Anarcho
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October 22, 2017

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This pamphlet is by the author of the best biography of Bakunin, *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*, Mark Leier and covers the Marx-Bakunin conflict in the First International.

It shares a cover picture with Wolfgang Eckhardt's *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association* [Oakland: PM Press, 2016], which raises the question whether this pamphlet is a (short) response to that work. It does not read that way, but the thought does cross the mind. Unlike that book, it does not attempt to go into the details of that conflict between the syndicalist and social-democratic tendencies within the International (personified, for better or for worse, in Bakunin and Marx). Instead, it aims to learn from history rather than repeat it

In this, it achieves its aim. There is very little to disagree with in the pamphlet. Yes, people can and should play different roles in

the movement and this should be recognised ("helpers, organisers, rebels, educators," following Bill Moyer and George Lakey). Yes, Marx and Bakunin had much in common both in terms of politics and life and, yes, those who are closest often fight the most, often over the most minor of differences. Yes, Bakunin was a grand synthesiser while Marx often wrote impressive works of scholarship. Yes, the writings of both can be read with great benefit by today's radicals – although, obviously, I would suggest Bakunin's contribution was greater (in-so-far he correctly predicted the failures of Marxism and pointed to an alternative, more fruitful if harder, path for the labour movement).

However, I must protest at this comment by Leier:

> "In contrast [to Bakunin], Marx was a careful scholar who took his research very seriously, chasing down evidence, refining arguments, anticipating and defeating criticism, and writing with exactitude." (18)

This is mentioned just before stating that Marx's book against Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, was "clever and pointed" whose title was "itself a jab at Proudhon's ill-digested Hegelianism." (19–20) In fact, Marx's book is the work of a hack who was more than happy to selectively quote and invent notions (and quotes!) , all the better to mock Proudhon – see my "The Poverty of (Marx's) Philosophy" (*Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 70) for just a few examples of Marx's dishonesty.

Proudhon was not the only person which Marx abused this way. In *Capital*, Marx's most studious and academic work, he quotes John Stuart Mill on whether "it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being" before smugly commenting in a footnote that "Mill should have said, 'of any human being not fed by other people's labour', for there is no doubt that machinery has greatly increased the number of distinguished idlers." (*Capital* [London: Penguin Books, 1976] I: 492) Yet Mill makes this precise point:

> "it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes. They have increased the comforts of the middle classes." (*Principles of Political Economy* [Boston: C.C. Little & J. Brown, 1848] II: 317)

The selective quoting of Mill is minor, nowhere near what Marx inflicted upon Proudhon but it does point to problems portraying of him as a serious scholar. Such a claim should not be made without caveats. Even his best books were driven by political concerns – not least undermining those whom he viewed as threats to his influence. So *The Poverty of Philosophy* was more than a "tawdry treatment of someone who had done much for the movement and much to shape Marx's own thinking" or "ferociously refuting error." (20) Marx attacked Proudhon not because of the alleged stupidity of his ideas but precisely *because* of their intellectual strengths and corresponding influence in the labour movement (for if he were the moron Marx portrays him to be, he would have had no need to put pen to paper…)

I mention this not to attack Leier, who is after all repeating a commonplace. It takes time to compare and contrast *The Poverty of Philosophy* with Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions*, time few people have. It does not help that the second volume of Proudhon's work is untranslated and Marx rarely references the quotes he extracts (or appears to extract). Moreover, it pioneered the preferred method of attack by Marxists on anarchists, so we must be aware of the technique in order to counter attacks today (particularly as these generally regurgitate those by Marx and Engels).

So where does that leave us? Leier's pamphlet is worth reading, a timely reminder that we all have roles to play, that all thinkers

can contribute to the task of human liberation. However, I feel that in his understandable desire to build bridges and remind all socialists of what we should have in common, he had unwittily contributed to certain myths which make that task harder. Marxist arrogance – to perhaps over generalise – has always been a hindrance to unity. The sooner they realise he was as flawed as the rest of us, the better. Then he can join with the likes of Proudhon and Bakunin as those whose works have contributed to understanding and overcoming capitalism and, as such, can be read fruitfully by modern radicals – but always critically and without excluding the others. In other words, as anarchists treat the likes of Bakunin, Proudhon and Kropotkin – for we would never proclaim ourselves as Kropotkinists, Bakuinists or Proudhonists!

So Marx's analysis of capitalism is still useful (as long as we remember that both capitalism and economics has changed since 1867) even if his vision of social change (parties, electioneering, centralised State, etc.) has simply proven anarchist critiques to be prescient. Still, anarchists have long been resigned to the fact that being proven correct matters little in "revolutionary" politics…

Ultimately, Leier is right to note that many Marxists – such as Paul Mattick, Anton Pannekoek, amongst others – have drawn libertarian conclusions from Marx (although, he fails to note that Maurice Brinton – like Cornelius Castoriadis – ended by rejecting the label). However, it is also right to note that these people have always been in a distinct *minority* within Marxism, which surely suggests something in terms of the nature of Marxism?

Returning to Leier's pamphlet, it is definitely worth reading and has important points relevant for today's movement – even if I have reservations about a few minor parts of it.

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Mark Leier
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