

# **Counterpower, participatory democracy, revolutionary defence**

**Debating Black Flame, revolutionary anarchism and historical Marxism**

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This article responds to criticisms of the broad anarchist tradition in *International Socialism*, an International Socialist Tendency (IST) journal.<sup>1</sup> I will discuss topics such as the use of sources, defending revolutions and freedom, the Spanish anarchists, anarchism and democracy, the historical role of Marxism, and the Russian Revolution.

The articles I am engaging with are marked by commendable goodwill; I strive for the same. Paul Blackledge's article rejects "caricatured non-debate".<sup>2</sup> Ian Birchall stresses that "lines between anarchism and Marxism are often blurred".<sup>3</sup> Leo Zeilig praises Michael Schmidt's and my book, *Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, as "a fascinating account".<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note where we converge. The IST states it is for socialism from below through revolution. If Marx, Lenin and Trotsky are invoked here, it is because the "essence" of their works is taken to be "working class self-emancipation".<sup>5</sup> The term "dictatorship of the proletariat", Leo insists, means merely "the democratic defence of working class power" through "organs of self-organisation; councils, trade unions, communes etc".<sup>6</sup>

By any measure, anarchists favour working class self-emancipation. For Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin, social revolution required a movement by "*the workers and the peasants*", "the only two classes capable of so mighty an insurrection".<sup>7</sup> The "new social order" would be constructed "from the bottom up" by the "organisation and power of the working masses".<sup>8</sup> The popular classes would "take upon themselves the task of rebuilding society",<sup>9</sup> through revolutionary *counter-power and counter-culture*, outside and against the ruling class, state and capital.

We have real differences too: these require comradely yet frank discussion. The first step in avoiding "caricatured non-debate" is to engage seriously with what Leo calls the "often obscured" history of the broad anarchist tradition. It is a pity, then, that Leo's review concentrates on refuting (as I will show, not convincingly) what *Black Flame* said about mainstream Marxism. The point of *Black Flame* is not to study Marxism, but the 150 year tradition of anarchism and syndicalism—a mass movement with a sophisticated theory, usually caricatured by Marxists.

Benedict Anderson notes that the broad anarchist tradition was long the "dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical left", "the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism".<sup>10</sup> Into the 1950s its movements were often larger than their Marxist rivals. In its dark years, into the 1980s, the tradition remained important in unions and armed struggles in Asia, Latin America and southern Europe, and in the Cuban and Soviet undergrounds.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I develop these arguments more in a paper here. Thanks to Shawn Hattingh, Ian Bekker, Iain McKay and Wayne Price for feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p132.

<sup>3</sup> Birchall, 2010, p177.

<sup>4</sup> Zeilig, 2009, pp221-2. I use the term "syndicalism" to refer to revolutionary trade unionism that combines daily struggles with the goal of seizing the means of production. It emerged from the anarchist wing of the First International; it is an anarchist strategy and all its forms are part of the "broad anarchist tradition".

<sup>5</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p132.

<sup>6</sup> Zeilig, 2009, pp221-222.

<sup>7</sup> Bakunin (1870), pp185,189, emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Bakunin, 1953, pp300,319,378.

<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin (1912), p188.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 2006, pp2,54.

<sup>11</sup> See the online article for full citations.

Today anarchists are central to the “most determined and combative of the movements” fighting capitalist globalisation.<sup>12</sup> A 2007 syndicalist union summit in Paris drew 250 delegates worldwide, Africans the biggest continental grouping.<sup>13</sup> There is a global spread of anarchist values: bottom-up organising and direct action outside the official political system.<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Paul and Leo that anarchists have caricatured Marxists, but the reverse is true too—often because Marxists use unreliable or hostile sources, dismissing other accounts as “liberal”, etc. Ian commendably distances himself from Hal Draper’s bizarre charges that Bakunin favoured dictatorship, etc.<sup>15</sup> Draper distorted anarchist views through manipulation and fabrication.<sup>16</sup> Ian instead cites former anarchist Victor Serge’s recollections.<sup>17</sup> Serge, however, is not reliable. He claimed, Ian notes, that the anarcho-syndicalist *Golos Truda* group “made common cause” with the Bolsheviks; in fact, it charged Bolshevism with state capitalism and dictatorship, and was repressed.<sup>18</sup> The materials of the anarchist movement *itself*—particularly its mainstream—deserve more thorough, open-minded engagement.

## Anarchism and revolutionary force

Do anarchists really deny the need for the popular classes to be “organised ideologically, politically and militarily” to defend revolution, as Paul claims?<sup>19</sup> Leo’s *own* review of *Black Flame* admits the book shows that most anarchist currents insisted on the need to “coordinate the defence of the revolution against internal and external enemies”.<sup>20</sup> A few syndicalists hoped for a “bloodless revolution”, but not the mainstream.<sup>21</sup>

Bakunin wanted the existing “army...judicial system...police” replaced by “permanent barricades,” coordinated through delegates with “always revocable mandates”, and the “extension of the revolutionary force” between “rebel countries”.<sup>22</sup> This is “revolutionary force”, used for *emancipation*, not oppression,<sup>23</sup> based on the peasants and workers “federating” their “fighting battalions, district by district, assuring a common coordinated defence against internal and external enemies”.<sup>24</sup> To be anti-authoritarian *requires* forceful struggle against oppressors; this is no contradiction, as Engels asserted.<sup>25</sup>

The need for “revolutionary force” was recognised by most key figures, Kropotkin, Pyotr Arshinov, Alexander Berkman, Camillo Berneri, Buenaventura Durruti, Emma Goldman, Praxedis Guerrero, Li Pei Kan (“Ba Jin”), Liu Sifu (“Shifu”), Ricardo Flores Magón, Errico Malatesta, Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, José Oiticica, Albert Parsons, Domingos Passos, Rudolph Rocker,

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<sup>12</sup> Meyer, 2003, p218; Epstein, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> “Conférences Internationales Syndicales-107,” here

<sup>14</sup> Goaman, 2004, pp173-174.

<sup>15</sup> Birchall, 2010, pp179-180, referring to Draper, 1966, chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> Keffer, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Birchall, 2010, p178, notably Serge’s *Revolution in Danger*.

<sup>18</sup> Thorpe, 1989, pp96,98,100,164,179,197,200.

<sup>19</sup> Blackledge, 2010, pp136,139,142.

<sup>20</sup> Zeilig, 2010, p222. See van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009, ch4, 6.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Chaplin (1933).

<sup>22</sup> Bakunin (1869), pp152-154; also Bakunin (1870), p190.

<sup>23</sup> Bakunin (1865), p137.

<sup>24</sup> Bakunin, (1870), p190.

<sup>25</sup> Engels (1873), 1972. See McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 4.7.

Shin Ch'aeho and Kim Jao-jin. It spurred anarchist/syndicalist militias in China, Cuba, Ireland, Korea/Manchuria, Mexico, Spain, Russia, the Ukraine and United States.<sup>26</sup> It was the official stance of, for instance, the anarchist majority of the post-1872 First International, the syndicalist International Workers' Association (1922), the Eastern Anarchist League (1927), the Korean People's Association in Manchuria and Spain's National Confederation of Labour (CNT).

Paul says: "Once social movements are strong enough to point towards a real alternative to the *status quo*, states will intervene with the aim of suppressing them".<sup>27</sup> What anarchist would deny this? To suggest anarchists and syndicalists ignore the state is equivalent to insisting Marxism ignores capitalism. The anarchist mainstream does not agree with the self-proclaimed Marxist John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power*.<sup>28</sup>

Paul claims the CNT joined the Spanish Popular Front in 1936 because anarchists lacked a plan for "coordinating the military opposition to Franco's fascists".<sup>29</sup> In fact, joining violated CNT policy, and was driven by fear of isolation and fighting on two fronts. Since the 1870s Spanish anarchists aimed to "annihilate the power of the state" through "superior firing power".<sup>30</sup> From 1932 the CNT and the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI) organised insurrections, stressing armed defence and coordination through a National Revolutionary Council.<sup>31</sup> This was reiterated at the 1936 FAI and CNT congresses,<sup>32</sup> was still official policy in August 1936, and was partially implemented through the Council of Aragon.<sup>33</sup> In 1937 the dissident Friends of Durruti *reiterated* it, calling for a National Defence Council, not a Popular Front.<sup>34</sup>

## **Anarchism, democracy and armed defence of revolution**

What is the place of participatory democracy, debate and freedom in this scenario? First, the FAI / CNT / Friends of Durruti insisted, coordinated military defence was subject to the basic aims of the revolution—self-management, collectivisation and emancipation—and to the popular classes' organs of counterpower. Repeating Bakunin's arguments, the National Defence Council would be "elected by democratic vote", under revocable mandate.<sup>35</sup> Handing power to officers or a revolutionary clique would destroy revolution *from within* as surely as external defeat.

Secondly, the revolution is for *libertarian communism*, ie for freedom, *against* capitalism, state and oppression. In place of the late Tony Cliff's notion that it is acceptable that "tactics contradict principles",<sup>36</sup> anarchists insist means must match ends, because they shape them.

Defence of revolution *necessarily* includes defence of participatory democratic processes and structures, and of political and civil rights. The democratic heart of counterpower cannot be cut out to "save" the revolution: it is *both its means and its end*.

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<sup>26</sup> See online paper for references, and "Declaration of the Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism": Thorpe, 1989, p324.

<sup>27</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p139.

<sup>28</sup> Holloway, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p139.

<sup>30</sup> Maura, 1971, pp66,68, 72, 80–83.

<sup>31</sup> Gómez Casas, 1986, pp137, 144, 154–157.

<sup>32</sup> Gómez Casas, 1986, pp171, 173–175; CNT (1 May 1936), pp10–11.

<sup>33</sup> Paz, 1987, p247.

<sup>34</sup> Friends of Durruti (1938, 1978), p25.

<sup>35</sup> Friends of Durruti (1938, 1978), p25.

<sup>36</sup> Birchall, 2010, p175.

The basic system would be popular self-government through worker/community assemblies and councils made up of mandated and recallable delegates, with basic rights protected at all times. As Diego Abad de Santillan wrote, anarchists “oppose with force those who try to subjugate us on behalf of their interests or concepts”, but do not “resort to force against those who do not share our points of view”.<sup>37</sup>

Legitimate coercion is applied to external threats, including the counter-revolutionary ruling class, and to internal anti-social crime; the majority within the system is prevented from oppressing internal dissenters and minorities; internal dissidents are prevented from forcible disruption. Anarchism will be the guiding revolutionary programme because it is *freely accepted* by the *popular* classes through *debate* and *participatory democracy*, in multi-tendency structures of counterpower.

The mainstream anarchist/syndicalist movement’s rejection of the Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat” was *never* based on rejecting the need to *defend* revolution. It arose from the view that the Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat” was really “dictatorship over the proletariat”.

## “Real democracy”, anarchism and the Paris Commune

Given this, it is odd that Paul claims (echoing Draper) that anarchists reject the “possibility of real democracy”.<sup>38</sup> If “democracy” means the rule of the people, anarchism is radically democratic. Bakunin and Kropotkin viewed the state as a centralised, hierarchical system of territorial power, run by and for the ruling class. Here “all the real aspirations, all the living forces of a country enter generously and happily”, only to be “slain and buried”.<sup>39</sup>

The class system is defined both by *relations of production* expressed in inequitable control of the means of production, and *relations of domination*, expressed in inequitable control of the means of coercion that physically enforce decisions, and administration, that govern society.<sup>40</sup>

The means of coercion and administration are centralised in the state, controlled by state managers: senior officials, judges, military heads, mayors, parliamentarians. Capitalists are only *part* of the ruling class; those who run the state are always members of the ruling class; the ruling class is always a dominant, exploiting minority; the state is centralised in order that this minority can rule the majority. (Marxists have a different definition, but let’s get clear about the anarchists.)

The popular classes’ counterpower, for anarchists, *cannot* therefore be expressed through a state.<sup>41</sup> Anarchist anti-statism arises *from* recognition of the state’s profoundly anti-popular class character.<sup>42</sup> In place of states and corporations, anarchists/syndicalists advocate that the means of production, coercion and administration be taken and restructured under genuine participatory democracy. When the “whole people govern”, argued Bakunin, “there will be...no government, no state”.<sup>43</sup> Wayne Price argues “*Anarchism is democracy without the state*”.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Abad de Santillan (1937), p47.

<sup>38</sup> Blackledge, 2010 , pp133-134, 136, 143-144.

<sup>39</sup> Bakunin (1871b), p269.

<sup>40</sup> van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009, p109.

<sup>41</sup> Bakunin, 1990, p63.

<sup>42</sup> Price, 2007, pp172-173.

<sup>43</sup> Bakunin, 1953, p287.

<sup>44</sup> Price, 2007, p172, emphasis in original.

Paul cites Uri Gordon and George Woodcock, who insisted anarchism is against “democracy”. But did they mean what Paul suggests? They defined “democracy” as imposing “collectively binding” decisions on dissidents, and objected.<sup>45</sup> They did not oppose collective decisions—only this supposed coercion. Theirs is not an argument most anarchists would accept; nor do most anarchists think consensus decision-making preferable.<sup>46</sup> This is not, however, to deny that the Gordon/Woodcock line has a profoundly *democratic* intent.

There is nothing “difficult to understand” about Bakunin praising the 1871 Paris Commune as “practical realisation” of anarchist ideals.<sup>47</sup> Anarchists played a central role in communalist risings in France, Spain and Italy at this time; with Proudhonists, they were a large bloc on the Commune’s Council.<sup>48</sup> The Commune’s basic project was anticipated in Bakunin’s 1870 open “Letter to a Frenchman”, and by Proudhon, revolutionary anarchism’s immediate precursor.<sup>49</sup> Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s only critique of the Commune was that it did not go *far enough* in collectivisation and self-management, leaving too much power in the Council.<sup>50</sup>

## **Anarchism, syndicalism and specific political organisations**

Paul suggests that anarchism denies the need for revolutionary political organisations that can link struggles, and fight for ideological clarity and revolution.<sup>51</sup> He is correct that there is an anarchist current that argues against specific political organisations. He is incorrect to present this current as *representative*.

Many key anarchists/syndicalists advocate specific political organisations, working with mass organisations like unions. Flores Magón stresses “an activating minority, a courageous minority of libertarians”.<sup>52</sup> Bakunin, Flores Magón, Kropotkin, Makhno, Oiticica and Shifu also insist on “organisations of tendency”, based on political unity and collective discipline (others favoured looser structures).<sup>53</sup>

“Organisations of tendency” include the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, Spain’s FAI, Mexico’s *La Social*, China’s Society of Anarchist-Communist Comrades, the post-war Uruguayan Anarchist Federation, etc. These were to fight the battle of ideas and promote self-activity, counterpower and counterculture, not to replace or rule the popular classes.

Anarchists/syndicalists are not “opposed to the political struggle” for rights, but stress it “must take the form of direct action”.<sup>54</sup> Rights should be won from below by mobilising counterpower; participation in the state is ineffective, corrupting. All stress the importance of revolutionary ideas for a revolutionary change, a “new social philosophy”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon, 2008, pp69-70.

<sup>46</sup> van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009 , pp70-71, 240–242, 244–247, 256–257.

<sup>47</sup> Blackledge, 2010, pp131-132, 148.

<sup>48</sup> Avrich, 1988, pp229-239.

<sup>49</sup> Bakunin [1870], pp184, 186–187, 189–192, 197, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Kropotkin [1880], pp123-124.

<sup>51</sup> Blackledge, 2010 , pp136, 139, 142.

<sup>52</sup> In Hodges, 1986, pp83-84.

<sup>53</sup> Bakunin (1865), p138; see van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009, chapter 8.

<sup>54</sup> Rocker (1938), pp64, 74, 77.

<sup>55</sup> Bakunin (1871a), pp249, 250–251.

## Do anarchists misunderstand the “Marxist tradition”?

Rejection of Leninist parties arises from a different concern: the argument that these parties created dictatorships. Paul thinks anarchists have a “massive misunderstanding of Marxism”, and Leo that *Black Flame* caricatures “classical Marxism” in calling it reductionist and authoritarian.<sup>56</sup>

But Paul admits the “rational kernel” of the anarchist critique is “that the most powerful voices claiming to be Marxists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were statist (of either the Stalinist or Maoist variety) who presided over brutal systems” of “bureaucratic state capitalism”.<sup>57</sup> Leo admits that the anarchist critique is valid *if* “you include Kautsky, Stalin and Mao in the Marxist canon”.<sup>58</sup>

That suffices. According to *International Socialism* and IST writers, Kautsky was long “the most prominent Marxist theorist”; Stalin represented “Soviet Marxism”, Maoism a type of “Marxism-Leninism”, etc.<sup>59</sup> By the IST’s *own* admission, then, *mainstream* pre-Leninist Marxism was reductionist and statist; mainstream 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism was “Stalinist or Maoist”; *all* Marxist regimes ended as state capitalist dictatorships, with even (the late Chris Harman stated) the Soviet Union a “Bolshevik dictatorship” by 1921.<sup>60</sup>

I am not sure why Paul confidently claims the “essence” of Marxism is “working class self-emancipation”.<sup>61</sup> That’s been rather unusual in Marxist theory and action, as Ian himself has shown.<sup>62</sup> Libertarian minority Marxist traditions like Council Communism and autonomism are the exception, not Leninism or “classical Marxism”.

Leo claims *Black Flame* repeats the “daily clichés of the media”.<sup>63</sup> I concede—*if* he means the mainstream Marxist media, mass papers like *Umsebenzi*, *L’Humanité*, *New Age*, *People’s Democracy*, *Angve Bayan*, etc. This may be, by the IST’s lights, mere “debased” Marxism—but why should anarchists accept the IST’s judgement? Most *Marxists* do not.

We cannot claim that “the only significance of Christianity in history is to be found in reading unaltered versions of the Gospels”, and ignore 2,000 years of the church and its offshoots. Marxism, too, must be judged by its history, not by selected quotes.<sup>64</sup>

## The early “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the Soviet Union

Paul insists that Marxism’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” merely proposes a “workers’ state” to end “exploitative social relations”.<sup>65</sup> Leo adds that this “most maligned concept” merely means “democratic defence of working class power”.<sup>66</sup>

The problem is that it’s not easy to find a real world example; this is pure assertion. Writers like Cliff looked hopefully at the early Soviet Union. Supposedly, “the land...was distributed to

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<sup>56</sup> Zeilig, 2009, pp221-2.

<sup>57</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p133, note 15.

<sup>58</sup> Zeilig, 2010, p222.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Blackledge, 2006; Harman, 2004; Rees, 1998; Renton, 2002, 2004; Banaji, 2010, editor’s introduction.

<sup>60</sup> Harman, 1987, p18.

<sup>61</sup> Blackledge, 2010, p132.

<sup>62</sup> Birchall, 1974.

<sup>63</sup> Zeilig, 2010, pp221-222.

<sup>64</sup> Castoriadis, 2001, p77.

<sup>65</sup> Blackledge, 2010, pp146-147.

<sup>66</sup> Zeilig, 2010, pp221-222.



the peasants, the factories...taken under state ownership...run under workers' control" and "the oppressed nationalities got...self-determination". If "many hundreds of thousands" died, this was "not because of the action of the Soviet government".<sup>67</sup>

Regrettably, the facts show the Lenin-Trotsky regime to be the template for Stalin's. Land was nationalised, not "distributed", and "the action of the Soviet government" in forced grain requisitions killed millions. Peasant uprisings were crushed with fire and sword: iron dictatorship over 90 percent of the population. Industry was "under state ownership", not "workers' control": in 1919 state-appointed individual managers ran 10.8 percent of enterprises; by 1920, 82 percent.<sup>68</sup> Red Army elections were abolished in March 1918, command turned over to ex-Tsarist officers and party *commissars*.

Cliff condemned Stalin for Taylorism and piecework,<sup>69</sup> but Lenin introduced these policies in 1918.<sup>70</sup> Unions, Harman claimed, enabled "workers' control".<sup>71</sup> Actually, these "unions" were state-run bodies by 1919, active in repressing strikes.<sup>72</sup> Rather than insist that "strikes were not to be suppressed",<sup>73</sup> the Bolsheviks routinely crushed them, also militarising industry.<sup>74</sup> The crushing of the Kronstadt revolt had numerous precedents.<sup>75</sup>

Harman claimed Bolshevism was the soviet "majority party". This was only true in a few cities, for a few months. Defeated in the 1918 urban elections, the Bolsheviks responded by dissolving, gerrymandering and purging soviets, repressing opponents.<sup>76</sup> Power was centralised in the cabinet (Sovnarkom) and Supreme Economic Council (*Vesenkha*); a secret police (*Cheka*) and militarised Red Army; and a state bureaucracy heavily recruited from the old order. Thus an unpopular party of 600,000 ruled an empire of 90 million in 1920. The Cheka's mandate included watching the "press, saboteurs, strikers", and summary executions.<sup>77</sup> Besides 20 times more executions in five years than the Tsarist *Okhrana* in 50, it ran concentration and labour camps, "cleared from time to time by mass extermination".<sup>78</sup>

Cliff claimed the Bolshevik minority was nonetheless internally democratic. By 1919 the party was run from the top down, staffed with *apparatchiks*; factions were banned in 1921 and dissidents jailed.<sup>79</sup> The early 1920s saw Lenin's GPU operate a vast informer network; beatings, torture and rape were routinely used; left opponents were crushed; open soviet elections were prevented.<sup>80</sup> Rather than "self-determination," the Red Army installed puppet regimes in Belarus and Ukraine from 1919, Georgia (1921), Armenia and Azerbaijan (1922). The anarchist-led Ukraine

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<sup>67</sup> Cliff, 2000, pp66-67.

<sup>68</sup> All figures unless otherwise stated, from Shukman, 1994, pp29, 166, 175, 177, 182, 184, 187.

<sup>69</sup> Cliff [1964], pp30-34.

<sup>70</sup> Devinatz, 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Harman, 1987, p43.

<sup>72</sup> Pirani, 2010a.

<sup>73</sup> Cliff [1964], pp28, 34.

<sup>74</sup> For a summary see McKay, *The Anarchist FAQ*, section H 6.3.

<sup>75</sup> Kronstadt argued for new, open elections to soviets; it never called for "soviets without Bolsheviks": Avrich, 1991, p181.

<sup>76</sup> Avrich, 1967, pp. 184-185; Brovkin, 1991, p. 159; Farber, 1990, p22; Malle, 1985, pp240,366-367; Rabinowitch, 2007, pp. 248-252; Schapiro, 1977, p. 191.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Daniels, 1985, p90.

<sup>78</sup> Shukman, 1994, pp182-3.

<sup>79</sup> Avrich, 1984.

<sup>80</sup> Avrich, 1967, pp234-237; Brovkin, 1998, pp20-26, 44-46, 52-53,61-80,90-93; Bulletin[1923-1931]; Dubovic and Rublyov, 2009; Jansen, 1982; Pirani, 2010b.

saw itssoviets banned, its communes smashed, its leaders executed—despite formal treaties of cooperation.<sup>81</sup>

## Delinking socialism-from-below from Bolshevism

It is precisely *because* anarchists and syndicalists defend socialism from below that they reject Bolshevism. Paul claims Bakunin’s critique of the Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat”—that it would end in a “barracks” regime of “centralised state capitalism”<sup>82</sup>—is “superficial” and “inept”.<sup>83</sup>

By any reasonable measure, however, Bakunin’s theory is “vindicated by the verdict of history”.<sup>84</sup> *International Socialism* has tried to exonerate Lenin’s and Trotsky’s dictatorship by reference to difficult conditions: counter-revolution, “imperialism,” economic crisis, etc. The “Bolsheviks had no choice”, said Harman, but to rule alone: the “class they represented had dissolved itself while defending to fight that power”. Power anyway rightly belonged to “only those who wholeheartedly supported the revolution...the Bolsheviks”.<sup>85</sup> Cliff argued that “the pressure of world capitalism” later forced the Soviet Union’s rulers to make the economy “more and more similar”.<sup>86</sup>

This will not do. Leo objects to Black Flame suggesting classical Marxism tends to economic reductionism, but one would struggle to find a better illustration of exactly that tendency than these alibis.

It is contradictory to proclaim that Bolshevik ideology was *essential* to the revolution’s supposed success, yet insist that it had no impact on the revolution’s outcome. It is contradictory to condemn all anarchist experiences (as in Spain) as due entirely to ideology, not context, but to exonerate all Marxist experiences (as in Russia) as due entirely to context, not ideology.

Unless Leo embraces the “no choice” determinism he claims to reject, he must concede some *choice* is still possible when fighting faceless forces like “imperialism”. If he does, he cannot deny Bolshevik culpability in destroying the “democratic defence of working class power”. If he does not, he can hardly condemn Stalin, who faced the “pressure of world capitalism”.

Bolshevik choices led straight to one-party dictatorship, even before the Civil War started (May 1918) and long after it ended (November 1920). This was precisely because the Bolsheviks insisted (as Harman revealed) that they alone deserved power: all rivals were automatically counter-revolutionary.<sup>87</sup> Faced with popular repudiation—by peasants, and by the embarrassingly not actually “dissolved” proletariat through the *soviets* and strike waves in 1918, 1919 and 1921—the party clung to power at all costs.

Despite some genuinely democratic elements in Lenin’s thought, its overall thrust was simple: substitutionism.<sup>88</sup> Even *State and Revolution* is silent on political contestation in *soviets*: the “workers’ party” will be “directing and organising the new system”.<sup>89</sup> Unlike Leo, who hopes for

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<sup>81</sup> For a recent debate on the “Makhnovist” anarchist movement, see McKay, 2007, pp30-32, 39.

<sup>82</sup> Bakunin [1872], p284; Kropotkin [1912], pp170, 186.

<sup>83</sup> Blackledge, 2010, pp133, 146–147.

<sup>84</sup> Compare Blackledge, 2010, p133.

<sup>85</sup> Harman, 1987, pp19-20.

<sup>86</sup> Cliff, 2000, pp29-30.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Lenin [1918], p599.

<sup>88</sup> Price, 2007, pp128-129; Tabor, 1988, pp93-104.

<sup>89</sup> Lenin [1917], p255.

democracy, Lenin insisted that “the dictatorship of the proletariat *cannot* be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of that class... It can be exercised *only* by a vanguard”.<sup>90</sup> This was, said Trotsky, “entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy”.<sup>91</sup>

As for socialism, it would be top-down: “To organise the whole economy on the lines of the postal service...all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat” (see above: meaning the party), “that is our immediate aim”.<sup>92</sup> The “working masses” must “be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded”, “deserters” “formed into punitive battalions” or sent to “concentration camps”.<sup>93</sup> Lenin and Trotsky unapologetically opposed self-management,<sup>94</sup> and Trotsky’s Left Opposition advocated forced industrialisation long before Stalin.<sup>95</sup> Before anyone says I am picking quotations, note that the Bolsheviks acted on precisely the lines these quotes suggest; the State and Revolution’s council system existed only as words in an incomplete pamphlet.

## To which tradition should we look for resistance today?

To defend the Russian Revolution against liberal and conservative critiques is commendable. To conflate this with a defence of the Bolshevik regime that destroyed the revolution is a serious error.

To reclaim socialism, we must reclaim its participatory democratic *and* revolutionary traditions, suppressed by Leninist Marxism. This requires that sincere Marxists seriously engage with—rather than arrogantly lecture to—the black flame of anarchism and syndicalism, and its alternative vision of libertarian communism, revolutionary process and radical democracy.

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<sup>90</sup> Lenin, [1920], p21, my emphasis.

<sup>91</sup> Trotsky, 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, in Farber, 1990, p203.

<sup>92</sup> Lenin [1917], p273; also Lenin [1918], pp258, 269.

<sup>93</sup> Trotsky, 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, in Brinton, 1970, p61; also Trotsky [1920], pp150-151.

<sup>94</sup> Lenin [1918], pp258, 269; Trotsky [1920] 1921, pp150-151; also see Brinton, 1970.

<sup>95</sup> Marot, 2006.

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