

# **The State is Counter-Revolutionary**

Anark

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# Introduction

The following is a compilation of the scripts I published in four parts on my YouTube channel Anark

(<http://youtube.com/c/anark/>) over the course of a six month period. If you would like to watch the video series, it is here:

**Part 1:** <https://youtu.be/uTwxpTyGUOI>

**Part 2:** <https://youtu.be/uwU3STgBknQ>

**Part 3:** <https://youtu.be/ycZYRSpSIPw>

**Part 4:** <https://youtu.be/HOrYgQ3eVoY>

Minor edits have been made to the script compilation to instead refer to itself as an essay instead of a four part video series. Other than this, content has remained the same and may be seen as a copy of the videos, in text form, that can be distributed wholly in place of the video series.

I hope this serves as an asset for comrades in learning about the events at hand, in developing a strong introductory knowledge of the anarchist theory of the state, aiding in the formation of strong anti-authoritarian rhetoric. These scripts, although only part of the videos that were made, comprised a huge amount of the effort that went into the project. I hope they are useful for you!

Solidarity forever.

## Part 1: What is the State?

This essay will be focused upon a very important topic in leftist theory, namely: the role and nature of the state in the revolutionary process. It would be an understatement to say that this has been a point of contention for a variety of committed socialists. Indeed, it represents the most significant early theoretical split in the left, one which has endured until this day. Over the course of this essay, we will inspect why this is the case and why this division has not disappeared, despite a century of experiments both with states and without.

As we begin this analysis, I would like to refer to a quote from the book *The Bolshevik Myth*,<sup>1</sup> in which the anarchist Alexander Berkman tells the story of his deportation from America to the Soviet Union between the years of 1919–1922. Despite what you might assume, given his anarchist ideology, Berkman was willing to sideline his skepticism of the state in the revolutionary process. Indeed, upon his arrival he wrote:

A feeling of solemnity, of awe overwhelmed me. Thus my pious old forefathers must have felt on first entering the Holy of Holies. A strong desire was upon me to kneel down and kiss the ground — the ground consecrated by the life-blood of generations of suffering and martyrdom, consecrated anew by the revolutionists of my own day. Never before, not even at the first caress of freedom on that glorious May Day, 1906 — after fourteen years in the Pennsylvania prison — had I been stirred so profoundly. I longed to embrace humanity, to lay my heart at its feet, to give my life a thousand times to the service of the Social Revolution.

Shortly after, in fact, he recounts an event where he confronted a dissident Russian anarchist who was giving a speech to a crowd:

“We Anarchists,” [the dissident anarchist] was saying, “are willing to work with the Bolsheviki if they will treat us right. But I warn you that we won’t stand for suppression. If you attempt it, it will mean war between us.”

[Berkman] jumped on the platform. “Let not this great hour be debased by unworthy thoughts,” I cried. “From now on we are all one — one in the sacred work of the Revolution, one in its defense, one in our common aim for the freedom and welfare of the people. Socialists or Anarchists — our theoretical differences are left behind. We are all revolutionists now, and shoulder to shoulder we’ll stand together to fight and to work for the liberating Revolution. Comrades, heroes of the great revolutionary struggles of Russia, in the name of the American deportees I greet you. In their name I say to you: We’ve come to learn, not to teach. To learn and to help!”

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Berkman, “The Bolshevik Myth”

This was the attitude of many anarchists toward the Russian Revolution. It was not perfect, they might have imagined, but it was the best bet that leftism had at the time. Berkman, a committed opponent of the state, counseled his fellow anarchists to support the Bolsheviks. Kropotkin too, always a vocal critic of the state, was heartened by the promise he saw there. The anarchists of the last wave of revolutionary acts suspended their skepticism in order to see if the flower of state socialism might bloom into liberation.

They cannot be blamed for having withheld their skepticism in the face of what appeared to be an exhilarating victory. Indeed, it must have seemed like the world revolution was just around the bend. However, unlike the leftists of 1917, we now have in hand the empirical outcomes of the state experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in the following essay I will argue for why we must reject a repetition of this historical cycle; first I will carry out a theoretical inspection of the state as an institution and disentangle how the ideologies which cling to it have been corrupted so deeply. Then, in the following parts, I will move on to inspect the historical record more closely, such that we can witness the degradation of these revolutionary projects in greater detail.

The tasks we have ahead of us are far too important to avoid speaking the truth out of fears of sectarianism. It is a solemn duty that we have to the people of our societies, to bring something far more than just a marginal improvement, something better than a new aesthetic for an old system. In order for this to happen, it depends upon our vocal opposition to the failed tactics of the past. And all evidence that can be found leads the careful observer to only one conclusion: the state is counter-revolutionary.

## **Introduction to the State**

So...if we are going to have this discussion, it only seems appropriate that we should answer a very basic question, namely: “what is the state?” There is a common definition first defined by Max Weber,<sup>2</sup> that the state is:

the human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory.

This definition is largely functional and is a very good way to disentangle complicated conversations, but it is insufficient if we are to really develop a complete understanding of our goals and if we wish to lay out what abolition of the truly oppressive aspects of the state will even look like.

Errico Malatesta, however, gives a more expansive coverage:<sup>3</sup>

Anarchists, including this writer, have used the word State, and still do, to mean the sum total of the political, legislative, judiciary, military and financial institutions through which the management of their own affairs, the control over their personal behaviour, the responsibility for their personal safety, are taken away from the people and entrusted to others who, by usurpation or delegation, are vested with the powers to make the laws for everything and everybody, and to oblige the people to observe them, if need be, by the use of collective force.

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”

<sup>3</sup> Errico Malatesta, “Anarchy”

This definition includes almost every important aspect of the state, yet loses the territorial nature of Weber. Kropotkin, however, brings us full circle, synthesizing Malatesta and Weber. The state, Kropotkin says

not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies. [...] A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing has to be developed in order to subject some classes to the domination of others.

We have left out the quibbles of these two thinkers in which they develop distinctions between “state” and “government.” Although useful, they will prove unnecessary for our inspection. Nonetheless, when we combine these definitions, we can now see what aspects in particular that the anarchist objects to in the institution of the state. It is not only Weber’s legitimate use of violence within a territory which is objectionable, although that certainly comprises the core ultimatum of their paradigm, it is the fact that the state is a top-down schema of social enforcement, inherently predicated upon diminishing the direct control by the people, centralizing the judicial, military, and political functions of society into a body of privileged rulers. The very existence of such an entity is thus guaranteed to create a class structure in which the functionaries of the state and their collaborators operate above the people, transmuting the masses into subjects. This last aspect is particularly emphasized by Rudolf Rocker in his work *Nationalism and Culture*:<sup>4</sup>

Every power presupposes some form of human slavery, for the division of society into higher and lower classes is one of the first conditions of its existence. The separation of men into castes, orders and classes occurring in every power structure corresponds to an inner necessity for the separation of the possessors of privilege from the people.

And, although Rocker illustrates this beautifully in his own work, I will leave that reading to you. If the origin and toxicity of the state interests you, you will find plenty of food for thought in both the works *Nationalism and Culture* by Rudolf Rocker and *The State: Its Historic Role*<sup>5</sup> by Peter Kropotkin. Instead, I intend to use these foundations to reformulate an argument I made in one of my videos for my channel Anark, *The Case Against Hierarchy*. The argument goes as follows:

The state is a small group of people vested with unitary control over the functions of governance and the legally legitimate power to coerce others to abide by that control.

Regardless of the temporary existence of selfless leaders, self-interested people will exist within the state.

The power of the state is what allows those people to act in their self-interest.

Therefore it is in the interest of all people that operate the state, to perpetuate the power of the state.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Rocker, “Nationalism and Culture”

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role”

With this in mind, each time the power of the state is threatened, those who operate the state will have a tendency to stymie that threat.

But every power structure that exists, is competition for the state.

Thus, the state stands at odds with any structure which may threaten its control over society.

The masses, however, have an inherent power in their numbers and in their primary function as the laborers that make society run.

So, the state will always have an institutional tendency to view the masses as a threat to the unitary power of the state.

And, therefore, the state will always seek to control and suppress the latent power of the masses, except when it serves the interests of the state.

This formulation alone guarantees an antagonism between the people and the institution of the state; centralized, vesting control over the organs of coercion and violence, seeking to establish and maintain a set of class hierarchies which bolster its own power. Just starting from the simple assumptions that people sometimes act in their own self-interest, that the state is comprised of people, and that the state is vested with the power to coerce society, it is a guaranteed outcome that this affair of subjugation will take place over a long enough timeline. As Rocker said, “every power presupposes some form of human slavery.”

The only conceivable counter-argument, that a benevolent leadership which does not act in their own self-interest may sit in the seats of power, neglects a simple reality: all humans die eventually. And once those benevolent dictators die, the reins will be handed back over to a new group of human beings, turning the state, on a long enough timeline, into a game of Russian Roulette with the future of the masses lying in the balance.

It gets worse, however. It is not only that individuals in power often seek to act in their own self-interest, nor is it the inherent tendency of the state to create and perpetuate class structures by its nature. It is also the tendency of even well intentioned human beings, given a particular tool, to see the application of that tool as the solution to all problems. This cognitive bias is sometimes called The Law of the Instrument or “Maslow’s Hammer.” It is famously contained in the pithy adage that “to the hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”

And we shouldn’t be shocked that this cognitive bias occurs enough to have earned such a reputation. Humans have an inherent desire to solve the problems that lie in front of them. And, given a single tool to solve that problem, they will have a tendency to attempt and discover every way that that particular tool could conceivably overcome that particular problem. Every challenge that arises is then re-framed as a question of how it is a problem for the wielder and mutated by this frame into something which the wielder of the tool perceives as solvable through their means.

Such a situation is even more perverse in light of the fact that the state’s primary tools are coercion and the manufacture of consent. Within its very nature, it is thus a paternalistic and chauvinistic entity, bound to view all those who are subject to its will as unruly when they disobey and useful only when they abide. It is an entity in a perpetual process of moral decline, a warden eternally destined to betray its charge. Left to its own devices over a long enough time, it can only be guaranteed to represent its own interests and the joint interests of its most powerful collaborators, not the exploited.

The very act of centralizing power is thus an act of violence against the workers. So long as the state is allowed to exist, worker emancipation is impossible, in the same way that the class antagonisms of capitalism cannot be eliminated while the means of production are controlled by the capitalists. Class abolition can then only ever hope to succeed if it corresponds to an abolition of centralized power. Such a statement is not a preference, it is a foundational requirement for the next phase of human development, and all attempts to make the state into a vehicle for liberation are misguided negotiations with a potent counter-revolutionary force.

## The Foundations

So why did leftists ever convince themselves that it could be otherwise? We will now inspect what theoretical and rhetorical aspects of leftist ideology led to the rot in the authoritarian foundations, so that we might better understand what created their repeated failures in a practical context.

First, lying at the center of the authoritarian left conceptualization is the notion that any social-project managed by the people is too weak and too aimless to defend itself from sabotage and that, instead of the people governing themselves in the interim, the state will need to rapidly centralize power, then wield that power benevolently in the interests of the masses. Said otherwise, the authoritarian conceives that a period bearing similarities to both capitalism and socialism must be created to rule in the interests of the the previously exploited class and in suppression of the previous exploiter class, for an extended period.

This particular affair, it must be said, is not strictly contained anywhere within Marxist literature. In fact, Marx said something quite contrary at the First International,<sup>6</sup> namely that “...the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule.”

However, some of Marx’s rhetorical choices and early theoretical emphasis left the notion of what should be done and by what practice struggle should take place, sufficiently vague, making the threat of co-option inevitable. The most pertinent of these rhetorical choices was that Marx called for a stage in which there would be a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” But Marx almost certainly did not mean that a centralized bureaucracy with complete control should domineer the workers and the previous bourgeois alike. Although it is true that he advocated centralization even as early as 1848 in *The Communist Manifesto*, by 1891, in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx was brutally criticizing the German socialists for their belief that socialism could be achieved through a paternalistic state, saying:

Free state — what is this?

It is by no means the aim of the workers, who have got rid of the narrow mentality of humble subjects, to set the state free. [...] Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it; and today, too, the forms of state are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the “freedom of the state.”

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen’s Association”

We can see by this that the notion that worker control meant centralized state control was certainly not a view held by the end of Marx's life. Indeed, the only state that Marx could see as consistent with worker control, was one completely subordinated to the direct will of the workers. In fact, in *Critique of the Gotha Program*<sup>7</sup> he excoriated the German Social Democrats for the notion that they should even presume to educate the masses.

Government and church should rather be equally excluded from any influence on the school. [...] the state has need, on the contrary, of a very stern education by the people.

So where did the authoritarian tendency arise, if not from Marx? Well...upon inspection of the historical record, the truest forerunner to the authoritarian ideology appears to be an individual named Louis Auguste Blanqui. Blanqui, an early French socialist revolutionary, did not believe that the proletariat were up to the task of revolution on their own. Instead, Blanqui conceived of the need of a small group of revolutionary professionals who would form a vanguard party and then lead the workers in a coup against the state, proceeding to suppress the previous ruling class until a time would come that a transition to socialism could take place. Blanqui did not attempt to conceive of the socialist future nor when, how, and where the transition from vanguard rule to worker control might take place. It was far more important that the previous ruling class was defeated at all costs. This is not the last we will hear of such a viewpoint, although its next adherents will not call themselves Blanquists.

## The Root

With these foundations in place, we can now turn our inspection to the next and perhaps most significant development in the authoritarian leftist ideology, calling itself "Marxist"-Leninism. This ideology, basing itself on the thought of Vladimir Lenin, would animate a great many revolutionary struggles and ideological offshoots to come. However, we don't have sufficient time to inspect all of those; instead we will look at the most significant of these offshoots, Marxist-Leninist-Maoism, in part 3 of this essay. For now, let us start at the beginning. This quote from Lenin's work *What Is To Be Done?*<sup>8</sup> is quite instructive of the attitude he takes toward revolutionary organization:

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.

Leninism is predicated on a fundamental lack of faith in the workers to organize themselves and to arrive upon a coherent conception of their class position without a party to lead them. To Lenin, the vanguard, occupied by enlightened socialist thinkers, was a representative body of proletarian class consciousness. Thus it was the job of the revolutionary party to tutor the masses on their liberation "from without." Wherein the workers lacked such a guiding hand, Lenin took a dim view of their mass potential, believing that the highest state that they could

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program"

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "What is to be Done?"

achieve on their own was what he called trade union consciousness; that is to say, the ability to band together into trade unions.

Such a conception, of course, neglects the fact that trade unionism was a movement with its own adherents and thinkers, developed and pioneered forth by other revolutionaries, a movement, in fact, which would be far more responsible for the radical and transformative elements of the Russian revolution than the Bolsheviks. But, in Lenin's mind, the masses had to develop past this trade union consciousness to succeed in revolutionary activity, and in order for them to develop in the way he wanted, they would have to submit to vanguard rule.

In 1904, Rosa Luxemburg, after reading Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* wrote a response called *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*<sup>9</sup> to criticize this attitude, in it she said:

...the two principles on which Lenin's centralism rests are precisely these:

1. The blind subordination, in the smallest detail, of all party organs to the party center which alone thinks, guides, and decides for all.
2. The rigorous separation of the organized nucleus of revolutionaries from its social-revolutionary surroundings.

Such centralism is a mechanical transposition of the organizational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class.

From this, we can see that the connection of Lenin's thought to Blanqui is not something I've just made up. Lenin was accused of having advocated Blanquism so often he even saw fit to mount defenses against the accusations. But his only defense was that he was not a Blanquist because his vanguard would organize the masses to achieve absolute control, unlike Blanqui whose vanguard planned the coup alone until the last moment.

Ultimately, however, what has to be recognized is that Lenin's conception of the party was not really so much a body representing proletarian consciousness, but a body demanding submission of the proletariat to vanguard consciousness. This is what Luxemburg meant when she mentioned how Lenin's centralism represented a "separation of the organized nucleus of revolutionaries from its social-revolutionary surroundings." Indeed, Lenin seemed to view the people as having a natural desire to submit. She continues:

The authentic proletarian, Lenin suggests, finds by reason of his class instinct a kind of voluptuous pleasure in abandoning himself to the clutch of firm leadership and pitiless discipline.

The centralizing tendency of Lenin, far be it from any conception of accountability to the revolutionary masses, was instead a way of configuring machine-like obedience among the workers. In fact, it would not even seem that Lenin viewed alienation of labor as something to be dismantled.

Lenin seems to demonstrate again that his conception of socialist organization is quite mechanistic. The discipline Lenin has in mind is being implanted in the working class not only by the factory but also by the military and the existing state bureaucracy – by the entire mechanism of the centralized bourgeois state.

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<sup>9</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy [Leninism or Marxism?]"

There is something perverse in this conception, wherein Lenin does not seem to want to change the relations of the workers to the means of production, but instead to simply refocus proletarian obedience to the capitalists with proletarian obedience to vanguard authority. Luxemburg, so disturbed by Lenin's ideas would say:

Nothing will more surely enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straightjacket, which will immobilize the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee.

And she was not the only one to have foreseen disaster based on Lenin's words. Trotsky himself, before the February Revolution ever took place, saw in Lenin's expedient ideology the risk for what he called substitutionism. Said simply, Trotsky was worried that in Leninism:<sup>10</sup>

...the organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally the 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee.

Such an arrangement did indeed take place and justified itself by Leninist logic that: since the party is the proletariat consciousness, then when the party forms a state dictatorship, it is a dictatorship of the proletariat. The practical results of such sophistry would be far from trivial. It is a tragic irony that Trotsky himself, once in power in that very same substitutionist party, only a few years after the revolution, would be the one to vocalize its attitude so clearly:<sup>11</sup>

The Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship...regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class...The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy...

I think it should be quite clear that none of this represents a development of Marx. Quite the opposite, these ideas represent a drastic break with Marxist theory. Whereas Marx believed that any power representing the workers must be "completely subordinated" to the workers, Lenin perceived that the workers had to be completely subordinated to the party. Whereas Marx thought that the revolutionary state had to be educated by the masses, Lenin thought that the masses should be educated by the state.

Further, because Lenin astutely avoided a coherent understanding of anarchism, his ideology was then destined to fall victim to all of the problems that we laid out at the beginning of this essay. Leninism does not eliminate the inherent antagonisms between the state and the workers, it exaggerates them. Leninism not only views domination as a useful tool, it can only conceive of domination as a tool.

For this reason, even projects that would come later, seeking to temper the bureaucracy seen in Leninism while maintaining vanguard ideology, would find out all too late what kind of contradictory thing they had incubated in their revolutionary projects. Lenin's ideology would carry forth as a sort of Blanquist sickness, passed on by force in some occasions and by willing recipients in others; but in all occasions leading to an eventual abolition of socialism, as all centralist attempts are invariably doomed to do.

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Our Political Tasks"

<sup>11</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Speech to Tenth Party Congress," cited by Maurice Brinton in "The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control"

## Part 1 Conclusion

Even after all of this analysis, however, I don't expect you to take what I've said for granted. After all, to exist only within the realm of ideas is not sufficient if we're going to build a revolutionary future. That is why, in the next two parts of this essay I will focus on a coverage of the two preeminent statist experiments, the USSR and Maoist China. What I will demonstrate is that in both, though these two projects had very different ideological premises to their leadership, where there existed some possibility for socialism, it was destined to be destroyed by a state driven counter-revolution. And the workers, having allowed such an entity the excuse to domineer them, would eventually find nothing left of their socialist aspirations.

Finally, in part 4, we will return to our theoretical considerations and explain how the modern left has come to excuse these failures, demonstrating the rhetorical emptiness of their appeals and offering a countervailing narrative that will help us understand how we might avoid the same pitfalls in the next revolutionary wave.

Before we finish our essay, however, I would like to return to Alexander Berkman's diary. Although initially he sidelined his principles out of an almost religious awe at the potential for liberation in 1919, by 1922 his tone had changed considerably. These were the last words he recorded before returning to America:

Gray are the passing days. One by one the embers of hope have died out. Terror and despotism have crushed the life born in October. The slogans of the Revolution are foresworn, its ideals stifled in the blood of the people. The breath of yesterday is dooming millions to death; the shadow of today hangs like a black pall over the country. Dictatorship is trampling the masses under foot. The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness.

High time the truth about the Bolsheviki were told. The whited sepulcher must be unmasked, the clay feet of the fetish beguiling the international proletariat to fatal will o' the wisps exposed. The Bolshevik myth must be destroyed.

I have decided to leave, Russia.

Soon we shall see what events led Berkman to this change of heart.

## Part 2: The USSR

So let us continue the analysis that began in the first part of this essay. In the last part we explored why the state is an inherently counter-revolutionary and anti-socialist institution from a theoretical standpoint and then outlined what ideological trends led to its emergence in the left. In this part, we will trace the progression of the Leninist method as it was first practiced in the USSR and demonstrate its material impact as a justifying ideology. In part 3 we will trace the continuation of this ideological approach as it manifested in Maoist China, inspecting how Mao's revisions were still insufficient to stop the state from eventually overwhelming worker control.

This second and third part of the essay are very important, I believe, because the temptation of the authoritarian ideology lies within a belief that it has seen success when implemented. However, what we will demonstrate here is that the success of these projects is not the success of socialism, but instead a demonstration that a statist model of centralization and military conformity is part of a successful method of hoarding power for a privileged ruling class.

When understood through this lens, longevity becomes trivial. No one was in doubt that a central vanguard party could properly seize control and overthrow a previous central dictator; this is how every bourgeois revolution is carried out, after all. The conversation at hand is whether this method can bring about worker control of society. And, as we shall see, it cannot.

### Warnings

In part 1 of this essay, we offered a series of foundational critiques and outlined some of the anarchist theory which helped explain the state as an entity. We also listened as Rosa Luxemburg, a contemporary of Lenin, critiqued the foundations of his ideology and expressed her skepticism of his organizing ethos. However, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin saw much further than this. We have left his predictions for this part, because I would like for them to stay fresh in your mind as we proceed.

Bakunin did not even have to read Lenin to know what kind of expediency was on its way. Indeed, he could see the embryonic justifications within Marx. For example, in 1869, nearly fifty years before the USSR even came into existence, he said:<sup>1</sup>

the Dictatorship of the Proletariat... In reality it would be for the proletariat a bar-rack regime where the standardized mass of men and women workers would wake, sleep, work and live to the beat of a drum; for the clever and learned a privilege, of governing: and for the mercenary minded, attracted by the State Bank, a vast field of lucrative jobbery.

Then, later, in 1873:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, "Marxism, Freedom, and the State"

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, "1873"

the leaders of the Communist Party, namely Mr. Marx and his followers, will concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand. They will centralize all commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production, and then divide the masses into two armies – industrial and agricultural – under the direct command of state engineers, who will constitute a new privileged scientific and political class.

How is it, given the evolution we discussed in Marx's ideology over the course of his life, that Bakunin was able to foresee this threat so clearly? Well...it is perhaps not because Bakunin accurately understood Marx, but instead because Marx had chosen a terminology which obscured his desires. It did not matter if, after dissection and distinction, Marx was not an authoritarian; in speaking of "dictatorships" of the proletariat and "worker's states," Marx had allowed the political language of the authoritarians to form his rhetoric. That later authoritarians might then transform that rhetoric into justification for their power is not shocking. This is, in fact, what has come to be called the linguistic turn in Russia. In this view then, Bakunin's critiques are being levied against the risk of what Marx's ideology might become if appropriated by a centralized state.

After all, Bakunin and other contemporary anarchists recognized quite deeply that, if socialism is worker ownership and control of the means of production, then the state, a centralized, top-down power structure which seeks the monopoly of violence, is inherently in opposition to socialism. Any bureaucracy that domineers the workers, directing their work, setting their compensation, and deciding their production and distribution, inevitably reproduces a class system, no matter what aesthetics it uses. Keep these predictions by Bakunin and the inspections of the last part of this essay in mind as we proceed through this part and the next. Each will be vindicated in full in both projects.

## **The Revolution**

In the year 1917 Russia was deep in the despair of World War 1. Although the conflict had originally been a rallying cry that served to distract the masses from their suffering under Czar Nicholas II, soldiers were now returning home from a pointless, traumatizing conflict only to find their wives in breadlines and large groups of the industrial workforce now engaged in early conflict with the state. Both the peasantry and the urban proletariat had lost faith in the regime. The combination of war-weariness, brewing dissatisfaction with the very institution of monarchy, and food shortages had driven the populace into mass strikes and riots. The government itself was fractured due to a series of foolish decisions. As inflation rose, as war threatened the ability of the Russian market to access the world, the people of the nation were at a breaking point. That breaking point would come to be called the February Revolution. By the end of February 1917, Czar Nicholas, his troops having abandoned him and the masses having joined together to oppose him, abdicated the throne.

Following this, a provisional government was created, led by a man named Alexander Kerensky. But this government was not to last either. Already, inspired by socialist theory, the workers had begun creating a variety of direct-democratic bodies and trade unions; and although they took many forms, we will call the direct-democratic bodies Factory Committees and we will call the broader hierarchical representative organizations Trade Unions, from here on out. The distinction is meaningful: these Factory Committees were not mere unions. They were not managed

by an internal hierarchy and they did not just seek to negotiate with the workplace owners; they sought to collectively become the workplace owners. These Factory Committees often seized the means of production from capitalist control and proceeded to institute direct worker control through democratic means, whereas the trade unions were structured through internal elections and acted as bargaining bodies between the workers and the workplace owners.

During this period, mechanisms of direct worker control were being created so fast that the citizens had essentially built the dual power structures that would rival the power of the state. Maurice Brinton explicates this in his work *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*.<sup>3</sup>

Soviets and Factory Committees were appearing everywhere at a phenomenal rate. Their growth can be explained by the extremely radical nature of the tasks confronting the working class. Soviets and Committees were far more closely associated with the realities of everyday life than were the unions. They therefore proved far more effective mouthpieces of fundamental popular aspirations.

Even the historian E.H. Carr, a scholar who has demonstrated an affinity for the Bolsheviks in the past, had to admit of this period:<sup>4</sup> “the spontaneous inclination of the workers to organize factory committees and to intervene in the management of the factories was inevitably encouraged by a revolution which led the workers to believe that the productive machinery of the country belonged to them and could be operated by them at their own discretion and to their own advantage.”

This is to say, throughout this period, the workers were not under the impression that the bodies they were meant to create, were supposed to prefigure vanguard rulership. They were instead intent upon directly configuring socialist property relations. Indeed, at the very first national meeting of the Factory Committees in 1917, this spirit of self-determination and bottom-up control was unmistakable in their statement that the factory committees themselves “should emanate all instructions concerning internal factory organization” including “hours of work, wages, hiring and firing, holidays, etc.”

This was echoed clearly in the anarcho-syndicalist magazine *Golos Truda*, saying the people demanded “total workers’ control, embracing all plant operations, real and not fictitious control, control over work rules, hiring and firing, hours and wages and the procedures of manufacture.”

The Bolsheviks, while maintaining views that centralization was necessary, could not be seen to be in opposition to such a state of affairs so long as the revolution was still underway. The Factory Committees were the fighting bodies of the economic insurrection. The Bolsheviks would even make public statements that the Factory Committees were “the battering ram that would deal blows to capitalism, organs of class struggle created by the working class on its own ground.”

Under such conditions of mass worker agitation and direct control, the Bolsheviks swept into an electoral majority and by October of that same year, the provisional government was overthrown in what is now called the October Revolution.

Meanwhile, internal enemy forces, what came to be called the White Army, were beginning to form and the Russian Civil War was brewing. So too were the foreshocks of the Bolshevik sabotage of worker control and the suppression of dissent rumbling at foot. Shortly after the

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Brinton, “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control”

<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomsky, “The Soviet Union Versus Socialism”

revolution, at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, a Bolshevik spokesman was already at work attempting to bring the workers into obedience to the party, saying:

...New laws will be proclaimed within a few days dealing with workers' problems. One of the most important will deal with workers' control of production and with the return of industry to normal conditions. Strikes and demonstrations are harmful in Petrograd. We ask you to put an end to all strikes on economic and political issues, to resume work and to carry it out in a perfectly orderly manner...Every man to his place. The best way to support the Soviet Government these days is to carry on with one's job.

Indeed, the USSR existed for scarcely a single month before Lenin's draft decrees were issued, dark foreshadowing of the ultimate dissolution of the Factory Committees and thus any hope for Russian socialism. Although it could have been missed, given that Lenin's first decree solidified what the Factory Committees had already achieved through struggle prior to the October Revolution, a deadly poison was included within it. Namely that: "the decisions of the elected delegates of the workers and employees were legally binding upon the owners of enterprises" however, they could be "annulled by trade unions and congresses." Further, Lenin's decree declared that "in all enterprises of state importance" all delegates from the Factory Committees were "answerable to the State for the maintenance of the strictest order and discipline and for the protection of property."

And what qualified as "enterprises of importance to the State?" Well "all enterprises working for defence purposes, or in any way connected with the production of articles necessary for the existence of the masses of the population." If these extremely broad requirements were met, any delegate appointed by the workers could be dismissed by the Bolsheviks and thus management by the workers became utterly subverted to the state machinery. This may seem to have been something utilitarian given the possibility of reaction. However, it can be seen that it was carried out very consciously with the intention to dissolve worker control and thus to sabotage the brief existence of socialist economic conditions in Russia. Lozovsky, a Bolshevik trade unionist made very clear:

...the lower organs of control must confine their activities within the limits set by the instructions of the proposed All-Russian Council of Workers' Control. We must say it quite clearly and categorically, so that workers in various enterprises don't go away with the idea that the factories belong to them.

But the factory committees did not intend to go down without a fight. Just after the revolution, they attempted to form their own national organization, meant to establish these directly democratic worker bodies as the rightful managers of the economy. Here too we see the precursor of a form of anti-socialism beginning; the Bolsheviks for the first time worked to pit the trade unions against the factory committees. The trade unions, more hierarchical and thus easier to co-opt, would become the preferred worker body for the Bolsheviks as time went on. Thus they called on the trade unions to renounce the factory committees and to call for full submission to the Bolshevik party. The trade unions, as they would do repeatedly in the years to come, obliged; a deal made with the devil that they would eventually come to regret.

By next year, Lenin produced an article outlining the intentions of the Bolsheviks proceeding forward. In this article he explained a need for “raising labor discipline,” by which he meant that there should be an emulation of the American capitalist form of labor control called Taylorism. In fact, he said it plainly:

...we must raise the question of applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system...the Soviet Republic must at all costs adopt all that is valuable in the achievements of science and technology in this field...we must organize in Russia the study and teaching of the Taylor system.

Such a system included strict measurement of every workers’ productivity, staunch regulations, and a “Rate-of-Output” bureau which would report and enforce output quotas for every worker. In enacting such a system, literally formed by the managerial philosophy of capitalism and attendant with a brutal subjugation of the workers, the system of state capitalism was configured in a most coherent and explicit fashion. Lenin said without compunction that:

...today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of the labour process.

In correspondence with the height of the civil war, the industries which were now conceived of as being affected by the need of “unquestioning submission” and thus would be summarily expropriated from the workers were to include the mining, metallurgical, textile, electrical, timber, tobacco, resin, glass and pottery, leather and cement industries, all steam-driven mills, local utilities and private railways. In this process, all industries were taken out of the hands of the workers and now, within the course of barely a year, the workers were already turned into nothing more than military servants. Everything became a supply chain for the front, not at their own direction, but at the demand of the central apparatus.

And, although it might seem tempting, in light of the pressures of the war, to claim that this was needed in order to fight the White Army, Maurice Brinton points out that:

This period witnessed a considerable fall in production, due to a complex variety of factors which have been well described elsewhere. The trouble was often blamed, however, by Party spokesmen on the influence of heretical ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ ideas.

While it may be true that popular aspirations held similarities to anarcho-syndicalist ideas, the anarcho-syndicalists as a faction had little formal power left by this point. The Bolsheviks had crushed the power of the factory committees and the anarchist press was being actively dismantled. The anarchist contingent of Russia was being forcefully driven into obscurity. The syndicalists which had done much of the work organizing the factory committees which waged Russian revolution before 1917, now had to flee to groups like Workers’ Opposition, the Socialist Revolutionaries, or choose to agitate as Non-Party workers, at constant risk of suppression by the Cheka.

That the Bolshevik centralization and brutal crushing of worker control so quickly after the revolution may have led to a loss of enthusiasm among the masses of laborers and that that

subjugation led to the drop in production, was an idea the state simply could not entertain. Instead, the workers and their desire for worker control had to be turned into a heresy. Every time that popular support for socialist policies arose, it would be called “anarchist” “syndicalist” or “counter-revolutionary” as an excuse to suppress it. But the socialism that the Russian workers fought to produce was one which afforded the workers the freedom to direct their labor and they only tolerated its suspension temporarily. Such a proletarian consciousness, with its practical through-line to syndicalist ideology, represented an existential threat to state monopoly and thus had to be destroyed at all costs.

On August 25<sup>th</sup> of 1918, at the First All-Russian Conference of Anarcho-Syndicalists, they would not mince words. The Bolshevik party was “betraying the working class with its suppression of workers’ control in favour of such capitalist devices as one-man management, labour discipline and the employment of ‘bourgeois’ engineers and technicians. By forsaking the Factory Committees – the beloved child of the great workers’ revolution – for those ‘dead organizations,’ the trade unions, and by substituting decrees and red tape for industrial democracy, the Bolshevik leadership is creating a monster of ‘state capitalism,’ a bureaucratic Behemoth, which it ludicrously calls socialism”

Other anarchists were more measured in their assessment. Brinton paraphrases an article seen in the anarcho-syndicalist magazine Volny Golos Truda, which was established after Golos Truda was forcefully shut down by the Bolsheviks earlier that year. In this assessment:

Lenin and his followers were not necessarily cold-blooded cynics who, with Machiavellian cunning, had mapped out the new class structure in advance to satisfy their personal lust for power. Quite possibly they were motivated by a genuine concern for human suffering...But the division of society into administrators and workers followed inexorably from the centralization of authority. It could not be otherwise. Once the functions of management and labour had become separated (the former assigned to a minority of ‘experts’ and the latter to the untutored masses) all possibility of dignity or equality were destroyed.

However, it did not matter that they had taken this moderate tone. Volny Golos Truda was shut down by the Cheka after five issues. Even some fellow anarchists called them “anarcho-bureaucratic Judases” for daring to question the Bolsheviks. But such condemnations would ring hollow; by Autumn, the National Soviet was completely absorbed into the state. It had no more meetings and the last direct mechanism of control for the factory committees was therefore dead.

What remained for workers who wished to steer the ship of the Russian machine were the trade unions. But they were already a ghost of their former selves, vast numbers of delegates that had been appointed by the workers had already been annulled by the Bolsheviks. Brinton recounts an event in which the Bolshevik politician Vyacheslav Molotov underwent an analysis of the composition of these delegates:

Of 400 persons concerned, over 10% were former employers or employers’ representatives, 9% technicians, 38% officials from various departments (including the [central state])...and the remaining 43% workers or representatives of workers’ organizations, including trade unions. The management of production was predominantly in the hands of persons “having no relation to the proletarian elements in industry.”

The [delegate bodies] had to be regarded as “organs in no way corresponding to the proletarian dictatorship.” Those who directed policy were “employers’ representatives, technicians and specialists” “It was indisputable that the Soviet bureaucrat of these early years was as a rule a former member of the bourgeois intelligentsia or official class, and brought with him many of the traditions of the old Russian bureaucracy”

It was not only Molotov who discovered such a thing, either. Brinton recounts other independent sources who verified the same facts:

A Congress delegate, Chirkin, claimed for instance that ‘although in most regions there were institutions representing the trade union movement, these institutions were not elected or ratified in any way; where elections had been conducted and individuals elected who were not suitable to the needs of the Central Council or local powers, the elections had been annulled very freely and the individuals replaced by others more subservient to the administration.’

Another delegate, Perkin, spoke out against new regulations which required that representatives sent by workers’ organisations to the Commissariat of Labour be ratified by the Commissariat. ‘If at a union meeting we elect a person as a commissar—i.e. if the working class is allowed in a given case to express its will—one would think that this individual would be allowed to represent our interests in the Commissariat, would be our commissar. But, no. In spite of the fact that we have expressed our will—the will of the working class—it is still necessary for the commissar we have elected to be confirmed by the authorities... The proletariat is allowed the right to make a fool of itself.’

Such an arrangement as has been laid out here has no similarity to socialism. And indeed, contrary to those who uncritically praise the USSR, Lenin himself made no such claim. In his *Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* he said:

Socialism means the abolition of classes. The dictatorship of the proletariat has done all it could to abolish classes. But classes cannot be abolished at one stroke. And classes still remain and will remain in the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The dictatorship will become unnecessary when classes disappear. Without the dictatorship of the proletariat they will not disappear.

Yet even this admission was an act of bare propaganda. What Lenin and the Bolsheviks had transfigured here bore no resemblance to Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat, as we spoke about in part 1. Instead, what we can see is that Bakunin’s most dire concerns had come to be realized. The USSR was now “for the proletariat a barrack regime where the standardized mass of men and women workers would wake, sleep, work and live to the beat of a drum.”

The red flags, the fawning praise for Marxist theory, and all other considerations, were mere aesthetics. Worker control had become a propagandistic figment, a promise not only unfulfilled, but actively betrayed by Bolshevik power. Lenin’s later statement that “the syndicalist deviation leads to the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat” can really be interpreted as “the demands

of the workers to control the means of production require the dissolution of the state.” A fact that it is unfortunate a more sizable majority of the populace did not recognize.

Malatesta, watching from afar in Spain, could also see what was taking place in 1919, when he said:

...what we have is the dictatorship of one party, or rather, of one party’s leaders: a genuine dictatorship, with its decrees, its penal sanctions, its henchmen, and above all, its armed forces which are at present also deployed in the defense of the revolution against its external enemies, but which will tomorrow be used to impose the dictators’ will upon the workers, to apply a brake on revolution, to consolidate the new interests in the process of emerging and protect a new privileged class against the masses.

He could not have even known how right he was, not “tomorrow,” as he said, but at the very moments he made this statement. And, although those who seek to make excuses for this Bolshevik counter-revolution may have claimed that it was necessary to consolidate a military discipline to defeat the White Army, by 1920, the Civil War was essentially over. Indeed, very little resistance remained of the White Army or any interlocutors.

Yet, as Brinton recounts:

At the gathering of the Bolshevik faction Lenin and Trotsky together urge acceptance of the militarization of labour. Only two of sixty or more Bolshevik trade-union leaders support them. “Never before had Trotsky or Lenin met with so striking a rebuff”

Trotsky, however, was known to have said that:

The working class [...] cannot be left wandering all over Russia. They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers [...] Compulsion of labour will reach the highest degree of intensity during the transition from capitalism to socialism [...] Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps.”

Then later in the year, as the workers were becoming angered at their treatment:

the militarization of labour...is the indispensable basic method for the organization of our labour forces

And

Is it true that compulsory labour is always unproductive? [...] This is the most wretched and miserable liberal prejudice: chattel slavery too was productive. Compulsory slave labour [...] was in its time a progressive phenomenon. Labour [...] obligatory for the whole country, compulsory for every worker, is the basis of socialism.

Although it is popular to despise Trotsky, as some sort of unique tyrant. He was saying nothing that most of the Bolsheviks did not believe themselves and were not enacting on a daily basis. Trotsky merely spoke in less propagandistic language than the rest of them, veiled his intentions under less deception. In doing so, he explicated Bakunin's other prediction that the centralist tendency "will centralize all commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production, and then divide the masses into two armies — industrial and agricultural — under the direct command of state engineers, who will constitute a new privileged scientific and political class."

By March of 1921, the civil war was over but the state capitalist configuration of the economy had not changed at all. After enduring several years of so-called "War Communism," the workers had begun to realize the sacrifices they made in the name of centralization and were beginning to agitate widely. Tired of suppression in the opposition parties, they built a movement as Non-Party workers and demanded a return to the ideals of the revolution.

At this point, if one is trying to read the Bolshevik dissolution of worker control in the Russian revolution as motivated by material conditions, it would be appropriate to expect that this would have been the right time to hand control back over to the workers. Indeed, if this were a "dictatorship of the proletariat" in any way, this is the precise juncture at which the state would have attempted to dissolve itself. But quite the opposite of this took place at the Tenth Party Congress. Instead, Lenin proposed the banning of all political parties and thus a final consolidation of power in the state. The Non-Party workers' movement was a final threat that had to be destroyed. Mass arrests and suppression followed.

But even this did not defeat the spirit of the workers to take back their revolution: in Petrograd, spurred by extremely long work days, by unheated homes, by lack of food, anger at the inequality of rations between workers and party bureaucrats, by the decisions of the Tenth Congress, and a complete absence of remuneration from the Bolsheviks, workers began mass strikes and protests. They were tired of being treated like empty automatons, especially if they would experience little material benefit for having suffered to defeat the White Army. The strikers released a statement<sup>5</sup> as follows:

A complete change is necessary in the policies of the Government...First of all, the workers and peasants need freedom. They don't want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks; they want to control their own destinies. We demand the liberation of all arrested Socialists and non-partisan workingmen; abolition of martial law; freedom of speech, press, and assembly for all who labor; free election of shop and factory committees, of labor union and Soviet representatives.

Alexander Berkman, still present in Russia during these movements, reported that the workers were being arrested in mass by the Bolsheviks and that any of the trade unions who were still radical enough to participate were being dissolved by the government. Meanwhile at Kronstadt, a key naval base, tensions were rising. These Kronstadt sailors were not some fringe contingent, in fact they had been implemental in the success of the Bolsheviks during the early days of the revolution, called the "pride and glory of the Russian Revolution" by Trotsky himself. But after they sent a delegation to survey what was taking place with the striking workers abroad and seeing how the state was doing everything it could to dismantle the revolt, they issued a

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Berkman, "The Bolshevik Myth"

statement outlining their demands, in solidarity with the strikers. Berkman recounted the mood as follows:

Great nervous tension in the city. The strikes continue; labor disorders have again taken place in Moscow. A wave of discontent is sweeping the country. Peasant uprisings are reported from Tambov, Siberia, the Ukraina, and Caucasus. The country is on the verge of desperation. It was confidently hoped that, with the end of civil war, the Communists would mitigate the severe military régime. The Government had announced its intention of economic reconstruction, and the people were eager to cooperate. They looked forward to the lightening of the heavy burdens, the abolition of war-time restrictions, and the introduction of elemental liberties.

The fronts are liquidated, but the old policies continue, and labor militarization is paralyzing industrial revival. It is openly charged that the Communist Party is more interested in entrenching its political power than in saving the Revolution.

An official manifesto appeared today. It is signed by Lenin and Trotsky and declares Kronstadt guilty of mutiny. The demand of the sailors for free Soviets is denounced as 'a counter-revolutionary conspiracy against the proletarian Republic.' Members of the Communist Party are ordered into the mills and factories to 'rally the workers to the support of the Government against the traitors.' Kronstadt is to be suppressed.

Correspondence shows that Kronstadt sent word that "we want no bloodshed [...] Not a single Communist has been harmed by us."

The Bolsheviks did not care however. Such an affront had filled their eyes with blood. Trotsky released a statement that said:

[The workers] have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy!

Berkman again, on March 7<sup>th</sup>: "Distant rumbling reaches my ears as cross the Nevsky. It sounds again, stronger and nearer, as if rolling toward me. All at once I realize that artillery is being fired. It is 6 P.M. Kronstadt has been attacked!

Days of anguish and cannonading. My heart is numb with despair; something has died within me. The people on the streets look bowed with grief, bewildered. No one trusts himself to speak. The thunder of heavy guns rends the air."

Ten days later, he writes in his diary. "Kronstadt has fallen today.

Thousands of sailors and workers lie dead in its streets. Summary execution of prisoners and hostages continues."

Berkman notes on March 18<sup>th</sup>, the irony that: "the victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels..."

After the Bolsheviks slaughtered the strikers, they went on to smear the Kronstadt sailors and all those who took part in the mass demonstrations as being inside plotters who were trying to coup the government. Once more, anarchism is associated with the revolutionary demands of

socialism by Lenin when he calls the worker revolts “petty-bourgeois,” “syndicalist,” “anarchist” “caused in part by the entry into the ranks of the Party of elements which had still not completely adopted the Communist world view.”

But the reality of the matter did not escape the people. During the years of 1921–1922 would come the first of two enormous spikes in suicide rates among communists in Russia. In 1923, M. Reisner<sup>6</sup> wrote:

It’s hardest of all for the revolutionary romantics. The vision of a golden age unfolded so close to them. Their hearts burned out [...]. And sad stories are circulating. Here, one of our war heroes went home and shot himself. He couldn’t stand vile little squabbles any longer. One drop and the cup overflowed.

By 1923, even Lenin recognized that the dream of socialism had died in Russia and that it was the fault of the bureaucratic domination of the workers. Maurice Meisner,<sup>7</sup> in a work which we will use extensively in the next part of this essay, recounts this story:

Less than five years after the Russian Revolution, Lenin pondered why the new Soviet order had quickly become so bureaucratic and oppressive. On his deathbed he somberly concluded that he had witnessed the resurrection of the old czarist bureaucracy to which the Bolsheviks “had given only a Soviet veneer.” Lenin’s worst fears were soon realized with the massive bureaucratization of the Soviet state and society during the Stalinist era, and the unleashing of what Isaac Deutscher called “an almost permanent orgy of bureaucratic violence.”

In these same deathbed reflections, Lenin said he was “guilty before the workers of Russia” for having not warned them about the ruthless concentration of power sooner. Of course, it would not have mattered if he had told them or not. As soon as the first decrees by Lenin had been issued which allowed the state to nationalize anything which could be deemed pertinent to the state, he had, himself, set the stage to destroy the revolution. It is cold comfort to the martyred workers that he lamented those mistakes.

## **Part 2 Conclusion**

In the years to follow, suppression not only persisted, but escalated prolifically. Economic control would never return to the embryonic socialism of 1917. Quite the contrary, the Bolsheviks would carry out a series of Five Year market experiments and in doing so, the USSR would sacrifice even its questionably revolutionary state centralization and begin a slow decline back into traditional capitalist property relations. Indeed, the institution of the New Economic Plan would prove so discouraging for the Russian revolutionaries that between 1924–1926 there would be a doubling of the level of suicides that had occurred after Kronstadt; seven times the average for party communists and fifteen times the average for those in the Red army.

It is hard to blame the Russian revolutionaries for such hopelessness. All means of forcing the leadership of the USSR to meet the needs of the people and to fulfill their vanguard promises, had

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Pirani “The Russian Revolution in Retreat”

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Meisner, “Mao’s China and After”

failed. While the workers suffered miserably and fought valiantly to safeguard the revolution, the Bolsheviks crushed their dreams of socialism under heel and ruthlessly turned back all the progress that had been made toward worker control. The state, an inherently centralized entity made even more centralized by Leninist mutation of Marxist rhetoric, had suffocated the birth of revolutionary socialism in Russia.

And it was not only domestic, the USSR would go on to sabotage the anarchists who had enacted socialism in Civil War Spain, to invade the Free Territories of Ukraine, to attempt repeated destruction of the market socialism of Yugoslavia, and to undermine almost every single other place where actual worker control was enacted during its lifetime. The Soviet state could tolerate only unquestioning submission and was therefore second only to the United States in its sabotage of worker movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But even after all of this, one might be tempted to imagine: what if the ideology of the rulers in the central apparatus was of a sort which actually made an attempt to dissolve and dismantle bureaucracy? What if we applied some of the anarchist critiques of the state, but did not abandon the notion completely? The next part, inspecting revolutionary China will serve to answer such questions. As we shall see, even with the ostensibly anti-bureaucratic and unorthodox approach of Mao Zedong, no amount of recuperation can ever solve the inherent antagonisms between the workers and the state. It is not a matter of which leader sits in the seat of power. The seat of power itself is the enemy to the proletarian revolution.

## Part 3: Maoist China

Just as the topic of the last section was a historical coverage of the revolutionary period of the USSR, this section will be a coverage of the aftermath of the Chinese revolution under Mao. The reason this is included in the essay is because, even after an inspection of the USSR, someone might contend that the solution lies in a restrained state, one which is built from an ideology that seeks to dismantle its own power once it has defeated the old order.

Mao's China is therefore the perfect project for us to inspect. As we shall see, while Maoism maintained the state apparatus, Mao nonetheless sought significant departures from the Leninist and Marxist ideology, attempting numerous times to dissolve state bureaucracy, listening to peasant concerns about power hoarding, and letting slack the reins of power at certain key moments. If the state is a body which can conceivably dissolve its own power under the right conditions, one would have to conclude that Maoist China would turn out quite different from the USSR. However what we will see in this part is a convergence of China upon very similar economic affairs as to what took place in Russia, even though their paths to that end varied wildly.

As we proceed, I would like you to hold this quote by Kropotkin from *Are We Good Enough?*<sup>1</sup> in mind:

We earnestly invite those who like to reason for themselves to study the history of any of the great social changes which have occurred in humanity...They will see that history is nothing but a struggle between the rulers and the ruled, the oppressors and the oppressed, in which struggle the practical camp always sides with the rulers and the oppressors, while the unpractical camp sides with the oppressed.

### The Revolutionary Period

Although the story of the Chinese revolution began just before the Second Sino-Japanese War in the late 1930s, let us instead start in 1921. This is the year that the Chinese Communist Party was fully constituted, although it would not rise to power until decades later. By this point, the USSR was a geopolitical powerhouse and its influence could be felt in nations all over the region, including China. The USSR, cooperating with the nationalist party which ruled China, the Guomindang, helped build a fully modernized army for the conservative rulership in order to protect their regional control.

However, this proved to be an utterly disastrous foray. The Guomindang had no intentions to yield power to the communists, neither domestically nor abroad, and in 1927, after the Guomindang had used the communist insurrections to gain unparalleled control over most major Chinese cities, they then turned the modernized army that the USSR had helped them build, against the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kropotkin, "Are We Good Enough?"

Chinese communists. This event is called the Shanghai Massacre; a nationwide purge of the urban communists, resulting in an estimated three-hundred thousand communist party deaths and many more imprisonments.

In this we see a recurring tendency of the USSR to meddle in the affairs of foreign communists and to support existing liberal and nationalist governments, accepting profound compromises in order to gain power within them, but for these compromises to ultimately lead to the destruction of socialism in that project. The Shanghai Massacre is why, several decades later when Mao arrived on the scene, the only constituency that was available for the communists to organize was the rural peasantry.

However, despite the orthodox Marxist notions that the peasantry did not contain a socialist revolutionary consciousness, they would find that many of China's peasants were fertile soil for radicalization and organization, having been harassed by high taxation by the government and suffering greatly under conditions of warlordism and gangsterism. The primary difference was that, whereas in Russia, dual power was largely embodied in urban entities which gave direct, bottom-up power to the workers, the peasantry of China would instead be highly motivated by promises to expropriate the land from feudal rentiers and to enact social leveling.

Adding to these unique conditions Mao, unlike many Marxists and Leninists before him, had actually read some anarchist theory. Indeed, he had been one of many Chinese exchange students who had visited France, where anarchism was in vogue at the time before World War 1. He said, in his interviews<sup>2</sup> with Edgar Snow that, while he was in France:

I read some pamphlets on anarchy, and was much influenced by them. With a student [...] who used to visit me, I often discussed anarchism and its possibilities in China. At that time I favored many of its proposals.

This is elaborated upon in the work *The Chinese Anarchist Movement*,<sup>3</sup> where Scalpino and Yu write:

Mao's interest in Anarchism was by no means unique. On the contrary, it marked him as a part of the central radical stream of those times. Anarchism preceded Marxism in northeast Asia as the predominant radical expression of the Westernized intellectual. Between 1905 and 1920, Anarchist thought was a vital part of the intellectual protest movement in both Japan and China. Indeed, in many respects, it possessed the coveted symbol among intellectuals of being the most scientific, most 'progressive,' most futuristic of all political creeds.

But this isn't to suggest that Maoism should be considered part of the anarchist tradition. Quite the contrary, Mao's Leninist and Stalinist influences would largely overwrite these early lessons. But it gives some context to what comes ahead. This unique combination of ideological underpinnings would provide the substrate for a new sort of statist praxis and with it, a new strain of Marxist theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Edgar Snow interviews with Mao Zedong; Scalpino and Yu, "The Chinese Anarchist Movement"

<sup>3</sup> Scalpino and Yu, "The Chinese Anarchist Movement"

## Second Sino-Japanese War

In 1937, the Japanese invaded the Chinese mainland and began the Second Sino-Japanese War. Previous to this, China had gained relative stability compared to the previous years. However, in response to a land invasion, the Guomindang had to print copious amounts of money to fund the conflict, creating terrible inflation and thus leading to starvation and mass unemployment. Making matters worse, as imperial Japan pillaged its way through the country, it utterly demolished much of the Chinese infrastructure.

Under Japanese control, the Chinese workers would spearhead numerous waves of strikes, although organized to some degree by clandestine urban communists, they were mostly the autonomous action of the Chinese laborers. In the year 1947 alone, there were more than 3 million workers taking part in the strikes, a task it would have been impossible for the communists, severely diminished after the Shanghai Massacre, to have organized alone.

In 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union would both intervene, ending the Japanese occupation in China. But, while the USSR assisted the Guomindang in reclaiming their territory, they also looted significant portions of Manchuria to prop up their own economy, loading much of the developed industry onto trains and shipping it back west. And, despite the fact that the Guomindang was handed control of the nation after the Japanese had been ousted, they were not prepared to manage the system that the Japanese imperialists had built, with its byzantine industrial structures and intense reliance on technicians.

Under these conditions, the Chinese Communist Party would organize the peasantry and, to a lesser degree, the urban workers in the coming years, waging a new civil war against the Guomindang. Although they suffered enormously in the conflict, the communists took over more and more areas of the mainland, where they would institute a highly mixed economic program, largely owing to the differing levels of industrialization, but also because of the mismatch of skills of the trained cadres and the new demands of economic management. For this reason, the cadres would, especially in areas like Manchuria, simply re-staff the gang boss system with leaders from the revolutionary urban communists instead. In other areas, some businesses would be run by the workers themselves, even during the period of seizure by the state, but it was by no means the standard arrangement. At the same time, nationalization spiked. Before the war was even over, *Sorghum and Steel* notes that the new state sector, helmed by the CCP:<sup>4</sup>

owned 58 percent of the country's electric power resources, 68 percent of coal output, 92 percent of pig iron production, 97 percent of steel, 68 percent of cement, 53 percent of cotton yarn. It also controlled all railways, most modern communications and transport, and the major share of the banking business and domestic and foreign trade. [...] But these enterprises, despite being under state monopoly, were still yoked to the capitalist imperatives of value accumulation, and were therefore understood as 'state capitalist,' rather than 'socialist.'

Unlike the USSR, the new Maoist government admitted quite openly that these were state capitalist property relations and that a "national united front" in which the proletariat cooperated with the petty and national bourgeois, was needed. Mao said plainly that China:

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<sup>4</sup> Chuang, "Sorghum and Steel"

must utilize all elements of urban and rural capitalism that are beneficial and not harmful to the national economy. [...] Our present policy is to control, not to eliminate, capitalism.

This new state, however, would not be a bourgeois republic, Mao argued, because it would be “under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party.” In other words, just as Trotsky had criticized Lenin for many years ago, the Maoist state was practicing substitutionism: A sort of metaphysical transformation wherein the state is dubbed a “worker’s state,” because it is led by ideological communists who claim to be acting in the interests of the workers.

During this period, the main goal of the communist party would be to normalize economic organization and bring urban production back to previous levels, while, in the countryside, delivering on their promises to expropriate land from the landlords and return it to the peasants. But the countryside was not their focus at this stage. In 1949, Mao declared that “the centre of gravity of the Party’s work has shifted from the village to the city.”

Although some program of productivism was clearly necessary in light of the devastation that had been wrought by years of war, the choice of class collaboration would also spell the recreation of much of what came before. In many areas the previous bourgeois would leverage their technical knowledge and ability to secure foreign loans in order to maintain control of the labor process. And this was no mistake. This arrangement was the goal of what was called the Coexistence Policy seen in the Common Programme in 1949.

*Sorghum and Steel* summarizes by saying that:

It aimed to complete the ‘bourgeois revolution’ in the cities, utilizing the elements of capitalism ‘that are beneficial and not harmful to the national economy.’ In other words, to ‘control, not to eliminate, capitalism.’ What this meant was effectively the appeasement of the remaining urban capitalists, who would be gradually bought out of their own industries by the state in exchange for offering their technical expertise to the project of industrial recovery and development.

Only a year later, China would sign the Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Treaty, which would establish formal ties between the USSR and China, including an influx of Soviet technicians. These Soviet technicians, having been trained to manage the state capitalism of the USSR, would play a significant role in configuring China’s economy in that same image, a constant countervailing force against China’s attempts to experiment in the coming years.

As a result, Chuang says that:

...the size of the private sector in this period was significant. Though it composed only 55.8% of the gross output value of industry as a whole, private production was some 85% of total retail sales—making it central to the circulation of goods.

This period, even though temporary, as a wave of nationalization was already beginning, did configure a dangerous aspect of the previous paradigm. The state, already coming to rely heavily on grain from the countryside, enacted a grain standard which would standardize the funneling of harvests from rural to urban areas, widening the rural-urban divide that had been so important to eliminate during the revolution.

Ultimately, with much of the gang-boss system in place in the port cities, with a significant reliance on previous bourgeois and Soviet engineers, and in maintaining the extraction of grain from the countryside, the CCP would quickly create a system which harkened back to what had come before. The workers were angered to find how similar the post-revolution economy was to the one they had fought so hard to abolish. Thus strikes were now once again becoming rampant and many private owners were simply closing their factories, firing workers, and planning to expropriate their businesses and flee the country instead of deal with the challenges.

The CCP would, however, force the business owners to increase wages and improve living standards for those in urban areas. They would also seed new unions into the urban economy and establish a national Labor Board in hopes that these entities could mediate the needs of the workers with the bourgeois. However, the workers did not just want better wages and living conditions or bodies of mediation with their employers. They wanted socialism. They especially wanted an end to the gang-boss system and private ownership. Thus, as wages quickly found a new ceiling, the unions just became industrial bodies to facilitate worker agitation and there was a real risk, in the eyes of the party, that they would seize the economy for themselves.

For this reason, in 1952, the party underwent a series of actions called the Five-Anti movement that were supposedly aimed at rooting out infiltration by the rulers of the old system, but which would ultimately serve to suppress the strike waves. This would be a recurring theme in the response of the state in coming years, to avoid systemic critiques, and to instead blame individual operators within the system for incomplete devotion to ideological orthodoxy as a tool to suppress dissent. For this reason, the solution was also non-systemic. Instead of giving the means of production to the workers, the state instead encouraged workers to carry out elaborate denunciations of their capitalist employers.

The party would also use this as an opportunity to seize over 1.7 billion dollars in fines from private enterprises for engaging in, as they said, “various illegal transactions.” This plus various denunciation campaigns, would create a pliable private industry, ready to be seized and transformed by the CCP. But, as *Sorghum and Steel* notes:

While successful in restraining the workers from a direct seizure of power and in crippling the influence of private capital, these programs led to a dip in production as workers and union cadre were constantly mobilized in attacks against their employers and enterprises were stripped of their working capital countrywide. The Five-Anti movement, at its height, ‘cause[d] a number of enterprises to cease operations and interfered with production in many others’ while also setting a dangerous precedent of giving workers power over their managers and enterprise owners. Fearing economic stagnation and renewed demands for a seizure of enterprises by workers, the Party began rolling back the reform movement.

As a result of copying this Soviet project of class collaboration, Stephen Andors in *China’s Industrial Revolution: Politics, Planning and Management*<sup>5</sup> noted that:

...by 1953 approximately 80 percent of the managerial personnel were of bourgeois background and 37 percent of these were pre-1949 graduates, returned overseas Chinese students, or factory owners. [...] By 1953 only 20 percent or so of manage-

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Andors, “China’s Industrial Revolution: Politics, Planning and Management”

rial and technical personnel was made up of urban Communist Party members, promoted workers or directors and trade-union officials appointed directly by the Party.

## The First Five-Year Plan

In 1951, seeing the trend toward nationalization and central management, Gao Gang, a party leader was known to have said:

We are not God, and we cannot work out a perfect plan.

It is ironic then, that Gao Gang himself would be set to the work of creating just such a “perfect plan” in the form of China’s first Five Year Plan, helping develop some of the early Taylorist quota setting and production goals in emulation of the USSR. Although the beginning of this era would see the toleration of forms of worker control, the Five Year Plan would heavily favor the Soviet style of state centralization and Taylorism. Overall, implementation would be uneven and worker revolts would pockmark institution. But the Soviet model, with its reliance on central management and investment in heavy industry, would eventually win out.

In his book *Mao’s China and After*,<sup>6</sup> Maurice Meisner discusses the effects of this industrial transition:

The decision to adopt the Soviet model of industrialization necessitated Soviet-type forms of political organization and state administration. Centralized economic planning demanded the bureaucratization and routinization of state and society. [...] the cadres of a revolutionary party were transformed into administrators and bureaucratic functionaries; workers in factories were subjected to increasing control by factory managers; the revolutionary ideal of the “guerilla” generalist was replaced by a new-found faith in the virtues of specialization and the technological specialist; old egalitarian ideals clashed with a new hierarchy of ranks and new patterns of social inequality; the revolutionary faith in the initiative of the masses faded as industrialization demanded authoritarian discipline, social stability, and economic rationality; socialist goals were postponed and partly ritualized in favor of the immediate and all-embracing goal of economic development. The tendency for revolutionaries to become bureaucratic rulers began in 1949, but it was now vastly accelerated.

Gao Gang’s rise would not last long however. The first internal party purges would begin in 1954, wherein Gao Gang would be among those accused of attempting a coup of the state. Ultimately, Gao would commit suicide, but news would not be given to the populace until an entire year later. As a result of his work however, *Sorghum and Steel* notes that:

Government orders as a percentage of total private industrial output rose from a mere 12% in 1949 to 82% by 1955. In order to soften backlash by the former owners of these enterprises, the state agreed to reimburse them at a fixed rate of interest out of future revenue.

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Meisner, “Mao’s China and After”

The first Five Year Plan had produced a great deal of economic growth, but the people of this new society, both workers and many of the party revolutionaries, were becoming disillusioned with what they saw playing out. Even the general increase in wages during this period would be distributed very unevenly and would come along with intricate piece-meal systems and incentive structures. Meisner says:

As in the Soviet Union, the disappearance of the old economically based ruling classes was accompanied by the emergence of a new politically based bureaucratic ruling class, albeit one in still embryonic form whose members saw themselves as servants of the people.'

This would create tension, however, because:

The old cadres had come from a revolutionary milieu and were the carriers of the values of a spartan and egalitarian style of life and work. In the early years of the People's Republic they had been treated in a relatively egalitarian fashion, the government providing housing, food, and a small monetary allowance for the basic necessities of life. By 1955, however, cadres were divided into 26 distinct ranks with corresponding salaries ranging from 30 to 560 yuan (\$12-\$224) per month...

China was experiencing many of the exact same struggles as the USSR had as they passed through this process. Meisner continues:

For the workers, the industrialization drive meant subjection to increasingly strict codes of labor discipline. It also meant increasing wage and status differentials within their ranks. The more skilled workers put in charge of factory work teams or became foremen exercising authority over fellow workers. [...] Before the First Five Year Plan trade unions had acquired some degree of independence as representatives of the interests of the workers, but by the mid-1950s, the unions had become instruments of state policy designed to raise workers' productivity.

In the spring of 1957, discontent had risen to such a level that the strikes would utterly dwarf all other waves that had come before. Elizabeth Perry wrote about this in her piece "Shanghai Strike Wave of 1957."<sup>7</sup>

Major labor disturbances erupted at 587 Shanghai enterprises [...] involving nearly 30,000 workers. More than 200 of these incidents included factory walkouts, while another 100 or so involved organized slowdowns of production.

The laborers were furious. In fact, they were so mobilized toward action that they began to relate their struggle to the Hungarian rebellions, chanting "Let's create another Hungarian incident!" and saying their conflict would proceed: "from district to city to Party central to Communist International." They built bodies of insurrection, distributing handbills in the streets to publicize their demands, and forming autonomous unions. Secret societies, like those before the upheaval, were now arising and there was real planning for the next revolt.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Perry, "Shanghai Strike Wave of 1957"

## The Hundred Flowers Campaign

In fear of what these revolts could become and seeing the resistance against Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe, in 1956, the CCP would encourage a vigorous campaign of criticism toward the party called the Hundred Flowers campaign. The name came from a poem, one line of which read:

Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend.

Accounts differ quite significantly over whether this campaign was carried out in good faith by the party or whether it was a ploy in order to draw out dissent, but what is clear is that it was motivated by a desire to lessen tensions and resolve contradictions that had been created by state capitalist implementation. But nothing of the sort took place. Instead, a deluge of criticism was unleashed on the party and its bureaucracy, claiming it had betrayed its socialist principles and that the state was becoming a new class of rulers. A leader of the Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party was known to have said:

In leading the masses to carry through the revolution in the past, the Party stood among the masses; after the liberation, it felt the position had changed and, instead of standing among the masses, it stood on the back of the masses and ruled the masses.

Another veteran Communist revolutionary echoed this, in a lengthy letter to Mao and the Central Committee:

There is a privileged class in existence. Even if a national united class has not yet been formed, the embryo of this class is forming and developing.

Even Mao recognized that this central critique was true, even going so far as to locate this bureaucratic class among the Communist Party:

A dangerous tendency has shown itself of late among many of our personnel—an unwillingness to share the joys and hardships of the masses, a concern for personal position and gain.

Yet, despite this seeming agreement, the party would go on to suppress the Hundred Flowers movement and wage what it called the Anti-Rightist Campaign in response. In this campaign, the party condemned many of those taking place in the Hundred Flowers movement as “rightists” or “bad elements.” Intellectuals and students would be grouped in as “rightists” and sometimes given the benefit of being asked to publicly renounce their previous views and reform, whereas workers were grouped in as “bad elements” which condemned them to be treated like nothing better than common criminals. Workers and even some union officials, who had agitated in the strikes and who lobbied anti-bureaucratic criticisms were often imprisoned, sent to labor camps, and even executed. *Sorghum and Steel* notes that:

When high-ranking ACFTU officials [...] stood behind the workers, even going so far as to advocate for independent unions, the result was vilification, dismissal, and a general purge of the ACFTU.

Ultimately, the inability of the dissident labor movement to develop a general strike in the face of prolific state repression would spell the destruction of the Hundred Flowers movement. But, while such a brush with disaster may have convinced other governments to be wary of experimentation and uncertainty, the Chinese communists would then undertake one of the most ambitious projects carried out in human history, The Great Leap Forward.

## **The Great Leap Forward**

To understand why the Chinese Communist Party turned its focus to rural areas during this period, it is necessary that we come to understand the dynamics of the post-revolutionary countryside and Mao's ideology toward these elements. Notably, he diverged from Marx, who thought that the proletariat were the only class where a truly revolutionary consciousness would arise. Mao instead believed that, because the peasants had not yet been propagandized by capitalist social relations and that they were the most incentivized to escape their conditions, they were the most revolutionary class, not the proletariat.

However, projects being carried out in the countryside, while delivering on the desires the peasants had before the revolution to give over ownership of the land, were also concentrating wealth in the hands of many of the small proprietors. Now controlling their land and producing the grain which fueled the needs of the growing Chinese economy, it was feared that they were becoming a new capitalist class. The task of confiscating the land of the rich peasants and equalizing the share with those less fortunate, had been postponed until somewhere around 1955. But now it was done with brutal quickness.

In less than a year, the entirety of the Chinese peasant population had been forced into collectives. And, as expected, this process was not carried out without resistance by the peasants. There were riots in many rural areas during 1957 and general unrest, some of them even forcefully dissolving the cooperatives they were forced into.

But, whereas the CCP had suppressed the Hundred Flowers movement in the urban areas through the anti-rightist campaign, they would need a much different approach to the rural areas. Although the pre-revolutionary state had been worthy of overthrow, it had also been much more distant, accommodating the peasants to lifestyles of self-sufficiency and distance from the ruling class. For this reason, they were not simply motivated by promises of socialism, but were also quite anarchic in their desire to have state interference reduced in their lives.

With all of these factors together, and in perhaps one of boldest decisions of the entire Chinese revolutionary project, Mao decided to send a huge number of party apparatchiks and urban intelligentsia into the countryside, demanding that they go and work the fields and labor alongside the peasants. This move would dissolve much of the bureaucracy of the central party, but it would also concentrate power even further in the hands of Mao and his inner circle, as it decreased the number of power holders in the state and thus decreased internal competition. Indeed, the state still maintained absolute control during this period; there were simply fewer bureaucrats involved in the construction and administration of that control.

Meanwhile, as the bureaucrats flooded into the countryside, the peasants were told through official proclamations to carry out a variety of economic experiments and that they would be given complete freedom in doing so. However, in reality, the state would pick from the vast

array which arose, those which were most preferable to its needs and exert heavy pressure on the peasants to abide by it. That preference was called the Commune model.

In this commune model, all property was shared among several thousand households, all activities, farming, food preparation, and so on, were carried out in large communal facilities. Yet the administration of labor was not determined openly and democratically by the people. Instead, in this model, administrators (often party bureaucrats banished from the central apparatus) would determine everything about the workdays of the peasants; what fields they would work, how long they would labor at each, and what production quotas would be set. In this way, although property had been communalized, control was handed over to a thousand petty dictators. And the workers therefore had less control over their work than they had before during the years of individual farmship laboring which they had become accustomed to.

Even Mah-Ki, a writer who was sympathetic to the policies of this era, says in his work *The People's Communes*<sup>8</sup> that:

The commune movement as a whole was largely compulsory in character. Though the CCP agrees in words with the principle of voluntary consent by the peasants, it has not complied with it in deeds. The people's communes started as an experiment in April, 1958, but the documents concerning them were first published in August, 1958. Then in a period of not more than two months 99% of the rural population was organized into the communes. In such a short period, the superiority of the communes could not be proved by an increase in production and by an improvement in the standard of living of the people. Also there was insufficient time for discussion among the masses on how to form the communes ... All was decided simply by decree in this hastily organized movement.

In these new dictatorial communes, the workers were held to highly regimented and militaristic standards. Maurice Meisner summarizes in *Mao's China and After*:

'Our revolutions are like battles,' Mao had declared in January 1958, and by July peasants on communes were organized in battalions marching off to labor in the fields in step, with martial music blaring from loudspeakers. The slogans of the time called upon the masses not only to collectivize but also to "militarize," "combatize," and "disciplinize." Although the militarization of work was ideologically rationalized by Marxist references to the Commune as a community dominated by the armed masses, the purpose was increased labor productivity. But the result was to be the physical exhaustion of the peasants, who were subjected to intolerable physical demands and an increasingly unrealistic extension of the working day

Indeed, the party cadres forced the workers to extend their work to eleven or even twelve hours a day. And such demands were not borne without complaint. In the Honan province for example, the First Secretary of the Party P'an Fu-Sheng would say:

'Peasants' production enthusiasm is not as high as in 1951'; 'we are sitting on a volcano'; 'the peasants will revolt; and may reject the leadership of the Communist

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<sup>8</sup> Mah-Ki, "The People's Communes"

Party.’ ‘The peasants were not equal to beasts of burden in the past, but are the same as beasts of burden today. Yellow oxen are tied up in the house and human beings are harnessed in the field. Girls and women pull ploughs; harrows, with their wombs hanging down.

For these complaints, the Deputy First Secretary Wang T’ing-tung, the Secretary of the Provincial Committee Yang Chueh, and P’an Fu-Sheng would all be purged from the local leadership.

Meanwhile, the party pushed a plan called the Four Pests Campaign, which instructed the people to kill all mosquitoes, flies, mice, and sparrows. Done with the belief that these pests were leading to lessened grain harvests, the policy precipitated an ecological catastrophe. The sparrows had been the environmental check on the locusts and with the sparrow population in rapid decline, the locusts would therefore boom wildly out of control, decimating the harvest. This, on top of what was already turning out to be a weak season.

But the unfortunate intersection of events does not end here. The state also insisted on higher agricultural productivity so that it could export a record amount of grain to the urban centers. All the while, Mao’s party cadres in the villages were falsely reporting that the harvests were increasing as the new program moved forward, giving the impression that this central demand could actually be achieved. All together, in a horrific mismatch of state priorities and the needs of the masses, the party exported the food that was needed to sustain the peasantry while they were in more need of food than usual. All the while, the state insisted that many peasants in agricultural areas be diverted into steel production instead of the production of more grain in what was called the Backyard Steel Campaign.

All of this together led to one of the worst famines in human history, lasting from roughly 1959–1961. Workers, under military regimentation by party cadres, forced to kill animals which would consume the locusts destroying their crops, were being marched at the end of full work-days to distant fields, only to return home and produce low quality steel in backyard furnaces. This confluence of inept leadership and labor coercion would lead to the loss of the Chinese Communist Party’s mandate among the rural peasantry.

Terrified to see what was unfolding, the CCP took the opportunity to recentralize power, to reintroduce market dynamics, and to concentrate production in a small number of profitable enterprises. The Great Leap Forward would therefore be abandoned. Indeed, this failure would prove to be one of the most important turning points in Chinese history; To the party bureaucrats, this was not a disaster of mismatched priorities, it was a practical failure of the workers to manage themselves. From this point on, decentralization would be seen as untenable in the eyes of the party and Mao’s internal control would be significantly weakened.

## **The Cultural Revolution**

This party’s retreat into more traditional modes of market operation and their disputes over his leadership did not cause Mao to demure from experimentation, however. He still saw the bureaucrats as the main opposition to socialist progress. In 1965, he would say:

The bureaucratic class is a class in sharp opposition to the working class and the poor and lower-middle peasants. How can these people who have become or are in the process of becoming bourgeois elements sucking the blood of the workers be

properly recognized? These people are the objectives of the struggle, the objectives of the revolution.

It's not difficult to hear echoes of Mao's early foray with anarchism in these words. But we should not get too carried away, as Mao never conceived of the possibility that the state could be abolished. Instead, he thought that the ills of the state could be diminished through staunch reductions in bureaucracy and by marshalling the masses to brutally criticize unjust hierarchies that were arising within those bureaucratic organizations.

This concept is what draws the line of coherence between the events of the Hundred Flowers movement and the Cultural Revolution and its ensuing suppression. In revolutionary China, criticism was always called for, but it was only meant to be a tool in service of the goals of leadership. Not always the narrow goals of Mao's self-interest persay, but always within the confines of the critiques he had of bureaucracy and no further.

In 1966, Mao would push forward with what is called the Cultural Revolution. In some ways a more ambitious version of the Hundred Flowers Movement, this era would be predicated upon a call to open criticism and revolt, but would also come along with calls to organize new forms of social and economic arrangement, not just in the countryside as it had been during the Great Leap, but now in the urban centers. Just as "let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend" was the rallying cry of the Hundred Flowers movement, the rallying call of the Cultural Revolution would be "it is right to rebel!" And so they did; far more radically than the party had ever anticipated.

In 1966, a group of students called The Red Guard began criticizing the school officials for being intellectual elitists and representing bourgeois tendencies and were denounced as "counter-revolutionaries" by the school administration. However, after Mao read their manifesto, he sided with the students, then had it aired on national radio and published it in newspapers. This turned the Red Guards into a movement, now comprising students and young intellectuals all over the nation.

In January of next year, would come one of the most promising attempts of the Cultural Revolution, the Shanghai Commune. The Shanghai Commune was notable, of all those that were developed during this period, for attempting to emulate the style of the Paris Commune most closely. And it was no coincidence that such an affair arose in Shanghai. Shanghai was not only the center of modern industrial radicalism, it was the very birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party. Further, to add to its threat to state hegemony, it was one of the most populated areas of the entire country. The Shanghai workers, although deeply beset by internal disputes, were extremely radical and intended to take the ideas of the Cultural Revolution to their furthest extent. They made up a list of demands:

The workers demanded that the Headquarters be recognized as a legal organization under 'the dictatorship of the proletariat,' thereby challenging the Party's monopoly of political power; they insisted that the workers be provided with the means to organize all factories in the city; and they called for the municipal government to give a public accounting of its administration.

However, the instructions from the capital told them to return to work and to fulfill their eight hour work days, warning the Shanghai organizers that it was a dire provocation to defy the

central party's instructions, and reminding them that their place as workers was to work. But the workers were fearless. Outraged, some of them took a train to Beijing to deliver the demands to Mao himself, which led to a three day stand-off between the workers and party cadres. At the end, however, the party conceded to their demands. This, and the enormous wave of strikes and direct action by radicals against party bureaucrats, would come to be called the January Storm or sometimes, the January Revolution.

The state would quickly begin working out how to subvert this new body of worker control. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, the Chinese party would be much more clever in its machinations. They did not crush the Shanghai Commune by force. Instead, they used the existence of temporary transition leaders in the commune to undermine the delegate democracy that the workers were trying to create.

Like the Great Leap, the party saw the multitude of experiments playing out and they had a preference for which would win the day. Where the workers had demanded a leadership elected directly by the masses and able to be recalled at their whim, Beijing demanded that they instead emulate projects that were taking place elsewhere and implement top-down, centralized leadership. When one of the heads of the Shanghai Commune, Zhang Chunqiao, went to visit with Mao in Beijing he told Mao that they were planning on eliminating all the heads of the commune in emulation of the Paris Commune and it was conveyed to him that this would not be allowed to happen. Mao was known to say of these demands:

This is extreme anarchism, it is most reactionary [...] In reality there will always be heads.

The structure that the party preferred was called a "revolutionary committee" and it was predicated upon cooperation between the mass organizations, party cadres, and the army. The army, being the direct representative of the central party's will, would become the dominant partner in these "revolutionary" committees, destroying what power the workers had seized through the January Revolution. At the demands of the state, when Zhang Chunqiao returned, he dissolved the Shanghai Commune and instead transformed it into a "revolutionary committee" with top-down control. Projects elsewhere which instated these revolutionary committees would also see nothing more than reformist progress, instead doomed to watch the goals of the Cultural Revolution degrade in slow motion over the next decade.

A year later, in 1968, another group of students, their name abbreviated as Sheng-Wu-Lien, wrote a scathing critique, titled "Whither China?" In it they called out what they saw as the counter-revolutionary attitude of the army and the new state government.

Before the liberation the army and the people fought together to overthrow imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and feudalism. The relation between the Army and the people was like that between fish and water. After the liberation, [...] some of the armed forces in the revolution have not only changed their blood-and-flesh relations with the people that they obtained before the liberation, but have even become tools for suppressing revolution.

They were also outraged at what had been done to the Shanghai Commune, saying:

Why did Comrade Mao Tse-tung, who energetically advocated the 'commune,' suddenly oppose the establishment of 'Shanghai People's Commune' in January? That is something which the revolutionary people find it hard to understand. Chairman Mao, who foresaw the 'commune' as a political structure which must be realised in the first cultural revolution, suddenly put forward 'Revolutionary committees are fine!'

Their critiques were sometimes even independent discoveries of ideas that anarchists had warned about almost a century before:

Facts as revealed by the masses and their wrath told people initially that this class of "Red" capitalists had completely become a decaying class that hindered the progress of history, and that the relations between them and the people in general had changed from relations between the leaders and the led to those between the rulers and the ruled, the exploiters and the exploited, from the relations of revolutionaries of equal standing to those between the oppressors and the oppressed. The special privileges and high salaries of the class of 'Red' capitalists was built on the basis of the oppression and exploitation of the broad masses of the people. In order to realize the 'People's Commune of China,' it was necessary to overthrow this class [...] The fruit of victory of the January revolution [...] has been basically usurped by the bourgeoisie. Social reforms were aborted, social changes were not consolidated and thoroughly realized, and the 'end' of the first great cultural revolution has not been reached. As the masses have said, 'Everything remains the same after so much ado.'

The ultimate failure of Mao's statist program to create socialism and his death shortly after, would lead to the final abandonment of socialist experimentation in China. This event would be what precipitated a change of power within the party and the rise of Dengism.

Sadly, we have not yet seen the defeat of the enemies of Sheng-Wu-Lien in China. Quite the opposite; the authoritarian bureaucracy that outraged the Chinese laborers has grown to catastrophic proportions. In 2011, a man named Xu Lizhi, a laborer at a Foxconn factory, wrote a poem describing what it felt like to be a worker in modern China, titled "I Fall Asleep, Just Standing Like That":<sup>9</sup>

The paper before my eyes fades yellow  
With a steel pen I chisel on it uneven black  
Full of working words  
Workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages...  
They've trained me to become docile  
Don't know how to shout or rebel  
How to complain or denounce  
Only how to silently suffer exhaustion  
When I first set foot in this place  
I hoped only for that grey pay slip on the tenth of each month

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<sup>9</sup> Xu Lizhi, "I Fall Sleep, Just Standing Like That"

To grant me some belated solace  
For this I had to grind away my corners, grind away my words  
Refuse to skip work, refuse sick leave, refuse leave for private reasons  
Refuse to be late, refuse to leave early  
By the assembly line I stood straight like iron, hands like flight,  
How many days, how many nights  
Did I – just like that – standing, fall asleep?

Xu Lizhi would go on to take his own life just three years later, in 2014. What is left of the dream that so many died for? Nothing but symbols and flags and glory-by-association. The only succor for those revolutionaries now living there are the aesthetics of their rulers.

In the last part of this essay, we will return to an inspection of theory, so that perhaps we can arrive at a synthesis of the thoughts of the many great thinkers we have inspected and understand what it was that took place in these projects.

## Part 4: “Left-Wing” Authoritarianism: An Infantile Disorder

In the previous parts of this essay, we spent some considerable time inspecting the historical record and laying out theoretical and empirical arguments as to why states are forces of anti-socialist self-sabotage. We sought two examples in which states were used where very different approaches were taken, so that we could compare and contrast their outcomes.

If the state could produce any other outcome than forced submission of the masses and sabotage of worker control, we should have seen China and the USSR differ in enacting those conditions. But they, in fact, underwent very similar trajectories despite very different material circumstances and ideological approaches. Why? And given this fact, what drives someone in the modern era to continue supporting these projects which, by all means, have now devolved into capitalist property relations? These are the two questions we will inspect in this fourth and final part of this essay.

### The Rot

As we get started I just want to say, a socialist existing before the failures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could hardly be blamed for having believed that the state might function as a transitory mechanism. Despite the theoretical justifications and historical examples that the anarchists used to demonstrate their concerns, the matter of whether the state could be repurposed to serve the needs of the proletariat was still an open question, needing experimentation to conclude. After all, the bourgeois revolutions all utilized a state in the process of overthrowing monarchy. Perhaps, they might have thought, the anarchists were just purists or cynics.

However, we are no longer in that era, we now have within the body of our historical analysis a record of those attempts to use the state for the means of socialism. It is now a matter of fact that the state sabotaged the project of worker liberation in precisely the way the anarchists predicted it would. The anarchists were neither purists nor cynics, they were the realists. Many variations of state socialism were tried and all degraded into capitalism, state capitalism, fascism, or social democracy in the best cases, and we saw only a repeated and thoroughgoing vindication of Bakunin’s words<sup>1</sup> that:

No dictatorship can have any other aim but that of self-perpetuation and it can beget only slavery in the people tolerating it; freedom can be created only by freedom.

So, as we embark on this conversation, let’s just establish what the common goals of all socialist revolutionaries are:

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy”

1. To enact complete control of the masses over their workplaces.
2. To protect from reaction and sabotage during the transition.

So how do they justify their ideology in face of the fact that their praxis in action inevitably suffocated socialism in its cradle and then recreated the conditions of capitalism? As we have inspected in part 1, it is not justified by any sort of theoretical coherence. And, as we saw in part 2 and 3, it is not because it has a winning track record for worker control. As we shall see, the primary issue which animates all of this rhetoric is that the statist have constructed a mythology in which they are the true utilitarians of the left. They believe they are making the necessary sacrifices that will bring about socialism and they are unconcerned if they are viewed as villains as they bloody their hands, because one day they believe they will be recognized as heroes. Said otherwise, they believe that the ends justify the means, without any conception of how the ends are fundamentally intertwined with the means.

Much of the foundation for this utilitarian mythology was created by Lenin himself, but it was spurred along afterwards by a procession of leftist apologists and hagiographers. Many of which marshalled their vast knowledge and intelligence not toward the re-discovery of a liberatory path, but toward the accumulation of excuses for why ailing state capitalist projects around the globe were not producing worker control. Desiring to appropriate these political systems as examples of success, they arrogantly called them “Actually Existing Socialism,” as to suggest that all other forms of socialist praxis were impractical, idealist, or fantastical. The most primary examples of “Actually Existing Socialism” were then the USSR and Maoist China, which is part of what has motivated our coverage of those projects in parts 2 and 3, but it has included many other projects which we have left out for brevity’s sake.

One of the key aspects that comes up over and over in defending authoritarian leftism is the claim that these projects are structured as a siege response to the existence of a global capitalist hegemony. However, contained in this claim is one that is unspoken, namely that socialism is too weak to defend itself. This is the claim, in fact, that is always fundamentally embodied in the usage of the “socialist” state: the workers are too improvident and unfocused to lead themselves against capitalism. The state is a necessary evil to manage the ignorant masses in the war against other hierarchies. Even if one takes the most charitable form of this argument, that it is not the weakness of socialism, so much as the strength of capitalism, it still makes an equally counter-revolutionary claim: command is more efficient than self-governance!

Indeed, this is what motivates arguments around “productivism,” which claim that these projects have to proceed through a period of capitalism so that they can develop the productive capacities of their nations. Said otherwise: they believe capitalism is more effective than socialism at developing infrastructure and productive capacities. From this we can see, even the most charitable version of this argument is anti-socialist at its core.

If worker control is so supposedly fragile to sabotage and so bad at developing its own infrastructure, under the state socialist praxis, when and how will this golden age supposedly come that all of the enemies to worker control are abolished, where productive capacities are sufficiently developed? Are we to imagine some naïve circumstance where the whole planet will be one international state capitalist economy and the supreme global vanguard which has hoarded power away from the workers for decades or even centuries while achieving global dominion, will benevolently decide to hand over its power to the people? Even accepting the charitable

interpretation, how will these future vanguard rulers even know that the productive capacities of the economy have reached a condition sufficient to undergo transition?

These questions remain unanswered because they are built on a fantasy. We are expected to blindly trust the future of human liberation to a narrow group of rulers and their future willingness to dissolve their own absolute power. Such a naive bargain is not a new one. It is, in fact, the story of how the masses have sacrificed their own autonomy and dignity in every era.

In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*<sup>2</sup> and *The State: Its Historic Role*,<sup>3</sup> Kropotkin recounts what remains, to this day, a very compelling case for how the earliest vestiges of lordship arose in the village communities of Europe. In this period, forms of society which had persisted for thousands of years through principles of mutual aid and folk law, were set upon by warring tribes. This did not lead to a Hobbesian “war of all against all,” however. The village communities much preferred peace. For this reason they were easy to persuade that they should exchange some amount of their harvest and land for protection by military brotherhoods. At the same time, the peasants, for long centuries having been the storehouses of folk law, increasingly began to trust this memory and application to specialists. Ensuing from these sacrifices, Kropotkin says:<sup>4</sup>

...gradually the first ‘concentration of powers,’ the first mutual assurance for domination — by judge and military leader — is made against the village community. A single man assumes these two functions. He surrounds himself with armed men to carry out the judicial decisions; he fortifies himself in his turret; he accumulates for his family the riches of the time — bread, cattle, iron — and slowly imposes his domination over the peasant in the vicinity.

In this way, the foundations, although not the entire form, of the lordly order, were laid. As the people sacrificed their power to a small group, they made a bargain with their own autonomy: even a superior one to the ones that state socialists expect of us, as they did not originally cede dictatorial authority to these brotherhoods. But, having accepted the seeds of rulership, it would not be until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that they would tear the roots of domination from the ground, much belatedly recognizing what bargain they had made so long ago.

Where the village communities revolted and threw off the yoke of their lords, they created the walled free cities of the medieval era, the only places during this time that the aspects of communal living and distribution based on need, the most prolific creation of art, architecture, and scientific advancement flourished for centuries. And wherever village communities ceded to the lords, through failure to resist or through capitulation, the communal ways were destroyed and were superseded by the cultural dominance of petty kings and their ideology of power perpetuation for centuries to come.

Like all rulers throughout history, modern states seek to convince us of that foundational lie: that the subjugation of the ruler is the only thing standing between us and a more brutish subjugation. No state can be configured such that it is truly a tool for liberation. Such a notion is only a mirage brought upon by transition from one set of masters to another or in resistance to such a transition. States care only for control of the masses. In believing in their foundational lie, in acting out of fear of internal and external enemies, we accept a pervasive, daily domination

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution”

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role”

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role”

by the state itself. In short, we internalize that we deserve to be ruled. We accept a supreme protection racket.

After all, there will always be some perceived enemies to progress, internally and externally. And if we are to believe the claim that socialism is inherently fragile, as we have been asked to do by authoritarian leftists, it will be susceptible to that same sort of sabotage for all of future history. What will prevent someone from creating a capitalist counter-revolution if indeed centralization and hierarchy are such efficient means of siege? What will prevent them from laying siege to us once more in the future and unraveling our delicate web of social connections? Is a socialist society in this conception not one which will then be constantly on the edge of reverting into state dominance?

In this way, the statist line is a potent form of counter-revolutionary nihilism, because it supposes that socialism is not effective at combating capitalism as a force in and of itself. The authoritarian, socialism is a weak antithesis that must be bolstered by mimicking the power structures of the previous era, not even capable of undergoing synthesis with capitalism under a socialist economic and governmental program.

And, viewing our future in such a way, you can be certain of one thing: if the state is allowed to rule, it will forever insist that it must continue to rule, such that it can protect our supposedly weak projects of worker control from an infinite procession of threats. Every semblance of resistance, every force of sabotage that remains will be transfigured into an existential threat that only the state can protect us from. This isn't some new trick: this is the foundational lie of the state in action.

Authoritarians, having argued so doggedly for the domination of a paternalistic state and having therefore turned themselves into ideological infants, then develop a hyper-reductive view of geopolitics; precisely the one, in fact, that a state would like for them to have. "Socialism" becomes pathologically confused with "opposing capitalist nations" or more appropriately, "opposing all states aligned with the United States." They attempt to simplify the struggles of the entire planet down into two camps, the "bad guy imperialist states" and the "good guy anti-imperialist states." In doing so, worker emancipation is simplified into a single question: "do you support the imperialists or the anti-imperialists?" Woe be to those who do not submit to their reductive understanding. The statist who advocate this position are completely incapable of even understanding what an "anti-imperialist" entity might look like. They, in fact, simply support one imperialist bloc over the other in a battle of two power-hoarders.

Just as the feudal societies of old had more and less power in the monarch, more and less a presence of trade guilds and worker control, these geopolitical blocs of monarchs did not then represent the transition from feudalism into capitalism. They represented only variations of the feudal project carried out with varying degrees of freedom. This black and white campist view of the world is then essentially no different than supporting France over Great Britain in feudal Europe.

This is why it is highly questionable to call authoritarian projects anti-imperialist. If a state becomes powerful enough to defeat the previous empire through centralizing an extraordinary control away from the people, it will then have assembled all of the tools of empire and arrayed them underneath a centralized body. All states are mechanisms for power-hoarding and, given sufficient size and strength, will inevitably bring forth the brunt of their accumulated dominance to degrade the power of any group of people which threatens that continued dominance. In this

way, they force all projects within their influence to re-submit to state power. It is not a matter of moral fortitude in leadership, it is a matter of mechanical certainty and time.

More than just being a body of imperialism itself, the state apparatus, desiring only dominance and accumulation, will only tolerate vassals and its operators know quite instinctively that no body of people who have banished the institution of the state will bow to their will. Thus the only experiments that the state leftist can tolerate are other centralized, state projects with similar socialist aesthetics. The existence of bottom-up management, whether fragile or robust, gives way to the lie of the state's necessity. After all, if socialism can exist in this world and thus demonstrate itself as a possible mechanism to enact the downfall of capitalism, the single-minded accumulation of state power will be proven a dangerous waste of time, having betrayed the cause in its ideological adherence to a counter-revolutionary praxis and the long decades of propaganda which hung upon a loose thread, will be left to unravel.

Imperialism is then not just the end stage of capitalism, imperialism is the end stage of all concentrations of power if allowed to successfully pursue their goals. Kōtoku Shusui, a Japanese anarchist living at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, says in his work *Monster of the Twentieth Century*,<sup>5</sup> that imperialism is to be viewed like a plague and that

...patriotism is the microbe that causes the disease while militarism is the means by which the microbe is transmitted.

Such patriotic propaganda is an inevitable outcome of the state. The state, defining its necessity through the need to protect from internal and external enemies, insists on itself as the storehouse of a canonical national identity, it is the upholder of borders, it is a waystation at which the authenticity of the national vision is validated. To perpetuate a shallow patriotism is therefore contained within its very foundations.

Although a central vanguard may serve to free its people from a previous despot and will almost certainly present itself as the only protection from external forces of sabotage, over enough time, allowed to expand, that vanguard will become a new despotic ruling class, just as the military brotherhoods were to the peasants of the village communities. Thus, the authoritarian praxis can be summarily dismissed as a force for true anti-imperialism because it can never actually eliminate imperialism as a construct; it is instead an ideology of imperial protection at best and imperial competition if left to its devices of accumulation. The true antithesis to imperialism is the destruction of the very structures which produce empires and the only entity which can achieve such an affair, is a stateless and direct control by the masses.

Perhaps recognizing these facts, you will sometimes hear authoritarian leftists backpedal from these arguments and make a very different sort of argument. They will say that statist projects represent successful socialist transformations because economic conditions are superior to what preceded them, appealing to increased quality of life as the only meaningful metric to be discussed. This can be seen in the oft-repeated quote by Michael Parenti: "the revolution that feeds the children gets my support." And such an argument sounds good on its face, until one really turns it over in their mind. While it makes a very fair point, that any revolution which overturns the horrors imposed by some imperial aggressor and improves the quality of life of the people, can be said to have been a successful revolution and we should be very clear in saying that we do not want a reversion to previous norms in these state capitalist societies, that does not mean that

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<sup>5</sup> Kotoko Shusui, "Monster of the Twentieth Century"

these were successful socialist revolutions. In fact, they can be most substantively understood as successful bourgeois revolutions, much like those that brought Europe out of feudalism and into capitalism. Having veiled themselves in the imagery of socialism, these state capitalist projects have constructed a twisted justifying ethos for the perpetuation of capitalist property norms.

As Marx said in *Critique of the Gotha Program*:<sup>6</sup>

The capitalist mode of production [...] rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of nonworkers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal condition of production, of labor power. If the elements of production are so distributed, then the present-day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically. If the material conditions of production are the co-operative property of the workers themselves, then there likewise results in a distribution of the means of consumption different from the present one. Vulgar socialism [...] has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution.

Sometimes, when recognizing this fact, this is when the statist will offer another argument. They will say “okay, so the workers do not own the means of production, but socialism does not happen in a day! Socialism is best understood as the transition between capitalism and communism, thus what these projects are practicing is socialist.” But while this also sounds reasonable, it is just another one of Lenin’s conjurations, a meaningless tautology, even a piece of placating anti-socialist propaganda. Because such a description offers zero features to identify when an economic or social system is socialist, it implicitly encourages the replacement of progress in worker control with bare aesthetics and empty promises. If socialism is just “the transition between capitalism and communism” after all, and does not come along with any attendant features to identify that a society factually fulfills this descriptor, all it requires is a government claiming it will one day become communist. It is a definition requiring a time machine to verify, an invitation for rule by charlatans.

When a state believes that all it must do to be considered socialist is call itself socialist, it then has no obligation to actually change the conditions which represent capitalism. Quite the opposite of these projects representing transitions from capitalism to communism, as authoritarians will sometimes admit in their arguments about “developing productive capacities,” they actually represent programs to build out the infrastructure of capitalism, only controlled by the state instead of a market of private capitalists. Worse, in many cases, market control increasingly returns to private capitalists anyway.

The only thing that meaningfully defines a political or economic system is a mechanical description of its institutions and an analysis of who holds power. Only within its actual material structure can it truly be understood. And do not think that this is the opinion of only anarchists. This was the understanding of all the most radical socialists before the capitulations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even Engels, often considered to be more authoritarian than Marx, says in his work *Anti-Duhring*:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program”

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Anti-Duhring”

State ownership [...] does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces. [...] The more [of them the state takes over], the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers — proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with.

Marx concurred in *Das Kapital*,<sup>8</sup> saying:

The veil is not removed from the [...] process of material production [...] until it becomes the production by freely associated people, and stands under their conscious and planned control.

In the wake of all these empty arguments, there is left only an aesthetic husk of the socialist and communist project that so many once fought for. Anything done in the name of communism, anything using its auspices, appropriating its symbols, or mimicking its rhetoric, gets called socialist, so long as it promises that, one day, it will transition into an economic project of worker control. The modern authoritarian leftist, after they have sacrificed every semblance of worker liberation, is then little more than an aesthete. Because they have no examples of a promising future socialist economic paradigm to point to, they become more concerned with aesthetics and claims of ideological fealty, than they are with actual material re-organization of society into the hands of the workers.

Tragically, this then places authoritarian leftists who have committed themselves to defense of these state capitalist projects in opposition to existing worker controlled economies when they arise. The authoritarians, having attached themselves to bourgeois revolutions, defame anyone who opposes the statist bloc. Even committed socialists are labeled reactionaries, counter-revolutionaries, anti-communists, and so on... And so when a project of worker control and confederation appears in struggle as it is born, the centralized state and its adherents will not only broadcast that project's failures far and wide, they will often even actively work to undermine it from abroad, such as in the case of the CNT-FAI in Civil War Spain, or the Free Territories of Ukraine, or Socialist Yugoslavia, or the Shinmin Commune in Korea.

Sitting atop this mountain of contradictions and a long, established record of anti-socialist measures in their state projects, the authoritarians allow not a single flaw in horizontal, worker controlled projects. Nor is it expected that these worker controlled societies, attempting as best they can to actually produce a material opposition to capitalism, will receive the barest material aid. To the authoritarian it is counter-revolutionary compromise for me, self-destructive purity for thee. Utilitarians, they are most certainly not. They are, instead, aesthetes worshipping at the shrine of the state.

## One Last Return

In his book, *Seeing Like a State*,<sup>9</sup> James C. Scott lays out a robust theory of how and why the disasters of the state take place. The main thesis of his book can be explained in the following way. First and perhaps most important is the idea of what Scott calls "legibility." Scott says that in order for information to be processed by any given entity, either collective or individual, it

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, "Das Kapital"

<sup>9</sup> James C. Scott, "Seeing Like a State"

must be legible to that entity. This is to say, the information must fit within the framework of that entity and must be compressed to the degree that it can actually be received and processed.

The state, as an inherently centralized entity, is composed of a small group of people, yet it makes dictates which affect the entire populace it rules. And, both because this body of people will have their own needs as individuals and as a collective body, as well as because of the literal limitations of individuals within this state body to process the vast complexity of the world around them, the state forces information to be legible to it. But this simplification cannot conceivably represent the diversity and depth of information on the ground and in many occasions it does not want to! Instead, in making the complexity of the real world legible to it, the state will have a tendency to pick and choose the pieces of information which are most useful to it.

This narrowing of the information through need for legibility is what Scott calls “the synoptic view.” That is to say, the legible information becomes a synopsis of the real world. And in choosing the content of that synopsis and making decisions based on it, the state enforces its dominance cyclically, first in the act of choosing which information it gathers, and then as it acts, back onto societies and ecosystems as it perpetuates its needs. The state, viewing “order” as “adherence to state dictums,” then comes to suffocate the robust diversity of the real world. This is one very important reason why there is no possible metaphysical transmutation of the state, no ideological re-translation of the intentions of its ruling body which can ever ultimately achieve control by the masses. The structure of the state is fundamentally built contrary to the needs of the masses in achieving self-determination.

In Rudolf Rocker’s work *Nationalism and Culture*,<sup>10</sup> he presents a very similar thesis. His focus, however, is instead on how the synoptic view of the state also creates stagnation in the creative cultural aspects of humanity. He summarizes this well, early on in the work:

Political power always strives for uniformity. In its stupid desire to order and control all social events according to a definite principle, it is always eager to reduce all human activity to a single pattern. Thereby it comes into irreconcilable opposition with the creative forces of all higher culture, which is ever on the lookout for new forms and new organisations and consequently as definitely dependent on variety and universality in human undertakings as is political power on fixed forms and patterns. Between the struggles for political and economic power of the privileged minorities in society and the cultural activities of the people there always exists an inner conflict. They are efforts in opposite directions which will never voluntarily unite and can only be given a deceptive appearance of harmony by external compulsion and spiritual oppression.

The synoptic view is not an error to regard idly, a hiccup to be mitigated after power has been accumulated, it is an eternal fact about how societies are necessarily ordered as bottlenecks in popular control are implemented. The more thoroughly that centralized power structures intervene in the lives of the people, the more do they force them into rigid, recalcitrant schemas which compress the robust diversity of the real world, and thus bring about the misery of humans and the collapse of complex ecosystems.

This aspect, the collapse of complex ecosystems, is covered by James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, but it is covered perhaps even more thoroughly by the life’s work of ecologist Murray

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Rocker, “Nationalism and Culture”

Bookchin. In his work, *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought*,<sup>11</sup> he gives a very good elaboration on this aspect:

...man is undoing the work of organic evolution. By creating vast urban agglomerations of concrete, metal, and glass, by overriding and undermining the complex, subtly organized ecosystems that constitute local differences in the natural world — in short, by replacing a highly complex organic environment with a simplified, inorganic one — man is disassembling the biotic pyramid that supported humanity for countless millennia. In the course of replacing the complex ecological relationships on which all advanced living things depend with more elementary relationships, man is steadily restoring the biosphere to a stage that will be able to support only simpler forms of life. If this great reversal of the evolutionary process continues, it is by no means fanciful to suppose that the preconditions for higher forms of life will be irreparably destroyed and the earth will become incapable of supporting man himself.

Centralization and hierarchy of power are not only strangling human creativity, they are not only pushing societies into modernized slavery, they are at the root of our failure to steward the environment. Or, as Bookchin says in that same piece:

[T]he imbalances man has produced in the natural world are caused by the imbalances he has produced in the social world.

We cannot conceivably solve the problems at hand unless we are willing to oppose all schemas of simplification and centralization, all hierarchies of power and privilege. These plans for human development are not simply enemy to socialist revolution, they are enemy to the future conditions of life on Earth.

Because, ultimately, this is the true realization that needs to be had, if we're going to reclaim the revolutionary vigor that was once seen in the early 1900s: We did not win the last world revolution. We lost. Cuba, China, Venezuela, the DPRK, and their like, do not represent socialist successes; improvements over previous paradigms perhaps, but they are ultimately the co-option of a liberation movement gone to die in the counter-revolutionary state. We must envision a struggle fought anew and we must envision that struggle contrary to the failures of the authoritarians. They were given their chance and their praxis betrayed the millions whose blood was spilled to bring about worker control.

Hopeful projects exist across the planet, some small and some large, but today, the workers do not control the means of production in any place where those original statist revolutions arose. All of those projects are instead now locked in a cycle of revanchism and bourgeois paternalism. As Guy Debord said in his *Society of the Spectacle*: “the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary class that ever won.”

So, be certain: the only path forward in the task of liberation is the joining together of all oppressed peoples to overthrow the power hoarders and to destroy all of the mechanisms with which they hoard that power; whether those be the the state and capital or whether they be white supremacist ideology, of colonialism, of imperialism, of transphobia, of sexism, of ableism, and

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<sup>11</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought”

of all other variety of bigotry. The ideology which might fuse together these diverse struggles in respect of the structures as they truly stand is anarchism, libertarian socialism, no matter the name it is called by, no matter the people who practice it. Liberation can only come through the hatred of hierarchies of power and privilege.

The state is but one of many forms of human rulership, one that is so pervasive that it has fooled even many fellow socialists of its necessity. But in allowing themselves to be fooled by this myth, they have become the pawns of a machine, convinced of its great men and of their righteous place in the turning of its wheels. Having allowed themselves to become sycophants to this machine, they have placed themselves in ready opposition to the goals of those who seek liberation.

Even more, they have come to believe that their great men and their parties are what drive revolutionary change. They turn dictators and leaders into religious figures, they dismiss the needs of the masses as short-sighted, they appeal to the wisdom of their failed vanguards. These statist, seeking to cope with the anti-socialist outcomes of their attempts, have forgotten that it is the people who drive transformation and that all suppression of the people's immediate liberation is unacceptable. Only where the people reign have we surpassed the age of capitalism.

The revolution of the masses does not wait for permission; it is not an activity of states and power hoarders. Socialist revolution is an act of mass emancipation and thus it can only be an act of the masses. Those who have forgotten this are now the conservatives of the left, counter-revolutionaries laying in wait, hoping to co-opt liberation movements so that they might lead them down the dead-end of state power once again.

As we come to a close, I would like to end on a quote by Leo Tolstoy, a passage from his book *War and Peace*:

In quiet and untroubled times, it seems to every administrator that it is only by his efforts that the whole population under his rule is kept going, and in this consciousness of being indispensable every administrator finds the chief reward of his labor and efforts. While the sea of history remains calm, the ruler administrator in his frail bark, holding it with a boat hook to the ship of the people and himself moving, naturally imagines that his efforts move the ship he is holding on to. But as soon as a storm arises and the sea begins to heave and the ship to move, such a delusion is no longer possible. The ship moves independently with its own enormous motion, the boat hook no longer reaches the moving vessel, and suddenly the administrator, instead of appearing a ruler and a source of power, becomes an insignificant, useless, feeble man.

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