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Until the Revolution: Two Trends of Leftism

An exposition on the practical differences between anarchists and authoritarian Marxists

Bertram Ledbetter

2020

There are two major trends in revolutionary leftism: anarchism, in its various forms, and authoritarian Marxism. While both seem to have large bases of followers, only one of these trends is a potent, revolutionary force. The reasons for this can be seen in the differences between the two camps.

Firstly, anarchist groups tend to be more action-based and purposeful, while Marxist groups tend to lay much more stress on ideology. Due to this, anarchists are much less sectarian. While there's no chance of Marxist-Leninists and Trotskyists and Maoists getting along, despite the similitude of those ideologies in almost all matters, in anarchist circles, one finds anarcho-communists working with mutualists, communalists working with egoists, all co-operating with ease. The fears of one ideological group "betraying" the others that is seen in any united organization of

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A short, rather polemical piece aimed against Marxist-Leninists.
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Marxists is simply nonexistent¹. So how do these groups reconcile their great differences in goals? To put it simply, they don't. They simply recognize that they have a great deal in common, and that they don't have to impose their entire worldviews on each other in order to work together. The Trotskyist and the Marxist-Leninist will spend all day arguing about Stalin, while the anarchists get things done. Look at who was more effective in the movement against the war in Vietnam. The CPUSA, the WWP, all the Marxist parties, spent their days reprinting Lenin's Imperialism. Their party papers ran Brezhnev's speeches, and wrote editorials as if they could convince the whole of America that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong were saints. Now what were they trying to achieve? The goal of getting America out of the Vietnam civil war, of course. So why not, instead, make the much easier argument that, while the North Vietnamese do have some atrocities to their name, the USA has just as much blood on their hands, and that it isn't our right to intervene, and that it's senseless that Americans are being drafted and killed for a war we shouldn't be in? It's infinitely easier to convince a person that the US intervention is bad than to convince them that the Viet Cong are good. And, due to this, the anarchists used that strategy. The SDS wasn't any ideologically-educated organization. They sang Yellow Submarine as an anthem, not the Internationale. The Yippies didn't even have a coherent ideology besides dope and mischief. But they sure as hell could protest, and they all but brought the nation to its knees. "The whole world is watching" they chanted, and they were right. Meanwhile, the headline of the People's Voice was a vicious polemic denouncing the "Revisionist-Trotskyite Conspiracy in U.S.," and I daresay that nobody was watching them.

¹ This tendency is due to the fact that anarchists don't believe in the suppression of opposition that authoritarian Marxists partake in. So while a Trotskyist has legitimate reason to fear persecution in a Marxist-Leninist state, a mutualist doesn't need to fear an anarcho-communist revolution, even if it isn't the most desirable outcome for them.

No Marxist and no anarchist has ever come to power in the United States. But anarchists have been doing much more to improve conditions in the meanwhile, by stopping fascism on the streets, by organizing mutual aid networks, by organizing strikes and demonstrations, all the while the Dengists and the Maoists feud about events that happened forty years ago in a country seven-thousand miles away.

Secondly, anarchist groups are decentralized and leaderless, while Marxists have a tendency to associate into top-down controlled parties. Infiltration of anarchist groups is hard to begin with; to quote our friend Abbie Hoffman on the matter, “For an FBI agent to learn an ideological cover in a highly disciplined organization is relatively easy. To penetrate the culture means changing the way they live. The typical agent would stand out like Jimmy Stewart in a tribe of Apaches.” And even if FBI agents managed to pull it off, what use would it be to them? There’s no upper leadership to sneak into. And the direct-democracy tradition of anarchist groups means that for agents to hold sway, they would need to either become the majority or somehow convince the majority of the organization that their path is the right one. And even if that occurred- that’s just one anarchist cell ruined, and the rest are untouched and unaffected. Its comparatively easy for an infiltrating agent to become a party boss, and quite effectively sabotage a centralized Marxist party. Look at what happened to the CPUSA: At one point in time, 15% of that organization consisted of FBI informants. There’s no reason to suspect that any of these newer Marxist parties won’t suffer the same fate.²

² Of course, this is assuming they actually enough members to cause concern in the US government, rather than dieing out due to infighting with another tiny sect of authoritarian Marxism. Due to the fact that, if theoretically in power, the victorious one of these parties will suppress all the others, a power struggle is necessary, and each party must become the dominant party or else die out. And thus each party is forced to spend all its days writing vitriolic inventives,

Thirdly, anarchists recognize their past mistakes, while the authoritarian Marxists don't. You don't see anarchists trying to defend the brutal concentration camps of revolutionary Catalonia; they recognize their own past atrocities, and work to find ways to ensure that their past errors aren't repeated. But what self-respecting Marxist-Leninist admits Stalin's fault in his Great Purge? What fourth-internationalist recognizes Trotsky's leadership in the ruthless suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion? And for a group of people who so like to pride themselves with their self-criticism and "struggle sessions," Maoists are so loathe to criticize their Chairman for the excesses he perpetrated during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. And this denial of the uncomfortable side of their history weakens the Marxists' standing; before they can even start talking about the theoretical basis of their ideology, they're forced to spend hours making weaseling rationalizations about how every single communist-bloc defector was lying. They have no mass appeal with tactics like that. The irony is palpable that the original forgers of their ideologies had the opposite mindset: Marx tried to learn from the failures of the Paris Commune, Lenin's works do their best to advance from Kautsky's failings. Yet modern authoritarian Marxism has stagnated. Nobody's willing to criticize the established theories, and the works of past ideologues are treated like holy books. To quote Marx, "All great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice...the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." The modern authoritarian Marxist movement is nothing but a farce: a few nobodies draped in the clothing of revolutionaries that died long ago. And so they're left behind while anarchism builds on itself and advances.

Authoritarian Marxism was once a very powerful current in the world. And so its no surprise that its dying such a slow, drawn-

labelling all the competing organizations as "revisionist" or "fascist" or "ultra-leftist," instead of actually doing organizing.

out death: ideology that influential won't go away at the drop of a hat. But its important to distinguish a sunrise from a sunset, a dying ideology from a rising one. Every day there are less authoritarian Marxists and more anarchists. Thirty, or even twenty years ago, anarchism in American politics was a triviality, a little gadfly in a herd of bison. But look at anarchism now! The Occupy movement, the most eminent revolutionary movement in modern America, was organized by anarchists. Its just before midnight, the day of authoritarian Marxism is almost over, and what a long day that was. But the day of anarchism is just about to begin.