

Suppress the Oppressors?

The Conceptual Failure of Marxist-Jacobinism

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One of the central reasons that historical Marxists have gravitated to the idea of taking state power is that they have had a certain conception of social revolution. In this conception the social revolution can only happen when the underclass “imposes it’s will” on the ruling class, usually by means of the state. This conception is best expressed by Engels in his essay against anti-authoritarian radicals; “A revolution is the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes it’s will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannon.”¹

The problem is that this conception of social revolution is a Jacobin one. This reflects the extent to which this conception describes a revolutionary movement as in the hands of the elites, rather than the masses. By fighting for liberation one does not erect a new form of social domination, but instead fights against all forms of domination. The imposition of new domination simply means the capture of the movement by elites, this is also known by the name of “Thermidor”, the ultimate outcome of Thermidor being Bonapartism; the transformation of the revolution into it’s opposite through the recreation of the social forms the revolution destroyed.

This conception of “revolutionary dictatorship” is the same conception that allowed communists who took state power to cover the Thermidorian turn of the regimes they created with Marxist sounding justifications. It’s permissible to replace worker-peasant control of society with bureaucratic state control, because after all, our dictatorship is revolutionary, we are imposing the will of our class on the former rulers. It is this logic that allowed Lenin to conclude that even a dictatorship of one individual could express the interests of the working class. The end result is always the real subjugation of the class supposedly doing the subjugating.

Despite the war with the Whites being won, and despite the constant talk of it, there was no dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia. The party ruled alone with the working class having essentially no influence in the governing institutions. Additionally, statecraft required the old Tzarist functionaries be grafted on to the new regime, military authority even after the end of the war, and transformation of a layer of workers into career bureaucrats. The stench of Thermidor became so odious that even before the rise of Stalin proper Lenin set about trying to challenge the fledgling bureaucracy even while his body continued to fail him.

The Thermidorian nature of Marxist-Jacobinism helps to explain the failure of the communists who took state power to use it for real liberatory social change. Anarchists pointed out that the state was elitist and would only preserve existing inequalities. An entity which can only exist through the expansion of central power can only be a tool in the hands of the ruling classes, the exploiters, and in our epoch; the capitalists. For all of the communists who took state power in the 20th century surviving meant recuperation into the capitalist world-system. The laws of the world-economy imposed themselves on the state structures which supposedly were controlled by those who wanted to abolish these laws.

The result was that “actually existing socialism” was simply a mercantilist strategy of capitalist accumulation. Socialist states could only partially insulate themselves from the world-market while never the less being drawn back into the world-division of labor. The Soviet Union’s crumbling economy was the result not of some inherent inefficiency of central planning, this “planning” in fact extended the law of value on a world-scale. In reality the Soviet Union exchanged political-economic liberalisation for being the west’s oil field.

¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm>

The world-crises of overproduction that struck in the 70s eventually made this exchange no longer profitable. Less dramatic changes of a fundamentally similar type took place across the “capitalist world” where private industry was supported by a social compromise of social spending, protectionism, and negotiation between capital and labor. The same exact forces that destroyed the Soviet Union destroyed the post-war welfare state and organized labor in the west while replacing aid with debt peonage in the Third World. None of the other actually existing socialisms have fared much better.

The Chinese dream took off, but only because China led the recovery from 2008 by leaning into globalization and becoming the world’s factory. That same “connectivity” has annihilated its own base by creating the covid crises. Cuba’s purchasing power was decimated by the collapse of COMCON and its only recourse, tourism, was also wiped out by covid, leading to the calamities that produced the recent protests. North Korea is suffering badly under sanctions and agricultural difficulties.² Vietnam and Laos have followed China’s path of market liberalization. The long and short is that none of these societies have the faintest glimmer of a positive alternative to the capitalist world-system since they have been parts of it from the moment of the “socialist state”’s creation.

Anarchists already articulated an alternative to this conceptualization in the 19th century. Social revolution is resistance to all forms of “imposed will”. The masses revolt against central power, resist all attempts to impose it, and organize themselves through their own self-activity. This is what preeminent Marxist-Humanist Raya Dunayevskaya referred to as negation of the negation. There is no re-imposition of top-down power, but a constant resistance against the power from above, and constant production of power from below.

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² https://www.democracynow.org/2021/6/18/headlines/north_koreas_kim_jong_un_acknowledges_food_crisis_d

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