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Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism

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a new name for the ideas raised in the IWMA and for which Bakunin was a leading advocate.

I have shown that there are very good reasons why “[m]any historians have emphasised the extent to which revolutionary syndicalism was indebted to anarchist philosophy in general and to Bakunin in particular”. (p. 29) We need only compare Bakunin’s politics and revolutionary syndicalism. Marxism, in conclusion, need not be invoked to explain revolutionary syndicalism.

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Instead of trying to squeeze Marxism into syndicalism, it would be better to ask why so many “Marxists” rejected the legacy of Marx and embraced positions (revolutionary unionism, primacy of economic struggle, the general strike, unions as the structure of a socialist society, etc.) which were expounded by Bakunin and attacked by the founders of their ideology. Looking at what the syndicalists themselves said, the ideas of Bakunin and what Marx and Engels advocated, it quickly becomes apparently that Marxism was not one of the “core ideological elements” of syndicalism. In reality, syndicalism was simply, as so many syndicalists and others stressed, a new name for the ideas raised in the IWMA and for which Bakunin was a leading advocate. Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism

“the anarchists ... do not seek to constitute, and invite the working men not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly, since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864–1866, they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”

Peter Kropotkin, **The Encyclopaedia Britannica**, 1910¹

Introduction

Ralph Darlington² tries to defend a provocative assertion in a journal dedicated to studying anarchism, namely that “the

¹ **Anarchism**, p. 287

² “Syndicalism and the Influence of Anarchism in France, Italy and Spain”, pp. 29–54, **Anarchist Studies**, vol. 17, No. 2

traditional assumption ... that syndicalism was simply an outgrowth of anarchism would be an over-simplification". (p. 30)

He does so by two main lines of argument. Firstly, Darlington suggests that "*Marxism* also influenced" syndicalism "significantly to varying degrees," going so far as to list it as one of its "three core ideological elements" (p. 46) alongside anarchism and revolutionary unionism. Secondly, he claims that "many other countries where syndicalist movements also flourished (for example, Britain, Ireland or America), anarchist influence was only of marginal consequence". (p. 30)

Both claims, I would argue, are deeply flawed. The first is simply assertion, with no supporting evidence, and ignores not only the more obvious influence of Bakunin's revolutionary anarchism but also Marx and Engels explicit rejection of key syndicalist ideas when raised by libertarians in the International Working Men's Association (IWMA). It also stands at odds with a well-established scholarly literature that, while admitting the affinities between some forms of Marxism and syndicalism, nonetheless draws a direct and lineal linkage between anarchism and syndicalism.³ The second confuses the *spread* of syndicalist ideas and their acceptance by Marxists with a pre-existing ideological influence. As such, it crucially ignores the element of time. Just because a few Marxists found syndicalism more appealing than Social Democratic orthodoxy cannot be used to retroactively make syndicalism indebted to Marx and Engels.

Anarchism and Syndicalism

The first assertion is that "syndicalism was always an alliance between at least three core ideological elements," one of which

³ This extensive literature is ably summarised by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt in **Black Flame**. See Chapter 5 ("Anarchists, Syndicalists, the IWW and Labour") in particular.

All of Darlington's supposed contributions of Marxism to syndicalism can be found in Bakunin's ideas. Moreover, other key elements of syndicalism identified by Darlington can also be found in Bakunin and, ironically, were denounced by Marx and Engels.

Rather than see unions and direct action as the key as Bakunin did, Marx and Engels advocated the creation of socialist political parties and use of (bourgeois) elections. So strongly did they feel about this they shattered the IWMA by making those mandatory policies for it. If syndicalism is marked, as Darlington says, by a "rejection of political parties, elections and parliament in favour of direct action by the unions" and a "conception of a future society" based on "the economic administration of industry exercised directly by the workers themselves" then it seems strange to seek a "core" ideological influence on it in the ideas of people who explicitly rejected this.

Kropotkin, therefore, was right to point to "the closest rapport between the left-wing of the International and present-day syndicalism, the close rapport between anarchism and syndicalism and the ideological contrast between Marxism and the principles of Social Democracy and syndicalism."⁵⁶

Instead of trying to squeeze Marxism into syndicalism, it would be better to ask why so many "Marxists" rejected the legacy of Marx and embraced positions (revolutionary unionism, primacy of economic struggle, the general strike, unions as the structure of a socialist society, etc.) which were expounded by Bakunin and attacked by the founders of their ideology. Looking at what the syndicalists themselves said, the ideas of Bakunin and what Marx and Engels advocated, it quickly becomes apparently that Marxism was not one of the "core ideological elements" of syndicalism. In reality, syndicalism was simply, as so many syndicalists and others stressed,

⁵⁶ quoted by Nettlau, pp. 279–80

shevik Party which seized power, *not* the Russian workers⁵³ – with predictable (and predicted, by the likes of Bakunin) consequences.⁵⁴ While many in the revolutionary movement did expose the failings of Bolshevism,⁵⁵ not enough believed them. Luckily, today these are too well known in radical circles for this to be repeated.

Ultimately, the Bolshevik revolution has associated socialist ideas with their exact opposite. It is a legacy which the socialist and labour movements have still not recovered from. This, by any objective measure, must be considered far more “unsuccessful” than the syndicalist movement.

Conclusion

Instead of seeking elements of syndicalism in Marxism, I would suggest that “the traditional assumption” that syndicalism was “simply an outgrowth of anarchism” is no “over-simplification”.

⁵³ Lenin was quite clear on this arguing in 1917 that the “Bolsheviks must assume power.” The Bolsheviks “can and *must* take state power into their own hands.” He raised the question of “will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?” and answered it: “I have already had occasion ... to answer this question in the affirmative.” Moreover, “a political party ... would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party ... if it refused to take power when opportunity offers.” (*Op. Cit.*, vol. 26, p. 19, p. 90) The problems of equating Bolshevik power with working class power soon became apparent when the party lost popular support.

⁵⁴ Space precludes any discussion of the interplay of subjective (e.g., Bolshevik ideology) and objective factors (e.g., civil war, economic collapse, etc.) here. Suffice to say, supporters of Leninism minimise the former and maximise the latter and so, I would argue, present a distorted picture of what caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. I explore these issues in section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

⁵⁵ For example: Emma Goldman’s *My Disillusionment in Russia*, Alexander Berkman’s *The Bolshevik Myth* and Peter Arshinov’s *The History of the Makhnovist Movement*. The eye-witness reports by syndicalist militants like Angel Pestaña, Augustin Souchy and Armando Borghi to their unions also ensured that many libertarian unionists rejected Leninism.

was Marxism which “influenced it significantly to varying degrees”. More precisely, “a number of syndicalist movement leaders inherited some central components of the Marxist tradition” (with the useful qualifier of “in however a diffuse form”). (pp. 46–7)

This influence was twofold. First was “the Marxist conception of the necessity and desirability of class struggle (of which strikes were the primary expression) as a means of collective resistance to capitalism that could develop the confidence, organisation and class consciousness of workers”. Second was “a conception of socialism arising from the need for workers to take power *themselves* rather than relying on the enlightened actions of parliamentary and trade union leaders who would reform capitalism *on behalf of* workers”. (p. 47)

As far as the first supposed contribution goes, recognising the “necessity and desirability of class struggle” is hardly uniquely Marxist as can be seen from Bakunin⁴ repeatedly expressing that opinion. It follows, therefore, that that characteristic of syndicalism by no means supports Darlington’s inference and so there is no need to invoke Marxism.⁵

⁴ While concentrating on Bakunin and his ideas I must stress that I am not suggesting that he *invented* syndicalism. Rather I am using him as a convenient source for ideas already germinating within the libertarian wing of the IWMA, ideas he championed and deepened. As such, Bakunin is used as a handy spokesperson for a wider anarchist movement which shared similar ideas on theory and practice. Moreover while syndicalist ideas have developed independently both before and after Bakunin, the ideas he expressed after 1865 and the movement he was part of both had a *direct* influence in the rise of syndicalism as a named revolutionary theory and movement when it developed in the 1890s. This focus on Bakunin also seems appropriate as the syndicalists “viewed themselves as the descendants of the federalist wing of the First International, personified above else by Mikhail Bakunin.” (Wayne Thorpe, “**The Workers Themselves**”, pp. xiii-xiv)

⁵ It would be churlish, but essential, to note that “the necessity and desirability of class struggle” had been discovered long before Marx was born. Similarly, while Bakunin advocated a syndicalist strategy in the 1860s he independently discovered a strategy pursued by British workers in the 1830s.

For Bakunin, like the rest of the revolutionary anarchist tradition, class conflict was inherent in capitalism for there was, “between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life.” He stressed that “war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable” and for the worker to “become strong” he “must unite” with other workers and form “the union of all local and national workers’ associations into a world-wide association, *the great International Working-Men’s Association*”. Only “through practice and collective experience” and “the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle” will the worker come “to recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.” There was “but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*” which “has only one meaning. It means workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*.”⁶ Thus “unions create that conscious power without which no victory is possible” while strikes “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.”⁷

Bertrand Russell stated the obvious: “Anarchists, like Socialists, usually believe in the doctrine of class war.”⁸

As for the second supposed contribution, the need for workers “to take power” themselves rather than relying on leaders, this was *precisely* Bakunin’s critique of Marx.

“When Marx was still in his teens,” E.P. Thompson noted, British trade unionists had “developed, stage by stage, a theory of syndicalism.” This vision was lost “in the terrible defeats of 1834 and 1835.” (**The Making of the English Working Class**, p. 912, p. 913)

⁶ **The Basic Bakunin**, pp. 97–8, p. 103

⁷ **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 379, pp. 384–5

⁸ **Roads to Freedom**, p. 38

That raises the obvious question of what counts as success. If we look at the “overall aims” of “the architects of the Russian revolution” then this revolution was “ultimately unsuccessful” – unless you assume that the “overall aims” were to create within one year a one-party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy or that this counts as a “successful” *socialist* transformation. So while it may be correct to say that the Bolshevik Party successfully seized and held onto power this was utterly *unsuccessful* in creating *socialism* which was the whole point.

Darlington is partially correct to suggest that “it was the seizure of state power by Russian workers under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party ... which was to prove a decisive ideological and political challenge to the revolutionary syndicalist movement”. (p. 49) Partially, because squeezed between fascism and Bolshevism (and then Stalinism) syndicalism *did* become marginalised as the negative influence and abundant resources of the Comintern (particularly, but not exclusively, under Stalin) and the illusions generated by the Bolshevik Myth sidetracked revolutionary movements across the world. The dream of socialism realised allowed far too many to blind themselves to the realities of Soviet Russia under Lenin and then Stalin.⁵¹ This cannot be ignored when evaluating why syndicalism did not flourish after the First World War as it had beforehand.⁵²

I would suggest that Darlington’s summary of the Russian revolution shows that the Bolshevik Myth still has its adherents. As anarchist and syndicalist critics of Bolshevism explained, a key problem was precisely that it had been the **Bol-**

⁵¹ Ex-syndicalists like William Gallacher and William Foster remained Stalinists to the end, happily denying its dictatorial nature while denouncing those who recognised that something had gone seriously wrong.

⁵² Or, for that matter, why Trotskyist and neo-Trotskyist parties remained so small and insignificant in spite of the obvious failings of Stalinist Russia.

their practice, but it should not be forgotten that they prided themselves in being revolutionary.

So if social democracy put the “emphasis on parliamentarism at the expense of the direct action of the workers” (p. 47) it is fair to say that the focus that Marx and Engels placed on “political action” helped this process immensely.⁵⁰

It is hard not to conclude that if syndicalism is marked, as Darlington suggests, by a “rejection of political parties, elections and parliament in favour of direct action by the unions” and a “conception of a future society” based on “the economic administration of industry exercised directly by the workers themselves” (p. 29) then not only were Marx and Engels not syndicalists, they were explicitly *opposed* to it. Given this, to claim that Marxism is one of syndicalism’s “core ideological elements” seems rather strange.

Assessing success

Darlington argues “revolutionary syndicalism was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its overall aims – particularly when compared to the architects of the Russian revolution”. (p. 49)

⁵⁰ For Marx, universal suffrage was “the equivalent of political power for the working class” and its “inevitable result” would be “*the political supremacy of the working class.*” (**Collected Works**, vol. 11, pp. 335–6) In countries “like America, England ... the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means.” (Marx, vol. 23, p. 255) Engels expanded on this, arguing that in Britain, “democracy means the dominion of the working class” and so workers should “use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess ... to send to Parliament men of their own order.” The worker “struggles for political power, for direct representation of his class in the legislature” for in “every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power.” (vol. 24, p. 405, p. 386) In America, the workers must form a political party with “the conquest of the Capitol and the White House for its goal.” (vol. 26, p. 435)

For Bakunin, “the new social order” would be attained “through the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages.”⁹ This meant that anarchists do “not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.” Rather, the revolution “everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.”¹⁰ This was because “every state, even the pseudo-People’s State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.”¹¹

In short, as well as “anti-state, anti-political action, and anti-militarist ideas” and “the notions of federalism, decentralisation, direct action and sabotage” (p. 46), syndicalism took from the *revolutionary* anarchism associated with Bakunin the “necessity” of class struggle *and* a “conception of socialism” based on workers’ power organised (to use one of Bakunin’s favourite terms) “from the bottom up.”

So to claim that class struggle and workers’ power were the contributions of Marxism to syndicalism means ignoring a far more obvious source for these ideas – Bakunin and other revolutionary anarchists in the IWMA. Given this, it seems odd

⁹ **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 300

¹⁰ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 237, p. 172

¹¹ **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 338

to invoke Marxism to explain aspects of syndicalism particularly since, as I will show, Marx and Engels explicitly rejected syndicalist ideas when they were raised by those libertarians in favour of forming political parties and utilising elections.

The redundancy of invoking Marxism to explain syndicalism can also be seen from what Darlington calls syndicalism's "utter primacy of the working class as the sole agency of revolution that could liberate the whole of society". (p. 47) Bakunin also argued that the "initiative in the new movement will belong to the people ... in Western Europe, to the city and factory workers – in Russia, Poland, and most of the Slavic countries, to the peasants." "Organise the city proletariat in the name of revolutionary Socialism", he stressed repeatedly, and "unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasantry."¹² However, "in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in this revolutionary movement be taken up by the city workers ... who combine in themselves the instincts, ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution."¹³

Then there is the issue of trade unionism. Here Darlington does indulge in a tautology by asserting that "arguably we can define" syndicalism as "revolutionary trade unionism" (p. 31) and then proclaiming that one of its "three core ideological elements" are "the ideas of *revolutionary trade unionism*."¹⁴ (p. 46, p. 47) Yet revolutionary unionism was a core aspect of Bakunin's ideas: "the natural organisation of the masses ... is organisation based on the various ways that their various

¹² **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 378

¹³ **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 375. Alvin W. Gouldner usefully discusses the "popular stereotype" associated with Bakunin's ideas on social class and revolution, noting it is "more distorted by its decisive omissions than in what it says." ("Marx's Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International", pp. 853–884, **Theory and Society**, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 869)

¹⁴ Given that Darlington does not actually define what "revolutionary unionism" is, it makes it difficult to determine whether he thinks it does, or does not, differ from syndicalism.

ing elections rather than Marx's hopes.⁴⁶ So when Darlington correctly suggests that when "many syndicalists dismissed" political action they were "rejecting" electoral politics he fails to note that they adopted the same "narrow definition of political action" (p. 47) as had Bakunin in the First International.⁴⁷ It was precisely this "narrow definition of political action" which Marx and Engels inflicted upon the IWMA against the libertarians.⁴⁸

It is true, as Darlington suggests, that many Marxists became syndicalists as "a reaction" against social democracy.⁴⁹ (p. 47) Sadly, he fails to raise the question of *why* social democracy became reformist, instead stating that these were "reformist socialist parties" (p. 47) so ignoring that, at the time, there were not – they considered themselves as *revolutionary* parties explicitly following the ideas of Marx and Engels on "political action." True, a substantial revisionist tendency existed within these parties and, moreover, their rhetoric was not reflected in

⁴⁶ Bakunin argued that when "common workers" are sent "to Legislative Assemblies" the result is that the "worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois ... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them." (**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 108)

⁴⁷ "The International does not reject politics of a general kind; it will be compelled to intervene in politics so long as it is forced to struggle against the bourgeoisie. It rejects only bourgeois politics." (**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 313)

⁴⁸ I explore Marx and Engels arguments on "political action" and how universal suffrage gave the working class political power in section H.3.10 of **An Anarchist FAQ** (volume 2).

⁴⁹ The first case of this would be in the American socialist movement in the 1880s with many embracing of anarchism and forming the IWPA in reaction to experiences of using "political action." Compare Bakunin's ideas to Lucy Parsons: "we hold that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labour assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society" (Albert R. Parsons (ed.), **Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis**, p. 110)

Bakuninists told the proletariat “to organise not in accordance with the requirements of the struggle ... but according to the vague notions of a future society entertained by some dreamers.”⁴² For Bakunin, the “future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.”⁴³ For Engels the “democratic republic” was “the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat”⁴⁴ (although the Paris Commune showed that “the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes”⁴⁵).

If “the essence of syndicalism was revolutionary action by unions aimed at establishing a society based upon unions” (p. 31) then this is found in Bakunin, not Marx and Engels. Indeed, they highlighted these aspects of Bakunin’s ideas – the centrality of union organisation and struggle (including the general strike) – and expressed their *opposition* to them.

Moreover, as well as rejecting key syndicalist ideas, Marx and Engels also advocated what many revolutionary socialists, as Darlington admits, came to consider as the “dead-end of electoral and parliamentary politics”. (p. 46) The subsequent development of social democracy confirmed Bakunin’s fears on us-

⁴² Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, p. 66

⁴³ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 206

⁴⁴ Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, p. 227. Engels re-iterated this elsewhere: “With respect to the proletariat the republic differs from the monarchy only in that it is the *ready-for-use* form for the future rule of the proletariat.” (Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 296)

⁴⁵ Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, p. 74. I explore the issue of the Paris Commune and its relationship with anarchism and Marxism in “*The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism*” (**Anarcho-Syndicalist Review**, no. 50)

types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association.” Once “every occupation ... is represented within the International, its organisation, the organisation of the masses of the people will be complete.” Then, “when the revolution ... breaks out, the International will be a real force and know what it has to do,” namely “take the revolution into its own hands” and replace “this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie.”¹⁵

As such, it is incredulous to suggest that when the CNT was founded in 1911 it “combined *syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism with the more traditional Spanish *anarchist* principles”. (p. 36) This ignores the well-established recognition that the Spanish anarchists had traditionally organised revolutionary unions. The Spanish section of the IWMA “was from the beginning based upon unions” and organised “by local councils in each town, and national unions for each branch of production.” One leading Spanish anarchist noted in 1910 that only the term “syndicalism” was new.¹⁶ In Zaragoza, for example, anarchist union organising began in 1871 and when the CNT formed 40 years later that city was the “largest centre of anarchist trade-union influence in Spain, outside Barcelona.”¹⁷ As such, syndicalism’s “theoretical and practical links to the nineteenth century are readily apparent.”¹⁸

As historian J. Romero Maura correctly summarised, for the “Bakuninists” in the IWMA the “anarchist revolution, when it came, would be essentially brought about by the working class. Revolutionaries needed to gather great strength and must beware of underestimating the strength of reaction” and so anar-

¹⁵ **The Basic Bakunin**, p. 139, p. 110

¹⁶ Temma Kaplan, **Anarchists of Andalusia: 1868–1903**, p. 82

¹⁷ Graham A. Kelsey, **Anarchosyndicalism, libertarian communism and the state**, pp. 13–4

¹⁸ George R. Esenwein, **Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain, 1868–1898**, p. 208

chists “logically decided that revolutionaries had better organise along the lines of labour organisations.”¹⁹

In short, Darlington is incorrect to suggest that “the core of syndicalist philosophy was not explicitly anarchist in character”. (p. 44) Comparing it with the ideas of Bakunin we discover *identical* theories and practice:

“Toilers count no longer on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralise and paralyse your growing strength by being duped into alliances with bourgeois Radicalism ... Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation ... are the workshops and the federation of workshops ... instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international ... when the hour of revolution sounds, you will proclaim the liquidation of the State and of bourgeois society, anarchy, that is to say the true, frank people’s revolution.”²⁰

As Bertrand Russell summarised: “Hardly any of these ideas [associated with syndicalism] are new: almost all are derived from the Bakunist [sic!] section of the old International.”²¹ In

¹⁹ “The Spanish case,” pp. 60–83, **Anarchism Today**, D. Apter and J. Joll (eds.), p. 66

²⁰ quoted by K.J. Kenafick, **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 120–1

²¹ Moreover, this was “often recognised by Syndicalists themselves” (Russell, p. 52). David Berry also notes that “anarchist syndicalist were keen to establish a lineage with Bakunin ... the anarchist syndicalism of the turn of the century was a revival of a tactic” associated with “the Bakuninist International.” (**A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945**, p. 17) The syndicalists, notes Wayne Thorpe, “identified the First International with its federalist wing ... [r]epresented ... initially by the Proudhonists and later and more influentially by the Bakuninists.” (p. 2)

Marx and Engels against Syndicalism

In addition to the obvious similarities in Bakunin’s politics and syndicalism, there is the awkward fact for Darlington that while he proclaims Marxism as one of syndicalism’s “core ideological elements” Marx and Engels explicitly rejected such ideas.

Marx attacked Bakunin for thinking that the “working classes must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions.”³⁸ Engels dismissed the general strike as “the lever employed by which the social revolution is started” in the “Bakuninist programme” while suggesting they admitted “this required a well-formed organisation of the working class”³⁹ (that is, Bakunin aimed to “organise, and when *all* the workers ... are won over ... abolish the state and replace it with the organisation of the International”⁴⁰).

Likewise, they routinely mocked the notion, popular in the libertarian wing of the organisation, that the International should both prefigure and become the future structure of a socialist society. For Bakunin, the “organisation of the trade sections and their representation by the Chambers of Labour ... bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself.”⁴¹ For Engels, the

³⁸ Marx, **Collected Works**, vol. 43, p. 490

³⁹ Engels, **Collected Works**, vol. 23, pp. 584–5. In section H.3.5 of **An Anarchist FAQ** (volume 2) I compare what Engels wrote about the “Bakuninist” general strike and what the “Bakuninists” themselves actually advocated.

⁴⁰ Engels, **Collected Works**, vol. 44, p. 305

⁴¹ **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 255. Compare this to the syndicalist CGT’s 1906 **Charter of Amiens** which declared “the trade union today is an organisation of resistance” but “in the future [it will] be the organisation of production and distribution, the basis of social reorganisation.” (quoted by Thorpe, p. 201)

So while not all syndicalists considered themselves anarchists, syndicalism itself originally came from revolutionary anarchism which had advocated revolutionary unionism *from the start*. This was reflected both theoretically and practically, with anarchists producing revolutionary union movements in Spain, Mexico³⁵, America³⁶ and elsewhere before the 1890s. Ironically, Darlington himself shows this to be the case when he states that “anarcho-syndicalism became a potent force after the Russian anarchist Bakunin had arrived” in Italy “in the late 1860s”. (p. 35) This admission contradicts the assertion that *Marxism* was one of syndicalism’s “three core ideological elements”.³⁷

elastic to be meaningless if it embraces those who politics are close, if not identical, to Bakunin’s.

³⁵ By the late 1870s the anarchists had become “strongest force in Mexican labour” and the **Congreso Nacional de Obreros Mexicano** was “affiliated with the Jura-based anarchist international.” (Hart, p. 59, p. 27)

³⁶ The anarchist dominated **International Working People’s Association** (IWPA) “anticipated by some twenty years the doctrine of anarcho-syndicalism.” The IWPA’s legacy influenced the IWW, whose “principles of industrial unionism resulted from the conscious efforts of anarchists ... who continued to affirm ... the principles which the Chicago anarchists gave their lives defending.” (Salvatore Salerno, **Red November, Black November**, p. 51, p. 79) As Paul Avrich reports, the Chicago anarchists’ ideas allow them to “penetrate deeply into the labour movement and attract a large working class following.” He also agrees they “anticipated by some twenty years” anarcho-syndicalism although he adds that these ideas had “originated” in the 1860s and 1870s when “the followers of Proudhon and Bakunin in the First International were proposing the formation of workers’ councils designed both as a weapon of class struggle against capitalists and as the structural basis of the future libertarian society.” (**The Haymarket Tragedy**, p. 73)

³⁷ Added to this must be the opinion of leading Marxists at the time. Karl Kautsky considered syndicalism as “the most recent variety of anarchism” and noted “its anarchist ancestry” (**The Road to Power**, 41, p. 67) while Lenin, referring to Germany in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote of “the growth of anarcho-syndicalism, or anarchism, as it was then called”. (**Collected Works**, vol. 16, p. 351)

this he was echoing the likes of Malatesta²², Kropotkin²³ and Goldman²⁴ (a position Rudolf Rocker repeated decades later²⁵). Many academics have made the same connection.²⁶

²² “I have ... never ceased to urge the comrades into that direction which the syndicalists, forgetting the past, call *new*, even though it was already glimpsed and followed, in the International, by the first of the anarchists.” (George Woodcock (ed.), **The Anarchist Reader**, p. 221) Space precludes a discussion of what I consider Darlington’s misreading of Malatesta’s critique of syndicalism.

²³ “Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions,” Kropotkin explained, “had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or ‘Bakuninist’ section of the International Working Men’s Association. In Spain and in Italy it had been especially successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France and **Freedom** eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda.” (**Act For Yourselves**, pp. 119–20) He repeatedly stressed that “the current opinions of the French syndicalists are organically linked with the early ideas of the left wing of the International” (quoted by Max Nettlau, **A Short History of Anarchism** p. 279) I must note that Kropotkin’s position was *not* suggested in response to the rise of syndicalism. In 1881, for example, he was arguing that the French libertarians follow the example of their Spanish comrades who had remained faithful to “the Anarchist traditions of the International” and “bring this energy to workers’ organisations.” His “advice to the French workers” was “to take up again ... the tradition of the International” (quoted by Gaston Leval, **Collectives in the Spanish Revolution**, p. 31)

²⁴ In the IWMA “Bakunin and the Latin workers” forged ahead “along industrial and Syndicalist lines” and “Syndicalism is, in essence, the economic expression of Anarchism.” (**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 89, p. 91) Her comrade Max Baginski argued that it was Bakunin’s “militant spirit that breathes now in the best expressions of the Syndicalist and I.W.W. movements” and these expressed “a strong world wide revival of the ideas for which Bakunin laboured throughout his life.” (Peter Glassgold (ed.), **Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth**, p. 71)

²⁵ “Modern Anarcho-Syndicalism is a direct continuation of those social aspirations which took shape in the bosom of the First International and which were best understood and most strongly held by the libertarian wing of the great workers’ alliance.” (**Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 54)

²⁶ For example: Syndicalism “can be traced to Bakunin’s revolutionary collectivism.” (Esenwein, p. 209); “Bakunin, perhaps even more than Proudhon, was a prophet of revolutionary syndicalism.” (Paul Avrich, **Anarchist Portraits**, pp. 14–15); The “basic syndicalist ideas of Bakunin” meant he

If syndicalism is defined as the belief that “unions should go beyond merely attempting to improve workers’ terms and conditions of employment within the framework of capitalist society, to become the instrument through which workers could overthrow capitalism and establish a new society” (p. 48) then it is clear that Bakunin advocated such a theory.²⁷ Sadly, Darlington does not discuss how syndicalism differs from the revolutionary unionism expounded by libertarians in the IWMA and after.²⁸ However, to claim that “*syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism combined with *anarchist* notions” (p. 38) would suggest unawareness that revolutionary unionism had been advocated decades before “syndicalism” was used to describe these ideas.²⁹

As far as Darlington’s second argument goes, that many syndicalist movements developed in countries without a large an-

“argued that trade union organisation and activity in the International were important in the building of working-class power in the struggle against capital ... He also declared that trade union based organisation of the International would not only guide the revolution but also provide the basis for the organisation of the society of the future.” For Kropotkin syndicalism “represented a revival of the great movement of the Anti-authoritarian International.” (Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism**, p. 219, p. 215, p. 268); “many anarchists, including Bakunin, had long recognised the revolutionary potential of syndicalism.” (Nunzio Pernicone, **Italian Anarchism: 1864–1892**, p. 117)

²⁷ Kropotkin also argued that unions were both “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order.” (quoted by Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, p. 81)

²⁸ Particularly, as Kropotkin notes, “[w]ithin these federations [of the IMWA] developed ... what may be described as *modern anarchism*.” (**Anarchism**, p. 294)

²⁹ This even applies of the red-and-black flag usually associated with anarcho-syndicalism but which was first used by anarchists in the IWMA in the 1870s (see “The Symbols of Anarchy” in my **An Anarchist FAQ**, volume 1). For example, by the end of the 1870s “the historic red-and-black flag of anarchism” had “became the official symbol of the Mexican labour movement” (John M. Hart, **Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860–1931**, p. 48)

archist presence, he ignores that these movements developed in response to syndicalist movements *elsewhere*, such as France, where there *was* significant anarchist influence. Given the role of unions in revolutionary anarchist theory and practice from the 1860s onwards, the rise of these initial syndicalist movements would testify to that very influence.

The Italian syndicalists, for example, “drew considerable inspiration from their French brethren”³⁰ while “the founders” of the IWW “did draw on the experience of the French syndicalists.”³¹ In Britain, syndicalists “drew much from the overseas syndicalist experience”³² (particularly of the CGT and the IWW). Over time, syndicalist ideas did spread to labour movements in countries without large anarchist movements but that cannot be used to downplay the links of syndicalism to anarchism for, as with George Sorel,³³ these self-proclaimed Marxists utilised the theories and practice of *existing* syndicalist organisations in countries which *did* have significant libertarian influence.³⁴

³⁰ Thorpe, p. 36

³¹ Salvatore Salerno, **Red November, Black November**, p. 94. Salerno has a useful chapter discussing the influence of the CGT on the IWW.

³² Bob Holton, **British Syndicalism: 1910–1914**, p. 50. Anarchist historian John Quail notes that British anarchists while relatively few in number “did provide the means by whereby the ideas of the French revolutionary Syndicalists could reach a wider audience.” (**The Slow Burning Fuse**, p. 236)

³³ Unlike many commentators who proclaim Sorel as the father of syndicalism, he himself stated that historians “will one day see in this entry of the anarchists into the *syndicats* one of the greatest events that has been produced in our time.” (**Reflections on Violence**, p. 35)

³⁴ This raises the interesting question of, regardless of their self-proclaimed Marxism, how far these individuals can be considered as Marxists given that both Marx and Engels explicitly *rejected* the syndicalist ideas raised by the libertarian wing of the IWMA. Schmidt and van der Walt suggest that such Marxists are better considered anarchists due to their embrace of positions advocated by Bakunin and rejected by Marx and Engels. Space precludes discussion of this issue beyond stating that “Marxist” becomes so