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Review: Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US History

Anarcho

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This collection of essays by American Academic and Trotskyist Paul Le Blanc has little of interest for anarchists or, indeed, anyone who is not a Trotskyist. For the latter, this collection of essays which seek to highlight Marxist influences in American history may make them feel better about their adherence to an ideology which has little to offer the world.

Yet given that Le Blanc has written or edited more than 30 books on Marxism, this collection of essays contains a significant number of inaccurate statements on that ideology and its history. Undoubtedly by pure coincidence, these inaccuracies present his ideology in a better light. A few examples are worth discussing as they show the limitations of this book and others like it.

We read about “the centrality of workers’ democracy to socialism” (222) and that “democracy... is something that is possible and desirable and necessary, both politically *and economically*, which means I am a socialist” (xvii) and yet Le Blanc also appears to consider the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky as socialist even though it lacked both. Likewise, he

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proclaims that “state control of the economy and of our lives” is “something that I, as a socialist, am absolutely opposed to” (xiii) yet this was precisely the aim of the Bolshevik regime – and defended by Trotsky in *Terrorism and Communism* with its plea for the “militarisation of labour”. No attempt is made to explain this doublethink on such critical issues.

We find Le Blanc asserting that the American Trotskyists in the 1930s were “standing as a beacon” for the “revolutionary-democratic ideals of early Communism against the corruptions, cynicism, and murderous authoritarianism of Stalinism” (218) when, in reality, they followed Trotsky in advocating the dictatorship of the party, refuting the notion that this was an alien concept brought into Bolshevism by Stalin. It did so by “quotations from Lenin, Trotsky and others so as to establish... the dictatorship of the party is Leninist” rather than “a Stalinist innovation”.¹

Likewise he suggests that it was only “[a]fter Lenin’s death” that “the Russian Revolution’s goal of soviet democracy and the commitment to a liberating revolution worldwide gave way to a bureaucratic dictatorship under Joseph Stalin” (218) and so here appears to know nothing of the vast growth of the bureaucracy, the party’s dictatorship and workplace one-man management which existed while Lenin was very much alive – and that the latter two were party orthodoxy. Yet a few pages later he admits to the (non-defined) “desperate and often disastrous ‘emergency measures’ of the Bolsheviks during the civil war period and its immediate aftermath” (211) which would suggest that he *does* know this to some degree. It goes unmentioned that the Bolshevik leaders did *not* view these as “emergency measures” at all, that most of them started *before* the civil war

¹ Max Shachtman, “Dictatorship of Party or Proletariat? Remarks on a Conception of the AWP... and Others”, *New International*, July 1934.

and either reflected previous stated policies or built upon tendencies already appearing in the regime.²

We are told that between 1905 and 1909, Kautsky's thinking "converged with that of Trotsky, Luxemburg, and Lenin" (8) when in reality before 1914 Lenin had repeatedly linked himself to Kautsky to show that the Bolsheviks, rather than Mensheviks, reflected German Social Democracy orthodoxy. This was most famously done in *What is to be Done?* which was penned in 1902 and it would be unlikely that a leading Trotskyist like Le Blanc would not be aware of this but acknowledging this would mean admitting the centrality of Kautsky to pre-war Marxism rather than his favoured thinkers (and the prominent place Kautsky held in their views).

The worse of this inaccuracy can be seen from the chapter on the Haymarket Martyrs which is probably of most interest to anarchists. His overall narrative follows the Stalinist account of Alan Calmer's *Labor Agitator: The Story of Albert R. Parsons* (New York: International Publishers, 1937) which he references but, unlike Calmer, he proclaims that Parson and Spies were Marxists, not anarchists. That a Trotskyist ventured to depths of historical rewriting that a Stalinist could not bring himself to do at the peak of Stalinism is quite staggering.

He bases this revisionism on numerous claims which I debunk elsewhere.³ Here, I discuss just two to give an illustration of his scholarship.

First, his claim that a "study of the *Alarm...* reveals many more positive references to Marx than to Bakunin" (39) is an invention as the reference Le Blanc provides makes no such claim on the page given – or anywhere else in the book. Yet

² Iain McKay, "The State and Revolution: Theory and Practice", *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017).

³ Iain McKay, "Anarchy in the USA: The International Working People's Association", *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Volume 3 Number 2 (Summer 2023).

even if this were true, his own attempts to downplay the anarchism in *The Alarm* by suggesting it would print anything (46) undermines his position – it makes no sense to suggest that the anarchist articles in it mean nothing for the Chicago IWPA’s politics *and* that any with a positive reference to Marx in its pages shows its Marxist credentials but that is what he does.

Second, he suggests that a “revealing text regarding Parson’s views on Marx is [his book] *Anarchism*” which “is divided into two parts. The first offers an explicitly Marxist analysis of capitalism, with lengthy extracts from the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*. It offers an outline of American history from colonial times to 1886, in which Parsons attempts to apply Marx’s materialist conception of history to the United States. The second half of the book contains extracts from speeches of Parsons and codefendants... followed by several anarchist essays by Peter Kropotkin and others, condemning the institution of the state and describing a stateless communism. These explicitly anarchist selections were undoubtedly appealing because the Marxist analysis of the state... was not available to most socialists in this period”. (40)

Parsons does, in the much shorter first part of the book, give an account of the development of capitalism in America, the conflict between the economic interests associated with slavery and wage-labour, and notes the increase in industry and the corresponding rise of the proletariat. This, to state the obvious, is *not* an exclusively Marxist analysis. Proudhon had analysed this process in *System of Economic Contradictions* (1846) and recognised in *Du Principe fédératif* (1863) that the civil war was simply the exploiters of the North and South fighting only over the type of servitude workers would suffer – whether as slaves or proletarians.

Significantly, Parsons *diverts* from Marx when he stresses that economic slavery means political slavery and so the ballot was useless. Marx, in contrast, thought the “fundamental contradiction” of democracy under capitalism is that the classes

That anarchists predicted these failures should count for something more than Marxist post-hoc rationalisations in socialist circles but apparently not, which is significant in itself and a symptom of wider problems in left-wing circles which this book – and books like it – contribute to.

Paul Le Blanc

Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US History
Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017

This can be seen from Le Blanc's comments on a former Trotskyist who "offers a set of authoritarian quotations in Lenin's *Collected Works* from the civil war period" which shows that Lenin was "committed to an extreme Jacobin dictatorship over the whole of society to remold it to his vision" and adds there "is much scholarship that would be needed to be confronted and refuted (or reinterpreted) to make this interpretation of Lenin stick." (210-1) Sadly, he does not inform his readers what this scholarship is nor does he mention Lenin's long-standing infatuation with the Jacobins. Likewise, his attempt to dismiss the reality of Bolshevism in power as "not provid[ing] a fair characterization of Leninist organisational principles as they developed from 1902 to 1917" (211) would be risible if it were not for the fact that it repeats what passes as analysis in every Trotskyist party across the world.

To conclude, this work is one of poor scholarship, which makes many wrong claims while repeating Trotskyist orthodoxy as if it were above reproach. It shows that Marxism blinds its adherents rather than illuminating reality, allowing them to ignore the grim reality of their ideas when applied in favour of an ideal which has never existed nor could do (with regards to its promised *positive* outcomes). It is only of note for its pathetic attempt to rewrite history and claim the Chicago Anarchists as Marxists, something which could only convince someone whose knowledge of anarchism is limited (in other words, your typical Marxist).

Le Blanc is correct to lament that there was no "survival of an effective left-wing force in the labor movement" after the 1930s which "would have set the stage for more effective struggles in the future" (77-8), yet that was precisely because of the legacy of Marxism (encouraging the labour movement into parliamentarism as a revolutionary activity) and Bolshevism (the notion that there was a successful *socialist* revolution in Russia rather than a case of the party successfully holding power).

"whose social slavery the constitution is to perpetuate" it "puts in possession of political power through universal suffrage."⁴ He listed America amongst the countries where the proletariat could achieve its goals by electoral means, as did Engels (positions Le Blanc fails to mention). Parsons echoed Bakunin who argued that the workers' political power under capitalism did not exist due to their economic situation.⁵

So, yes, this is a "revealing text" as it does not support Le Blanc's claims. It is undoubtedly materialist but it reflects either views shared by anarchists and Marx or, crucially, only held by anarchists.

As for the notion Parsons included works by Kropotkin and other anarchists because of a lack of Marxist accounts of the State, the more obvious reason was that he *agreed* with them.⁶ Likewise, it is churlish – but essential – to note that Kropotkin and Reclus also condemned capitalism along with the state. To fail to mention this misleads the reader for anarchism has never been just against the State, it has always been socialist (indeed, its opposition to the State is driven by its socialism). Yet to acknowledge this would undermine the importance he attaches to the fact that members of the IWPA "considered themselves, equally, anarchists and socialists and communists" (xxxix) – for so did Kropotkin, Malatesta and other anarchist-communists. As for Bakunin and Proudhon, they considered themselves as

⁴ "The Class Struggles in France", *Collected Works* 10: 79.

⁵ Bakunin, "The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International", *Liberty*, 20 November 1886.

⁶ If this alleged lack were the cause, surely that would mean that there were no Marxists at all at the time bar Engels? But this reflects a commonplace contradiction in Marxist circles who claim that Social Democracy was Marxist and so its growth shows the validity of Marxism *and* that Social Democracy was not Marxist when the degeneration caused by its (Marxist) tactics could no longer be denied. Then there is the obvious question of whether the few sentences in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* really be considered an "analysis" of the state? And why it took until 1917 and Lenin's *State and Revolution* to define something so important?

anarchists and socialists (as did Benjamin Tucker, whose ideas Le Blanc misunderstands⁷).

Le Blanc refuses to acknowledge this and insists on claiming that it is “misleading to simply label” the Martyrs as anarchists for the “word had a different connotation for them than it does today. The sharp differentiation between socialism and anarchism developed only in later years.” (40) Sadly, he fails to inform his readers what this “different connotation” was and how it differs from that held today. Likewise, the “sharp differentiation between socialism and anarchism” was something Marxists at the time insisted upon when they rejected anarchist claims to being socialists. Still, given that Marxism in practice simply confirmed anarchist warnings it is understandable if – in the face of reformist opportunism and Bolshevik State capitalist tyranny – anarchists came to differentiate themselves from what “socialism” came to mean for the general public.

An awareness of anarchism is lacking. Bakunin, for example, was not someone “who romantically extolled the liberating qualities of violence” nor was Sergi Nechayev “his disciple” (in fact Bakunin broke with him over his *Catechism*) and the notion that Kropotkin “thoughtfully theorized what the hoped-for future society would look like” at this time shows a woeful ignorance of his writings. (46) Le Blanc’s Kropotkin comment is presumably a reference to *The Conquest of Bread*, which was published in 1892 based on articles written after his release from prison in 1886 and concentrates on what a social revolution required to be successful. Between 1877 and 1883,

⁷ Le Blanc talks of “the American antistatist Benjamin Tucker” who “would soon evolve rightward to develop positions contributing to contemporary pro-capitalist libertarianism” (46) which is simply false – his ideas on what he called “anarchist socialism” did *not* change. It is true that properarians had sought to appropriate Tucker as a historical precedent to their ideology but to do so involves ignoring significant parts of his ideas and, for those who have actually read him, is as convincing as a Stalinist invoking Marx for a Trotskyist.

time positions (as befitting “professional” revolutionaries) and these soon gather various additional powers alongside the extensive officially designated ones. Then there is the privileged position of the party which Bolshevism (following the *Communist Manifesto*) is based upon as well as the privileged place of the leadership within it, which cannot help but produce an inflated sense of self-importance – particularly given the fawning rhetoric many Marxists use about their ideological leaders (some of which can be seen in Le Blanc’s essay on Kautsky).

All of which cannot help but lead to abuses of position, abuses that the likes of Barnes utilised. So if being shapes consciousness, we should expect those in such positions within a vanguard party to act in this way and should only be surprised when they don’t.¹³ In short, it is not a case of having to explain the Barnes regime in the SWP but explaining any cases –if there are any – of a Leninist party which does *not* share some or all of its features? That the left is full of former members of Leninist Parties who bemoan actually existing vanguards as practising “bureaucratic centralist” rather than the “democratic centralist” ideal is no accident.

Ironically, real life events have shown the weakness of these chapters attempting to defend Trotskyism from such obvious conclusions drawn from the fate of Trotskyists in action. At the time of publication (2017) Le Blanc was a member of the International Socialist Organization but that dissolved itself two years later because of “unaccountable leadership and a damaging internal culture” and rape allegations suppressed by the leadership to protect one its members. That his own sect went the same way as had the American SWP would suggest that the ex-Trotskyist critics he seeks to refute were more correct than he was willing to admit.

¹³ Indeed, there is substantial evidence that the Bolshevik Party in 1917 was far from being organised in the fashion of a vanguard party, which was imposed in during the civil war and projected backwards to “explain” past “successes” (see section H.5.12 of *An Anarchist FAQ*).

questions than it answers.¹² He argues that “the Marxist precept that being determines consciousness” means that people “from different realities will understand and apply the same ideas differently”. (231) This is the core of his attempt to absolve Trotskyism from the reality it produced – thus young SWP members were “reading the ‘classic’ texts that had been written in qualitatively different contexts” and “could not easily grasp the actual meaning of what Lenin or Trotsky might be saying. But they did not know that.” (214)

Thus, Trotskyists failed Trotskyism – imperfect individuals could not apply the ideology correctly for they could not understand it by their own efforts. Yet why did these “scientific socialists”, this elite of the proletariat, not see these changes and adjust accordingly? Why did they (as so many have apparently done, including the American SLP in the 1880s) mechanically apply Marxist texts? What is it about Marxism which makes it so difficult to understand and apply correctly? Why does it need a layer of enlightened leaders to decipher the sacred texts correctly?

In short, Le Blanc’s attempts are not convincing and we must conclude there is something in Marxism which encourages this, such as the centralised structure of the party which cannot help being hierarchical as it is based on the upper bodies having control over the lower. This, in turn, generates a bureaucracy within the party as these higher posts are always full-

¹² This notion of “objective” circumstances may be a truism (as every social movement exists within a given socio-economic context and is influenced by it) but for Marxists it is more than that: it is useful for providing an excuse to rationalise away the results of Marxist tactics so as not to necessitate evaluating them (or addressing that these confirmed anarchist predictions) – thus social democracy failed not because of its electoral tactics but because the super-profits of imperialism allowed reforms and higher wages (it goes unmentioned that no Marxist noticed this new Imperialist epoch until they had to explain why German Social Democracy supported its State in 1914 and why its use of pro-war quotes by Marx and Engels could be ignored).

Kropotkin was focused on critiquing capitalist society, stressing the need for the labour movement to follow the example of the Federalist International⁸ and discussing what was needed to achieve a social revolution – expropriation of property by the workers directly (as championed by Parsons with an explicit acknowledgement to Kropotkin’s writings).

Ultimately, it is hard to combine praise like “Parsons and Spies were among the finest that our working class has produced”, had “a deep thoughtfulness” and were “amazingly perceptive” with the claim that they did not understand the ideas they advocated, that they lacked the ability to comprehend that they were really Marxists – but then that incapacity was apparently widespread in their contemporaries whether they considered themselves Marxists (like Engels) or Anarchists (like Kropotkin). Still, we can agree that their “outlook contained not only an inspiring vision but also considerable sophistication, which made them a force to be reckoned with” for that was because they were anarchists as Le Blanc inadvertently shows when he correctly summarised that the “approach of the Chicagoans [was] a revolutionary rejection of electoralism, combined with a focus on building a mass working-class movement through trade union efforts and other struggles for economic justice.” (56-7, 41)

In short, the very thing which Marx had mocked Bakunin for advocating in the International. Hence the irony of his suggestion that “the so-called anarchists were far closer to revolutionary Marxism than were the moderate leaders of the SLP” (40) given that the party followed Marx’s strategy and organisational principles.

As well as the factual and contextual issues with Le Blanc’s assertions, another problem is that no Marxist at the time – including Engels – suggested the IWPA was anything other

⁸ Iain McKay, “The London Congress of 1881”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 87 (Summer 2023)

than anarchist and anyone who actually reads *The Alarm* could not suggest that it was anything other than anarchist. Indeed, if we take Le Blanc's own definition of anarchism⁹ then Parsons was certainly an anarchist, as shown by his autobiography and his articles in *The Alarm*.¹⁰

All of which highlights the fundamental problem of the article, which is that Le Blanc *fails* "to look at the living movement that these revolutionaries helped to lead" (40) as he promises. Rather, he simply parrots Marxist nonsense about anarchism as if it were accurate and relies on secondary sources which reflect his prejudices.¹¹ That Le Blanc tries to appropriate militants like Parsons to Marxism is undoubtedly due to the poverty of the Marxist tradition in America, particularly in its Leninist form. This can be seen from other chapters which discuss the descent of the American Socialist Workers' Party from the jewel in the crown of the Fourth International into an inward-looking, "authoritarian sect, dominated by a cult figure, wracked by internal trials and expulsions" under Jack Barnes. (222)

One chapter is a review of two former SWP members who sought to understand how the SWP became what it did. Both, Le Blanc argues, explain it by means of "original sin" which is "overstated and by itself inadequate in explaining the SWP disaster." (210) Seeking to absolve Leninism of any blame, he points to the better internal regime within the party under James Cannon and suggests this "does not harmonize well with [the author's] generalization – or with any notion of Leninism

⁹ "Someone who wants the people to rule themselves directly – without the intervention of any government at all, without voting got *anyone* to rule over them – is farthest to the left, making them an anarchist" (xiv)

¹⁰ A selection of writings by Parsons and other IWPA members can be found in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Volume 3 Number 2 (Summer 2023).

¹¹ Needless to say, Le Blanc references Carolyn Ashbaugh's terrible 1976 biography *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (reprinted in 2012 by the ISO-linked Haymarket Books) – for details, see my "Lucy Parsons: American Anarchist", *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 2 No. 1 (Spring 2022).

à la Cannon leading to the Barnes disaster". (211) Yet the SWP split in 1940 over the nature of Stalinism ("degenerated workers state" against "bureaucratic collectivism") with dissidents denouncing its bureaucratic conservatism. Later splits saw similar accusations raised. Moreover, the Barnes regime developed within the same party which Cannon had led ("A new leadership had been nurtured by Dobbs and other old-timers who led the party" [222]) and so Cannon's SWP could not stop a cult developing.

Le Blanc is right to be sceptical of accounts which lay the blame on individuals but if he rejects the "evil genius" notion (207) to explain the degeneration of the SWP, he embraces the "great man" notion to salvage the ideal of Bolshevism from its grim reality as expressed in party after party across the globe. Cannon is pointed to as evidence in defence of Bolshevism without any awareness that a party dependent on the goodwill of its leader is not a healthy organisation.

In this Le Blanc reflects a great deal of Leninist "history" which glorifies Lenin and the role he played in 1917. This allows the limitations of Bolshevism in practice to be paid lip-service to alongside support of an idealised Bolshevism which has never existed in reality, not even under Lenin between 1902 and 1917. Trotsky himself noted, in his biography of Stalin, the party's bureaucrats and their activities before 1917 as well as their clash with Lenin, the membership and the masses during the revolutionary struggles of 1917 in his history of the Russian Revolution but did not let either dent his faith on the need to reproduce the Bolshevik party internationally.

So what was the cause of the SWP's problems in Le Blanc's eyes? Essentially, the party did not change appropriately in the face of the changing nature of the working class and its struggles in a changing capitalist system – which raises more