused or impure. They built a state because they had no choice. Ultimately, states are coercive instruments whereby one class rules society. A workers’ state is unique in history because the class wielding power does so in the interests of the vast majority.”

Can it be considered “**coercive**” to stop people ruling or oppressing you? (H.4.7) As for “**unique in history**,” quite! So why call it a state? Simply because, in reality, the working class does not wield power in the so-called “workers’ state”: the party does. This was the case in Russia. The working class never wielded power under the Bolsheviks and here is the most obvious contradiction in Yanowitz’s account. (H.3.8) Throughout 1917, Lenin constantly called for the **Bolsheviks** to seize power **not** the working class – and that is precisely what happened. The first result of the Bolshevik revolution was the creation of an executive organ above the All-Russian Soviet Congress which was in direct contradiction to Lenin’s arguments in “**State and Revolution**.” (H.1.7) From top to bottom of the new state, the Bolsheviks centralised power in executive bodies, gerrymandered soviet elections and simply disbanded any soviet with a non-Bolshevik majority. (H.3.15).

So the working class did not wield power, the Bolsheviks did. This can also be seen by whom the so-called “workers’ state” actually repressed. Yanowitz complains that “[i]n the midst of a civil war, [the Makhnovists] emptied all the prisons and jails.” Considering who were in Bolshevik jails, they had a point. Of the 17,000 prison camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40,913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. (George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police**, p. 178) I’m also sure that Robespierre and the reactionaries of Thermidor that followed him were disappointed that the ignorant masses had demolished the Bastille. Stalin, I am sure, was grateful that he did not have to build new prisons for the Trotskyists – they simply joined the anarchists and other socialist political prisoners who had been rotting in them since Lenin’s time.

As such, Bolshevik Russia confirmed Bakunin warning that “[b]y popular government [the Marxists] mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people.” That is, “government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers’ world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people.” (**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 178)

Or, to quote Trotsky summarising the lessons of the Bolshevik revolution, the “very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves.” (**The Moralists and Sycophants**, p. 59) Such “vacillation” is expressed by democratic organisations. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky (echoing Lenin) explicitly argued that the “**revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party**” was “an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities — the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory.” This “**dictatorship of a party**” was essential and “we can not jump over this chapter” of

human history. He stressed that the “*revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution*” and argued that “*the party dictatorship*” could **not** be replaced by “*the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party.*” This was because the “*level of political development among the masses*” was not “*high*” enough as “*capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.*” (Trotsky, **Writings 1936–37**, pp. 513–4)

So much for “*the class wielding power*”! (H.1.2)

Anarchists are well aware that any libertarian socialist society will not be created overnight. (H.2.5) In fact, as AFAQ proves, we have always been at pains to stress that a social revolution would be difficult, facing both economic disruption and counter-revolution. As such, we know that “[*d*uring the civil war, the Ukraine was far from a classless society, as the actions of the Makhnovists show.” That, in its own way, gives the game away. Yes, the Bolsheviks were fighting a civil war. The Makhnovists were fighting a **revolution**, not merely a civil war. So it looks like the old Stalinist argument from the Spanish Revolution of winning the civil war first, then having the revolution has an old heritage.

Yanowitz argues that the Makhnovists “*had repeatedly declared overwhelming hostility to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and had nothing but vague platitudes to offer as a substitute.*” Given that the Bolsheviks *themselves* equated the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the dictatorship of the party by this time, this in itself suggests that Makhnovist “*hostility*” was understandable. This rather than “*their utopian views prevented them from uniting with the workers’ state.*” Equally, since when were soviet democracy, workers’ self-organisation and self-management, freedom of press, association and speech mere “**vague platitudes**”? How do you expect a socialist society to be created without the active participation of the working class and peasantry? How do you expect an economy not to break-down in the face of centralized bureaucratic ignorance? But then, Yanowitz seems unable to understand what “socialism from below” actually means:

“The Makhnovists were organized with an approach of anarchism from above as the peasant army would roll into a town and obliterate existing state structures before moving on.”

Presumably, the Makhnovists should have waited outside of the town leaving the workers to the tender mercies of the Whites until they had organized their own insurrection? What about solidarity? Equally, should the Makhnovists have allowed the White state structures to remain intact? Whatever happened to smashing the capitalist state? The lack of commonsense is staggering. And what was the Bolshevik (and, presumably, “socialism from below”) approach? Well, the Red Army would roll into a town and obliterate existing state structures. What happened next is what counts. Rather than impose, as the Bolsheviks did, a revolutionary committee to exercise power the Makhnovists called a soviet conference in order for working class people to start to manage their own affairs by means of their own organizations. Unlike under the Bolsheviks, all parties could publish their papers and their members could, and did, get elected to attend the congress. As Arshinov notes, the “*only restriction that the Makhnovists considered necessary to impose on the Bolsheviks, the left Socialist-Revolutionaries and other statists was a prohibition on the formation of those ‘revolutionary committees’ which sought to impose a dictatorship over the people.*” (**The History of the Makhnovist Movement** pp. 153–4)

Now, how is this “*anarchism from above*”? With his, let me say, unique understanding of up and down, Yanowitz should not be put in charge of a lift never mind a powerful centralised state. That is the fundamental issue. (H.3.2 and H.3.3) As he states in his conclusion:

“But the strength required to fundamentally transform society and set it on new foundations cannot exist only among the enlightened few who ‘get it.’ Instead, it is found in the collective energy and self-activity of the working class. With their hand on the lever of production, only the working class can revolutionise society. The Russian experience demonstrates they will need a state when they do so—to defend their new gains.”

This is precisely what did **not** happen in Russia precisely **because** the Bolsheviks created a state! If it had, I’m sure that most anarchists would be Marxists now. Instead, Bakunin’s grim predictions of party rule became all too true (i.e., the “dictatorship of the proletariat” quickly became a dictatorship **over** the proletariat). (H.1.1) The working class was dispossessed of political, economic and social power by the Bolshevik government which implemented its vision of centralised state “socialism” rather than that, for example, of the factory committees (“*On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the [factory] committees leaders sought to bring their model [of workers’ self-management of the economy] into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The Bolshevik alternative was to vest both managerial and control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them.*” (Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 38)). (H.3.13 and H.3.14)

That any future “socialist” revolution preceded over by Leninists will suffer the same fate can be seen by Yanowitz’s words: “***when workers’ power next establishes itself, its wielders will have to put tremendous energy into helping workers in other countries in their project of self-emancipation.***” That is, the working class will not be wielding “***workers’ power***” but rather something else will – namely the party.

Ignoring all the evidence that refutes him (including, ironically, some he mentions himself), Yanowitz states that “***Makhno had ... no generalized plan or vision for the future.***” Needless to say, the Makhnovists, like anarchists, had a vision for the future and tried to implement it. They also recognised that the means shaped the ends. There is no point having a vision of the future if your current actions take you on a path which leads away from it. Anarchists do not seek perfection; simply that society is changing in ways which will make anarchy more likely rather than less. As Emma Goldman put it, she had not “*come to Russia expecting to find Anarchism realised.*” Such idealism was alien to her (although that has not stopped Leninists saying the opposite). Rather, she expected to see “*the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought.*” She was aware that revolutions were difficult, involving “*destruction*” and “*violence.*” That Russia was not perfect was not the source of her opposition to Bolshevism. Rather, it was the fact that “*the Russian people have been locked out*” of their own revolution and that the Bolshevik state used “*the sword and the gun to keep the people out.*” As a revolutionary she refused “*to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.*” (**My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlvii and p. xlix) That was why she, like so many anarchists then and now, supported the Makhnovists.

Could the Makhnovists have won the civil war? Not on their own. That would have required similar movements in all parts of Russia and the Ukraine. What anarchists argue is that the

principles which inspired the Makhnovists and which they tried their best to implement could have. They show that Bolshevik authoritarianism was not simply a product of “*objective circumstances*” as Leninists argue. Rather, Bolshevik ideology played a key role. Their vanguardism produced the ideological justification for party dictatorship once their popular support receded. (H.5) Their centralism dispossessed working class people from their own revolution and turned organs of popular self-management into marginalised talking shops within a state. Their vision of socialism as “*merely state capitalist monopoly made to benefit the whole people*” (to use Lenin’s term) justified the elimination of the factory committees and workers’ control, so making the economic situation worse. (See the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”). As Kropotkin summarised, “*We are learning to know in Russia how not to introduce communism.*” (**Anarchism**, p. 254)

Ultimately, the logic in Yanowitz’s attack fails him. True, the Makhnovists did not live up to all their anarchist ideals but they did a remarkable job in difficult circumstances. The Bolsheviks did far worse in relation to **theirs!** Yet, for Marxists, the former must be pilloried far more than the latter. I can only surmise that this is because the Makhnovists, for all their faults, expose the authoritarian core of Bolshevism and show that libertarian alternatives were possible after all.

All I can do is sketch the real facts and sources of disagreement between anarchism and Marxism. I hope that those interested will seek the facts for themselves. As Peter Arshinov put it: “*Proletarians of the world, look into the depths of your own beings, seek out the truth and realise it yourselves: you will find it nowhere else.*” Hopefully, An Anarchist FAQ would be a good starting place for that journey.

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Anarcho
On the Bolshevik Myth
When Leninists attack anarchism in their press
December 4, 2007

Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com and on 28th October 2021 from
www.anarkismo.net

An anarchist critique of an ISO attack on the Makhnovists. Corrects the distortions and shows how the Makhnovists show that Bolshevik authoritarianism had its roots in Leninist ideology and cannot be solely explained by the civil war. Also refutes claims that the Haymarket Martyrs were Marxists as well as correcting the usual distortions about Kronstadt.

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