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Anarchism and the dictatorship of the proletariat

A response to Chris Cutrone

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AT THE PLATYPUS AFFILIATED SOCIETY'S 2021 Mid-west Regional Conference Chris Cutrone presented a teach-in dedicated to what he, with a good deal of merit, has deemed "the most controversial proposition by Marxism": the call for a "dictatorship of the proletariat."¹ Despite the historical baggage associated with the phrase, Cutrone has argued that it is necessary to address the substance of Marx's position, given his view that it is "how Marxism distinguishes itself," both in terms of theory and organizational practice.² Furthermore, Cutrone believes that it is the Left's "abandonment" of the

¹ Later published in print as Chris Cutrone, "The dictatorship of the proletariat and the death of the Left," *Platypus Review* 141 (November 2021), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2021/11/01/the-dictatorship-of-the-proletariat-and-the-death-of-the-left/>>. All quotes are taken from this article, unless noted otherwise. See also the video of the event, which includes a Q&A, at <<https://youtu.be/Cn8XCyyhgVE>>.

² Ibid.

dictatorship of the proletariat — as a “prognosis, intellectual project and political program” — which has resulted in its “death,” or irrelevance to any productive revolutionary project.³

In this response I want to examine Cutrone’s thesis from a critical, anarchist communist perspective. Though I have read and learned a great deal from much of Marx’s work I do not consider myself a Marxist or find its “political program” (meaning Marx’s strategic approach to transforming society) convincing. I have previously argued that Marx’s writings present us with an underdeveloped, contradictory, and obscurantist analysis of the State; a theoretical framework which obfuscates both differences and commonalities with the anarchist view.⁴ As we shall see, this is also the case with Marx’s closely related conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the many contradictions of which are neatly encapsulated within Cutrone’s discussion, beginning with his initial attempt to offer a succinct definition:

What did Marx and Marxism mean by the “dictatorship of the proletariat”? Very simply, the political rule by the working class. The form of such rule was meant to be “dictatorial” in the sense of revolutionary, politically and socially transformative, overruling social and political norms of constitutional government. It was meant to be a “state of emergency” and hence a dictatorship in the sense of the Ancient Roman Republic, an active political intervention into society of limited duration.⁵

Though the reference to the Roman Republic is ambiguous (if he wished to merely indicate the temporary nature of the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. Matthew Crossin, “Interpreting Marx’s Theory of the State,” *Libcom*, April 20, 2020, available online at <<https://libcom.org/library/interpreting-marxs-theory-state-opposition-anarchism>>.

⁵ Cutrone, “The dictatorship of the proletariat.”

people are spontaneously demonstrating, calling to kill off the ‘putrefied excrescence of the old order’ — that’s what they called the ‘Old Bolsheviks’ ... That was young people, that was the popular masses of people.”²⁸ A claim immediately followed by a concession: “Was it staged? I guess so.” — An astonishing turn, itself followed by *another* reversal: “But no, it was popular ... People were sincere.”²⁹

Such is the balancing act pulled by Cutrone throughout his attempt to elucidate Marx’s true meaning of “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” His phrase simultaneously refers to an *act* by the proletariat itself, as well as a *government over* the proletariat — to something which is *antithetical* to the Stalinist distortion, yet entirely *compatible* with their authoritarian regimes (if we are to call them “authoritarian” at all). Marx’s theory of the State, and so, necessarily, his theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, has always been a contradictory and obscure one. Cutrone’s articulation of it maintains its incoherent and obscurantist qualities, which have served for so long as a great weapon in the hands of both the champions of authoritarian government (whether intended as a “transitory” or otherwise) and the sectarian enemies of anarchism. |P

²⁸ Ibid., 01:11:58 – 01:13:19.

²⁹ Ibid.

“dictatorship,” it was unwise to reference a temporary form of governmental power), Cutrone’s definition appears to echo the more libertarian reading of Marx on this question, well-articulated by the scholar Hal Draper, wherein the dictatorship of the proletariat is synonymous with the act of social revolution. In his major work on the subject Draper contends that, “Marx thinks of class dictatorships [bourgeois or proletarian] in terms of the class nature of political power, rather than in terms of special governmental forms.”⁶ With such a reading, the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” can be rearticulated as follows: it is a revolutionary transformation of social relations (and therefore, necessarily, an *event* of limited duration), outside of and against the political norms of constitutional government.

There is, to this point, *no conflict with the revolutionary anarchist position*, dating back to the emergence of anarchism as a real mass movement of the proletariat, and the influential contributions to its foundation by Mikhail Bakunin. This has been explicitly stated on many occasions. As the great Italian anarchist communist Errico Malatesta wrote to his friend and comrade, Luigi Fabbri:

[Perhaps] our Bolshevized friends intend with the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat” merely the revolutionary act of the workers in taking possession of the land and of the instruments of labor and trying to constitute a society for organizing a mode of life in which there would be no place for a class that exploited and oppressed the producers. Understood so the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the effective power of all the workers intent on breaking down capitalist society, and it would become anarchy immediately upon the ces-

⁶ Hal Draper, *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 32.

sation of reactionary resistance [...]. And then our dissent would have to do only with words.⁷

Fabbri reiterates this sentiment in his book *Dictatorship and Revolution* (1921), to which he attached Malatesta's letter as a preface. In a key chapter, titled "The Anarchist Concept of the Revolution," Fabbri responds to those who confuse notions of dictatorship, authority, and the State, with the forceful uprising of the proletariat:

Violence is one thing, government authority is another, whether dictatorial or not. If it is true, in fact, that all governmental authorities rely on the use of violence, it would be inaccurate and erroneous to say that all "violence" is an act of authority [...]. Violence is a means, which takes on the character of the end for which it is used, of the way it is used, of the people who use it. It is an act of authority when it is used to force others to act in the way of those in charge, when it is an emanation from government or bosses, and serves to keep peoples and classes enslaved [...]. Instead, it is libertarian violence, that is to say an act of freedom and liberation, when it is used against those who command by those who no longer want to obey [...] when [...] it is used directly by the oppressed [...] against the government and the ruling class. Such violence is the revolution in progress; but it ceases to be libertarian, and therefore revolutionary, as soon as, having overcome the old power, it wants to become a power itself, and crystallizes in any form of government.⁸

⁷ Errico Malatesta, *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader*, ed. David Turcato (Chico: AK Press, 2014), 391–92.

⁸ Luigi Fabbri, "Il concetto anarchico della Rivoluzione," in *Dittatura e Rivoluzione* (Ancona: Libreria Editrice Internazionale Giovanni Bitelli, 1971).

that this is, in reality, a dictatorship *over* the proletariat — is entirely accurate. State management maintains the proletariat as a class without conscious social control over production and imposes upon it the alien logic of the propertied class which exploits them, and which sees as a necessary aim its own reproduction as a ruling class.²⁶ One wonders how these relations are supposed to "wither away," when their existence as class relations, within the Marxist framework itself, prevent this from occurring. To Marx and Engels, classes must disappear before the State can be disposed of — but the State (whether democratic or dictatorial) reproduces class society, whether directly or indirectly. In other words, the supposedly "temporary" dictatorship over the proletariat becomes a permanent state of affairs.

Solace cannot, however, be taken in the notion that Cutrone's proletarian dictatorship bears no resemblance to the one-party-states which branded themselves as Communist. In fact, Cutrone's initial attempts to distance his politics from the neo-Stalinist vision eventually give way to his allowance that such brutal dictatorial regimes *could be* seen as compatible with his interpretation. In addition to his defence of Cuba, the USSR, the People's Republic of China, and even the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("North Korea") are all described as supposedly no more or less "democratic" than any other state.²⁷ Most remarkably, Cutrone suggests that at the height of Stalinism the Soviet Union was, "quite politically participatory, dynamic, etc. The purge trials are popular. The

²⁶ For a recent Marxist-anarchist (the author identifies as both) critique of central planning as entailing a denial of conscious social control — and, therefore, the possibility for communism — see, Jasper Bernes, "Planning and Anarchy," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (January 2020); available online at <<https://jasperbernesdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/1190053.pdf>>.

²⁷ Video of Cutrone, "The dictatorship of the proletariat," 01:10:32 – 01:11:57.

lifetimes of these men. While Bakunin's politics led him to take consistently anti-imperialist positions, such as opposing the American conquest of Mexico, Marx and Engels often approved of such events, believing them to be part of a historically necessary process of economic and political development.²⁵

In reviewing Cutrone's discussion of Marx, we can conclude that there are a few dimensions to his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that they reveal contradictions of genuine consequence for revolutionaries today. His first instinct is to define the dictatorship of the proletariat as an *event* rather than *organizational form*, describing it as an *act* in which existing constitutional governments and relations of production are overthrown by the working class. He later clarifies, however, that the dictatorship of the proletariat *does* also take the organizational form of *the State* — meaning, of a distinct array of institutions, characterized by the bureaucratic organization of government from above, claiming the unique power to make and impose laws. As Cutrone himself recognizes, it naturally follows from this that the anarchist view —

further comments on colonialism and imperialism, see Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin: Selected Texts 1868–1875*, ed. and trans. A. W. Zurbrugg, (London: The Merlin Press: London, 2016), 175–80. Bakunin's argument, contained in his 1872 "Letter to Comrades of the Jura Federation," is available online at <<https://libcom.org/article/extracts-letter-comrades-jura-federation-mikhail-bakunin>>.

²⁵ Responding to an early pamphlet by Bakunin, Engels mockingly asked: "And will Bakunin accuse the Americans of a 'war of conquest', which, although it deals a severe blow to his theory based on 'justice and humanity', was nevertheless waged wholly and solely in the interest of civilisation? Or is it perhaps unfortunate that splendid California has been taken away from the lazy Mexicans, who could not do anything with it? [...] in some places 'justice' and other moral principles may be violated; but what does that matter compared to such facts of world-historic significance?" Taken from Engels, "Democratic Pan-Slavism" (*Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 222, February 15, 1849), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 8: Marx and Engels 1848–49* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 365–66.

In these passages Malatesta and Fabbri are simply reiterating the standard anarchist position regarding the need for the forceful expropriation of property and the armed defence of that transformation. Anarchists have always believed, as stated by the great German theorist of anarchism, Rudolf Rocker, "that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously" and that, "On the day of victorious revolution" the proletariat "will have to impose their will on the present owners."⁹ At the same time, however, we have also agreed with Rocker's assertion that a "Dictatorship of a class cannot exist as such, for it ends up, in the last analysis, as being the dictatorship of a given party which arrogates to itself the right to speak for that class."¹⁰

We could easily continue citing such examples. But the question remains: does this anarchist conception of proletarian rule really equate to the "political rule of the working class"? Cutrone describes the task of obtaining political power thusly:

[The] global working class must be in a position to overcome the reproduction of wage labor as the source of valuation for material wealth. The working class must be in a position to outlaw unemployment and prevent the exploitation of the labor of desperate poor people, in favor of gearing global production towards the production of wealth for human needs and overcoming the social compul-

Fabbri's book has yet to be published in English. The chapter referenced here has, however, been translated by João Black, with assistance from myself on *Libcom*, July 13, 2021, at <<https://libcom.org/library/anarchist-concept-revolution-luigi-fabbri>>.

⁹ Rudolf Rocker, "The Soviet System or the Dictatorship of the Proletariat?" in *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution*, ed. Friends of Aron Baron (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

sion to labor as part of the valorization process of capital, breaking its cycle of reproduction.¹¹

Cutrone remains unclear as to what this looks like in practice — i.e., what actual form of social organization the “political rule of the working class” is supposed to take. Are we, for instance, to take calls to “outlaw” unemployment (employment of who — workers?) as indicating a legal process overseen by some “socialist” government? Or is Cutrone suggesting that, through our self-organized activity, outside of and against the State, we are to *force* these crises in the reproduction of capital upon bosses and governments? This would be consistent with both the anarchist view and the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat as an *event* which breaks from the “social and political norms of constitutional government.” It is inconsistent with any legalistic approach, enacted from above through the State-form.

Cutrone does proceed to contrast his interpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the social democratic, or even “democratic socialist,” project of “governing the capitalist state.”¹² “The issue,” he says, “is the Marxist vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transition to, and not identical with, socialism”:

At issue is the possibility of gradually evolving socialism out of capitalism through increasing state control over and welfare provisions in capitalism. Historically, this has produced not the working class transforming capitalism into socialism, but rather the transformation of nominally “socialist” parties into political parties of governing capitalism, turning the working class’s

¹¹ Cutrone, “The dictatorship of the proletariat.”

¹² *Ibid.*

of, the suppression of factory committees, free soviets, peasant cooperatives, and independent political organizations — particularly those to the Left of the Bolsheviks, or even Left-wing factions within the Party itself.²² This is to say that, like so many Marxists, Cutrone ignores the fact expressed so well by Malatesta in response to Engels; “Whoever has dominion over things, has dominion over men; whoever governs production governs the producer.”²³ He is, therefore, unable to examine the ways in which the violent destruction of self-organized proletarian rule, in the interests of maintaining the “dictatorship *over* the proletariat,” reproduced the social relations of class society.

It is worth noting here another concession by Cutrone, as he admits that, at the time of the First and Second Internationals, the dictatorship of the proletariat (being in fact a dictatorship *over* the proletariat, and therefore, necessarily, administered via the State-form) implied the transfer of not-yet-proletarianized colonial subjects to the control of “revolutionary” governments, which were to be established in the most advanced capitalist countries. In various works Bakunin presciently condemned this position, not only arguing that the State-form could only ever result in a dictatorship *over* the proletariat, but that, even in its most democratic incarnation, this would also subjugate the so-called “peasant rabble” and “uncivilised” nations.²⁴ This had practical consequences during the

²² See, for instance, Maurice Brinton’s short but classic work on the factory committees, “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution,” in *For Workers’ Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton*, ed. David Goodway, 2nd ed. (Chico: AK Press, 2020), 369–479; available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/brinton/1970/workers-control/>.

²³ Errico Malatesta, “The Socialist State,” in *The Collected Works of Errico Malatesta, Volume III, “A Long and Patient Work...”: The Anarchist Socialism of L’agitazione, 1897–1898*, ed. David Turcato (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 123.

²⁴ On the dictatorship of the proletariat, or “the proletariat as a ruling class,” see Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. and trans. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 177–78. For

Cutrone gets to the heart of the matter only when prompted by a question from his audience — and his response is remarkable for its honesty and clarity:

[The] anarchist point is that the Marxist vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat is actually a vision for the dictatorship *over* the proletariat, except now the appropriators [of the product of labor; of surplus value] will not be the private investors, it will be the managers as a class; it will be the coordinator class — whatever they call it, it will be the state-bureaucracy, etc. Okay, yes! That is what the dictatorship of the proletariat will be, in fact.²⁰

Incredibly, Cutrone proceeds to argue that the only reason that the Soviet Union, or even modern-day China, cannot be viewed as genuine proletarian dictatorships is due to their isolation; their inability (and unwillingness) to “control the preponderant portion of global capital.” The Soviet Union was, Cutrone argues, compelled to “produce the means of production”; itself an alien logic of capital accumulation. It is in this sense, and this sense alone, that Cutrone concedes an “authoritarian” or counter-revolutionary character to the USSR and other Communist Party regimes.²¹

In making his case (we will put aside the question of being “compelled” to develop the productive forces), Cutrone totally avoids questions of organizational form and revolutionary strategy, and, as a result, fails to address concrete questions concerning the transformation of relations in production. He demonstrates no concern over, or even acknowledgement

²⁰ See 00:42:34 – 00:43:00 of the video of Cutrone’s presentation of “The dictatorship of the proletariat” at <<https://youtu.be/Cn8XCyyhgVE>>. Transcriptions are my own, as the Q&A is not featured in the print version.

²¹ Ibid., 00:43:00 – 00:44:36.

social and political organizations into appendages of the capitalist state.¹³

This critique of *Marxist* Social Democracy degenerating into what we *now* call “social democracy,” or reformism, could have been written by an anarchist. Indeed, it reflects the predictions of Bakunin and his comrades in the First International, made in response to Marx and Engels’s insistence on Sections engaging in electoral politics. Whereas Bakunin, with his materialist critique of the State, argued that “worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment and becoming statesman,” by definition, “cease to be workers” (“For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.”),¹⁴ Marx claimed, “To engage in politics is always a good thing.” In a speech to the 1871 London conference of the International he reiterated this position, stating that, “it must not be thought that it is of minor importance to have workers in parliament. [...] The governments are hostile to us. We must answer them by using every possible means at our disposal, getting workers into parliament is a victory over them, but we must choose the right men.”¹⁵ Cutrone’s assessment likewise conforms with the analyses produced by anarchists at the height of parliamentary socialism. Consider, for instance, Rocker’s summary of the phenomenon in *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*:

Participation in the politics of the bourgeois states has not brought the labour movement a hairs’

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, “The Policy of the International,” in *The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869–1871*, ed. Robert M. Cutler (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1992), 108.

¹⁵ “Record of Marx’s Speech on the Political Action of the Working Class,” in the “Minutes of the Session of the London Conference of The International Workingmen’s Association on September 20, 1871,” cited in Wolfgang Eckhardt, *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Workingmen’s Association* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 97.

breadth closer to Socialism, but, thanks to this method, Socialism [...] steadily lost its character [...]. In the minds of [the Socialist leaders] the interests of the national state were blended more and more with the alleged aims of their party, until at last they became unable to distinguish any definite boundaries between them. So inevitably the labour movement was gradually incorporated in the equipment of the national state.¹⁶

Furthermore, anarchists anticipated Cutrone's dismissal of the typical view that this is simply a matter of "betrayal." As Rocker continues:

The truth is that we have to do here with a gradual assimilation to the modes of thought of capitalist society, which is a condition of the practical activities of the labour parties of today [...]. These very parties which had once set out to conquer Socialism saw themselves compelled by the iron logic of conditions to sacrifice their Socialist convictions bit by bit to the national policies of the state. They became, without the majority of their adherents ever becoming aware of it, political lightning rods for the security of the capitalist social order.¹⁷

So we appear to have agreement with anarchists (and not Marx) as it pertains to involvement in parliamentary politics and the necessary consequences of managing the capitalist state. This is no less the case simply because Cutrone justifies his position with reference to Marx's claim that, "short of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the state remains the

¹⁶ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, trans. Ray E. Chase, 6th ed., (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 54–55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' [...] the dictatorship of capital, or the state ruling in the interests of capital as a whole."¹⁸

On top of this, Cutrone also seemingly wishes to distinguish his reading of Marx from the Stalinist (or rather the "tankie" and "neo-Stalinist"¹⁹) interpretation. This, however, is muddled by some bizarre comments concerning Cuba, which hint at the contradictions underlying his understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the particulars of which have, thus far, been obscured. Specifically, Cutrone describes the Communist Party's regime as "perhaps more democratic" than typical liberal-democracies, despite being "less liberal." This is almost certainly a view informed by a naïve and uncritical reading of how the Cuban electoral process nominally functions, as presented in apologetic accounts. Such descriptions of Cuba's "proletarian democracy," which consider the formality of the voting process in isolation, ignore that the entire system is, at every stage, subject to the bureaucratic control of the ruling party and its repressive apparatus.

This once again begs the question as to what Cutrone really means when he talks about "the State." As mentioned above, I have previously argued that Marx is himself contradictory on this point. Depending on the argument he wished to make, or who his polemic was directed against, Marx's "State" could be either a distinct organizational *form* (situated above society, with the power to make and enforce laws, reciprocally reproducing class society, just as class society reproduces the State), or the *process* of revolution itself; necessarily involving the forceful suppression of the old order and those who wish to resurrect it. Clearly this ambiguity regarding "the State" reflects the multiple interpretations of "the dictatorship of the proletariat," and, indeed, Marx stated that a revolutionary state could take no other form than such a "dictatorship."

¹⁸ Cutrone, "The dictatorship of the proletariat."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*