

Review of Ronald Tabor's The Tyranny of Theory

A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism (Black Cat Press, Edmonton, Canada, 2013)

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Full disclosure: Ron Tabor and I were comrades and collaborators in the International Socialists from 1969 to 1973, and then founding members of the Revolutionary Socialist League in 1973 (Ron was the RSL's national secretary; I edited its newspaper). Before we reestablished contact recently, we had been out of touch since I left the RSL in 1978.

In *The Tyranny of Theory*, Ron Tabor, a former Marxist, challenges Marxism from top to bottom. Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions, this is a serious effort that should be widely read and debated. His book is a sweeping summary, critique, and in the end rejection of Marxism and its philosophical foundations. The book is ambitious in scope, with chapters on Marx's theory of the state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, capital / Marx's analysis of capitalism, the materialist conception of history, and Marxist philosophy. There's no way that I can do justice to all that Ron has presented in the space of a book review, and I won't even try to do that. Instead, I'm going to make an honest effort to present the book's thesis and what I found to be its core analysis, doing so as much as possible by citations from the book. I conclude the review with my own questions and comments.

In what follows, all citations are from *The Tyranny of Theory*, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

The Thesis

Ron summarizes his thesis as follows:

The main thesis of my critique of Marxism is that it is, and must be held responsible for, Communism. In other words, it is my belief that the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels led directly to the establishment of totalitarian socio-economic systems in Russia, China, Eastern Europe, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and elsewhere. As I see it, the emergence of such systems was not the result of accidents, of unfortunate misrepresentations of Marxism, of unfavorable "objective conditions," or of some other external causes. These regimes represent the underlying logic of Marxism, and the efforts of Marxists and Marxist organizations to create revolutionary societies in the future (should they get the chance) will, in all likelihood, lead to similar systems. (p. 11)

If this contention had any validity, why is Marxism so prone to being misrepresented and distorted? Why have such intelligent people as Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Mao so profoundly misunderstood Marx? Engels was Marx's lifelong friend, with whom he exchanged ideas and collaborated for decades. How is it that even he did not truly grasp Marxism? Why do the overwhelming majority of people who read Marx similarly misinterpret his works? And what good is a theory of social change if nobody but a few geniuses (and philosophers) can understand it? (pp. 19–20)

I am convinced that Lenin and the Bolshevik party as a whole believed: 1) that there is an absolute truth (I mean by this that reality is determined and predictable); 2) that absolute knowledge, that is, perfect knowledge of that truth, is possible; 3) that such truth and knowledge exist in respect to human society and history; 4) that Marxism is the knowledge of this truth; and 5) that within Russia, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were the only real Marxists. (*A Look at Leninism*, 1988, p. 67)

In *The Tyranny of Theory*, Ron sets out to show that this approach of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was derived from the approach of Marx and Engels, who “believed they had discovered the historical logic that will make the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism/communism (through the dictatorship of the proletariat) inevitable. As in the Hegelian world view, in Marxism, there is no freedom to resist the historic process.” (p. 320)

Marx, democracy, and the dictatorship of the proletariat

Ron summarizes Marx’s view that capitalism was creating the preconditions for the transition to socialism and communism by rapidly developing the productive forces and socializing the labor process. Thus, according to Marx, the proletariat would soon be in position to take power, expropriate the bourgeoisie, smash the bourgeois state, and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx and Engels believed this dictatorship would be the instrument of the vast majority to suppress the exploiting minority. Thus, Marx concluded (in *The Civil War in France*) that establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat means “to win the battle of democracy.”

Ron presents the above, but finds it problematic:

A state, even one that is supposed to be proletarian, is inherently a centralized, hierarchical apparatus, based on authoritarian structures and processes, and staffed by individuals trained to work in such hierarchies, i.e., bureaucrats. The idea that the working class can construct a state that is “not really a state,” that is somehow an expression of the workers’ general political supremacy, is absurd. Insofar as the workers (or those claiming to represent the workers) construct a state, they will in fact set up a centralized apparatus, staffed by full-time functionaries, which, rather than remaining subordinate to the working class, will come to dominate it. (p. 58)

Tabor believes that the above describes the aftermath of the October Revolution, as he elaborates:

This, very roughly, is what happened in the Russian Revolution, only there it was not the proletariat itself that seized power, but an organization led by middle class intellectuals who, aided by a mass revolt of peasants and large-scale desertions from the army, mobilized a section of the urban workers to propel it into power, and from that position, attempted to carry out the Marxist strategy in the name of the working class. By a few months after the October revolution (the spring of 1918), the Bolsheviks had lost the support of many if not most of the urban workers and began to repress them. As a result, the Bolshevik-run state established its (dictatorial) rule over the workers rather quickly. In 1921, after the civil war, the Bolsheviks accepted what was essentially a truce with the peasants, the so-called New Economic Policy. But in 1929–30, they went after them with a vengeance, eventually bringing them under complete state control through forced collectivization. (p. 58)

And unlike many others, Ron believes that the same thing will happen in the event of proletarian revolution in an advanced industrial state, and it will happen because of two main factors: first, the Marxist leadership believes that it knows best (since it grasps, or is closest to grasping,

absolute truth); second, because after the seizure of power resistance will likely come not just from capitalists, but will come as well from other sections of the population, including from sections of the working class (since, after all, the working class is not and will not be ideologically homogeneous). In his words:

Let us now assume that a proletarian revolution has occurred in a country where the economic and social conditions predicted by Marx and Engels as the end points of capitalist development do obtain but where the working class is not politically united. Specifically, let us assume that significant sectors of the working population are anarchists, reformist socialists, liberals, or even conservatives, while others are apolitical. According to theory, a major task of the dictatorship of the proletariat is the suppression of capitalist resistance, but what happens if a sizable section of the working class opposes the establishment of a new state? It seems to me that in that case, the dynamic of the situation is for the Marxist workers, perhaps after trying to persuade their working class opponents through propaganda, to accuse them of being counterrevolutionaries, “supporters and agents of the bourgeoisie,” and then to use the state to suppress them. This would probably cause the apolitical sectors of the working class to protest. They, too, would come under suspicion of being counterrevolutionaries and agents of the bourgeoisie and would also be suppressed. Resistance would go underground. In the process, the Marxist workers would elevate Marxism into an official ideology that delineated “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary,” correct and incorrect beliefs, establish a propaganda machine to propagate that ideology, and create a police apparatus to ferret out not only the conscious counterrevolutionaries, but the “objective” ones too. The Marxist workers would thus come to identify the supporters and opponents of the state not by their class positions but by their politics, and to continue building up the state power, particularly the police functions, of the state. But the state, if beefed up sufficiently and with the organs of repression greatly enhanced, would eventually come to threaten the control of even the Marxist workers. In other words, it would most likely come to dominate society as a whole and eventually subvert the proletarian control of the state.

As this scenario reveals, a crucial underlying assumption of Marx and Engels’ strategy is that the logic of capitalist development is not merely the creation of the structural prerequisites of socialism—large-scale capitalist enterprises, employing huge numbers of workers, concentrated in a few massive blocks, and mostly controlled by the state—but also of an ideational prerequisite: ideological uniformity among the working class. Specifically, Marx and Engels assumed that the logic of capitalist development is to turn the vast majority of the working class, if not into conscious Marxists, then at least into de facto supporters of the Marxian program, specifically, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the centralization of all property in the hands of the state. This assumption is certainly arguable. Moreover, if it turns out not to be borne out, the result of the Marxian strategy is not the creation of a revolutionary state that “withers away,” but a state that establishes its rule over the working class. My point in this and the previous example is two-fold. First, if even just one of the conditions posited by Marx and Engels does not hold, the dictatorship of the

proletariat does not behave as they contended it would: it does not wither away; it grows and eventually re-enslaves the workers. Second, the actual results of the attempts to carry out the Marxian program, the ideological/police states set up in the name of human liberation, are the logical and predictable outcomes of Marxism and reveal its underlying meaning. These results suggest the absurdity of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a concept that makes sense (if it does at all) only in the realm of a theory that has assumed away the concrete circumstances of the real world. (pp. 62–3)

Marx's contributions; Marx's determinism

Perhaps even more fundamentally, Ron believes that Marx was a determinist who thought—wrongly—that he had proved the *inevitability* that the working class would overthrow capitalism, establish their own dictatorship, and bring about socialism and communism. In Ron's words, he rejects “Marx's insistence that he had demonstrated that the class struggle necessarily results in the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that the necessary outcome of capitalist development is socialism/communism.”

Like many theoreticians (particularly philosophers), Marx's mistake was to believe, despite his materialism, that his theory is more true, more real, than concrete reality, in fact, that his theory, his analysis of the “laws of motion” of capitalism, actually governs reality. In simpler, if somewhat cruder, terms, Marx was a victim of his own wishful thinking. (p. 169)

However, Ron does admit that Marx made real contributions, and not minor ones:

To me, Marx deserves credit for developing a model of capitalism and capitalist development that is critical of the system, in contrast to the apologetic character of most economic theory. Instead of viewing all economic participants as essentially equal owners of commodities/social resources (land, means of production, money capital, and labour), who meet on the market and gain their just rewards (rent, profit, interest, and wages) for their services, Marx analyzed capitalism as a hierarchy of power through which a tiny elite profits at the expense of the vast majority. In addition, instead of seeing capitalism as a system that functions smoothly, in which economic crises are an aberration, Marx saw it as an antagonistic system, one at war with itself, to which conflict and crises are endemic. Moreover, he attempted to come up with a model of how the capitalist system functions as a whole and how it would evolve. While the goal of a total theory eluded him (despite his prodigious efforts), the model has considerable explanatory value, while the breadth of his analysis, its internal consistency, and the sheer amount of work involved, are extremely impressive. In addition, Marx did discern some of the key tendencies of the system, and his effort to develop a strategy for human liberation on this basis represents a crucial milestone for all utopian projects that came after him. Probably most important, Marx tried to show that the working class is not just a passive object caught in the

automatic workings of an economic machine, but is an active force (a historical “subject”) whose struggles play a central role in the system and point (hopefully) toward its eventual overthrow. This was an attempt to provide a scientific basis for his insistence that “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.” (pp. 169–170)

Nevertheless:

Despite this apparently libertarian vision, Marxists, where and when they have had the opportunity to implement their program, have not created free societies or even societies moving toward freedom. Instead, they have forged social systems that have been among the most tyrannical of any seen in history. This, I believe, is not an accident. Although a variety of factors contributed to these outcomes, a crucial responsibility for these results lies with Marxists themselves, specifically, with the actions they have taken and the policies they have pursued upon their victories in social revolutions. And central to the motivation behind these actions has been Marxist theory, the consciously held views of Marxists, along with the logical implications of these views, of which Marxists have not always been aware. Throughout this book, I have attempted to trace some of the totalitarian implications of Marxist theory. Here I would like to focus on the Marxian theory of freedom.

In the Marxist view, all of reality, natural and social, develops according to natural and social laws. These laws are not just representations—analogs or models—in the human mind of the way the world might work, but are structures that actually inhere in the natural and social/historical worlds and determine what happens. This is why Marx and Engels’ writings abound with references to “inevitability,” “inexorability,” and “necessity.” And this is why they called their conception of socialism “scientific”: they believed they had discovered the historical logic that will make the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism/communism (through the dictatorship of the proletariat) inevitable. As in the Hegelian world view, in Marxism, there is no freedom to resist the historic process. Both support for and resistance to the cause of the proletariat are determined, along with the illusion that this is a matter of choice (remember, “social existence determines social consciousness”). Both “choices” represent the concrete working out of the (Marxian) dialectic of the class struggle. In sum, rather than believing in freedom, as most people conceive of it, Marx and Engels were determinists. (p. 320)

Comments and Questions

My first observation is that the dangers that Ron warns of are very real. The Marxist leaders of the October Revolution believed that there were only two roads open: either the revolution would spread west to advanced industrial capitalist states—especially, to Germany—or they would be crushed by capitalist counter-revolution and invading imperialist forces. With this outlook (or, as Ron would have it, believing in the absolute truth of such a scenario)—they were willing to employ virtually any measures to suppress opposition and deal with severe economic conditions.

Lenin was an outspoken admirer of the American time-motion industrial efficiency guru Frederick Winslow Taylor, and he also wanted Russian factories to be run like the German national post office. Trotsky went further: he insisted, in 1920, that: the end justified the means; the end of world revolution required the survival of the Russian workers' state; and such survival required the most ruthless form of state:

Nonetheless, the road to socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the state. And you and I are just passing through that period. Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the state, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of state, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction. (Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, Verso, p. 158)

The role of trade unions, Trotsky said, was to act as the arm of the Bolsheviks' Central Committee to impose labor discipline and mete out repression:

The continuous independence of the trade union movement, in the period of the proletarian revolution, is just as much an impossibility as the policy of coalition... Not only questions of principle in the trade union movement, but serious conflicts of organization within it, are decided by the Central Committee of our party... The trade unions become the direct organizers of social production. They express not only the interests of the industrial workers, but the interests of industry itself... The unions become the organizers of labour discipline. They demand from the workers intensive labour under the most difficult conditions, to the extent that the labour state is not yet able to alter those conditions. The unions become the apparatus of revolutionary repression against undisciplined, anarchical, parasitic elements in the working class. (ibid, p. 105)

Trotsky's rationale was that these policies were in the interest of the world revolution, because they were needed to sustain the October Revolution, and the October Revolution remained the source of inspiration for the international proletariat. In fact, this was a policy against the working class, a policy of a group ruling over the working class and ruling over the peasantry. I am not convinced that it necessarily and inexorably flows from Marxism—after all, there were contemporary Marxists (e.g., Luxembourg and Kollantai) who opposed the suppression of parties and factions, the “Bolshevization” of the trade unions; etc. And there were those who warned that a new ruling class would emerge out of the state apparatus if it were left unchecked. But in any event, it ought to be clear by now that capitalist restoration is not the only danger, but the likely proximate danger is the consolidation of class rule by the state apparatus (i.e., state capitalism). A state that rules over and suppresses the proletariat is not a proletarian state, and achieving socialism will require the revolutionary overthrow of such a state.

Second observation: There is no doubt that Marx and Engels based themselves on 19th century science. So, as Ron stresses, Marx and Engels (and Lenin and Trotsky) thought that their “scientific socialism” extended—or was at least extending—the scientific method and its (they thought) march towards absolute knowledge of the physical world and scientific processes to the realm of history and social processes. I think that Ron accurately shows how its world view—that science was marching onwards towards discovering absolute truth and knowledge—has been upended

by subsequent developments in science (and mathematics), developments like quantum mechanics; the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle; the shattering of first the foundations of geometry and then the foundations of arithmetic (see Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*, Oxford U. Press, 1980. Kline was the 20th century's leading English language historian of mathematics.)

I don't think that all who today call themselves Marxists think that Marxism is scientific, in the sense that it provides a rigorous basis for testing and rejecting the validity of its predictions in the real world. But I'm sure that I'm not alone in having encountered too many who do, who think that Marxism provides them with a flawless method for interpreting society and all social interactions, and for infallibly predicting the future course of events. (Failures are brushed aside with the wave of the hand and a muttered, "It's dialectical.") And such people do believe that their special grasp of absolute truth ("the dialectic"; or "historical necessity", or 'scientific socialism', or "the iron law of [this or that]"; or "Marxian praxis", or ...) means that they are the ones who are specially qualified to be making decisions for everyone else, and gives them the right to do so. How many times have I heard people say, "I wouldn't want to live in a country where they were in charge"? And when those with absolute knowledge ("the correct understanding"; "the dialectical method"; ...) are in power in a country, the scenarios that Ron describe have unfolded. He is right to warn us of them. It is important to understand that the danger of counter-revolution from capitalist resistance internally and imperialist intervention externally is not the only threat; to acknowledge that the state apparatus itself can and repeatedly has been molded into a class ruling over the working class.

Third observation: However, is the above "inevitable", "inexorable", "necessary"? Must the dictatorship of the proletariat inevitably lead to a command society directed by a group that rules over the working class, eliminates its rights, and suppresses its freedom? In the book, Ron seems to argue that the dictatorship of the proletariat must lead to a totalitarian state following the scenario he described in the passages cited earlier. (For example, his statement that we quoted earlier, that "the ideological/police states set up in the name of human liberation, are the logical and predictable outcomes of Marxism.") Isn't this an assertion of an absolute— necessary, inexorable, inevitable—and of absolute knowledge of how this social process must unfold?

Let's take this a bit further. Ron dismisses Marx's claim that the dictatorship of the proletariat will be the rule of the vast majority and signal that the working class has won "the battle for democracy." He dismisses Engels's statement that the dictatorship of the proletariat is "not really a state." He insists that its Marxist leadership will suppress all opposition—not only capitalist resistance, but resistance from other sectors of the population opposed to the state. And such resistance will persist in the working class, he says, because ideational (ideological) heterogeneity will persist, even after a revolution in an advanced capitalist state. I agree, and moreover I'm sure that the working class would be very heterogeneous—socially, culturally, ideologically, and in many other ways. They will pull in many different directions. But if not by a workers' state, then how does Ron believe that society can and should be structured to deal with the turmoil, chaos, divisions, frustrations, shortages, environmental needs, breakdowns in production and distribution, disagreement as to what to produce, how to produce it, how to allocate it, etc.? And to deal with capitalist resistance and resistance from racist and reactionary elements in the working population?

It seems to me that if we drill down further, we arrive at the questions of: Can the working class rule? Can the working class control a state at the national level? Can it make major decisions about society's priorities? Does it possess the abilities and skills to self-manage regions, munic-

palities, production units, infrastructure, education? Can it address global climate change, gross environmental pollution, gross inequality between different parts of the world? And if some of these skills are lacking after coming to power, can it make use of and control whatever technical / administrative personnel are needed while developing those skills themselves?

But if the working class can't control and run a state, why would they be able to run a city? Or even a factory? And, even if they could run a locale, how could their society deal with the conflicts that inevitably arise between different locales, between different strata of the population, between different groups that are yes, heterogeneous, ideologically (and socially, culturally, etc.) over precisely the issues raised in the preceding paragraph?

Let's be clear: I'm asking these questions, not answering them. It may be that there is no satisfying, positive answer to them. But if we don't address them, and try now to point towards solutions, then what hope is there for resolving the crises that threaten to hurl civilization backwards, if not thoroughly eradicate it?

Fourth observation: Ron's book addresses the danger of a Marxist-led revolution imposing a totalitarian state, because, he says, of Marxists' belief that their "scientific socialism" is the key to knowledge of absolute truth—and this belief, he says, stems from Marx and Engels' embrace of 19th century science and positivist philosophy. But he did not address the main tendency to emerge from this world view in the late 19th century—reformism and social patriotism in the Second International. Unlike the liberals and positivists who were the main social / political expression of that scientific world view, Marx was not a gradualist. He believed that the productive forces were being revolutionized at an accelerating pace, and that the working class was correspondingly gaining in the strength and outlook needed to establish its rule (actually, Marx overestimated the pace). Also, unlike the gradualists, Marx believed that a violent revolutionary rupture would be needed to replace capitalism with the rule of the working class. However, the gradual evolutionary road came to dominate the Marxist movement in the years between the Paris Commune (1871) and the outbreak of World War I (1914). Hand in hand with this, the Second International leadership had an increasing material stake in the system—(e.g., by 1912, the SPD [German Social Democratic Party] was the strongest party in the Reichstag). When war broke out, the positivist gradualism of the Second International foundered, as its various parties (except for those of Russia and Serbia) supported the war. The SPD voted for war credits in 1914; expelled opponents of the war in January 1917; and in 1918 SPD leader Frederick Ebert took the side of the military against the 1918 Revolution, becoming Chancellor and then President of Germany; and in 1919 Ebert and Defense Minister Gustav Noske—another SPD leader—used the vicious mercenaries of the Freikorps to crush the Spartacist uprising and murder its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. These Second International leaders, as is well known, were among the most vocal in denouncing the Russian Revolution as a totalitarian putsch. When warning of the danger of the state bureaucracy overturning a workers' revolution and emerging as the ruling class, it is important to bear in mind that the Marxist current that has been the most outspoken advocate of "democracy" is reformism, home of the lieutenants of the capitalist class, who seek to co-opt and corral struggle safely within the bourgeois system by collaboration with the bosses and their state; and have acted this out in blood.

Final observation: While the question "Why is Marxism so prone to being misrepresented and distorted?" is a critical one, Ron fails to ask a companion question, namely: "Why, nevertheless, have so many of those who seek to transform society to end oppression identified (with Marx and called themselves Marxists?)" I will not go into this at length—I am reviewing Ron's

book, not writing my own—but it seems to me that it speaks to a two-sided nature of Marxism: on one side, holding up a model of centralization, efficiency, and subordination of the individual; on the other side, an almost libertarian vision of freedom and the flourishing of individuality. If we call one side “means” and the other side “ends”, I think we see a contradictory phenomenon. And, in my opinion, both sides need to be understood, acknowledged, and addressed. The libertarian is expressed in a statement, quoted by Ron, that “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.” Put this together with the famous quote from Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* that “The philosophers have analyzed the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” Together, they express the imperative for the working class to act and through its own self-activity to emancipate themselves and change the world.

Ron cites that passage from *Theses on Feuerbach*, but says it is an example of Marx’s insistence that Marxist practice is consistent with and must flow from Marxist theory. Be that as it may, they are not fully consistent—at least, not in my opinion. Ron has amply analyzed the roots of Marxian determinism, and how it has led to avowed Marxists suppressing and ruling over the working class. This is not consistent with the emphasis on the imperative that the working class’s emancipation must come from the action of the working class itself, and that such action is necessary to change the world. This, in my opinion, is why many intellectuals have been attracted to Marxism, and why more than a few who reject the notion of “scientific socialism” continue to call themselves Marxists. (Many oppressed and exploited have been attracted because often, for the downtrodden, Marxists were their only recourse, their only hope for support and defense. This was certainly true for blacks in the U.S. in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. It was still more so for black people in South Africa living under apartheid.)

There’s an important qualification: Change is critical, and has never been more urgently needed than it is now. But change to what? Marxists—and not Marxists alone—have overwhelmingly focused on strategy and tactics of how to take power, and have overwhelmingly deferred the question of what to do after taking power until “after the revolution”, saying (really, rationalizing) with phrases like “There’s no blueprint,” “We don’t have a cookbook,” etc. While that’s true, it does not obviate the need to learn from the past 150 years — first, why and how things went so wrong; second, what we can do differently. In *The Tyranny of Theory*, Ron Tabor has amply—indeed, brilliantly—demonstrated the dark consequences of revolutionary change that puts in power those who are convinced that they possess in “scientific socialism” the absolute, infallible way to socialism and communism. The task for us all is to address how to bring about a revolutionary transformation that will end in liberation.

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