

In Defense of Anarchism

A Reply to Chris Day

Ron Tabor

July 28, 1996 (original); September 11, 2018 (revised)

Contents

Preface from Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation	3
Introduction by Bill Bachmann	4
In Defense of Anarchism: A Reply to Chris Day	4
Marxism and Anarchism	5
Failures of Marxist Theory and Practice	5
The Example of Spain	6
Stalin in Spain	7
The Need for Popular Consciousness	8
Of Necessity and Authoritarianism	9
Russia and “Objective Conditions”	9
Objective Conditions and Predetermined Futures	10
China and the Two-Stage Revolution	11
Failures of Mao	11
Authoritarian Revolution: Great Leap Forward	12
Authoritarian and Cultural Revolution	13
A Bourgeois Revolution	14
Marxist Methods	14
Brutal Marxism	15
You Are What You Do	15
For Permanent Revolution	16
Hope for the Future	17

Preface from Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation

Twenty years after its demise in 1998 the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation continues to be an important organizational reference for anarchism today. The group's origins began in 1989 as a project based around creating a monthly newspaper, Love & Rage, later evolving into a more formal network until becoming a formal membership based federation of local groups in 1993. As the organization consolidated localized anarchist groups, involving hundreds of members over its lifespan, it built a vibrant culture of internal debate and created a pole within anarchism committed to active work within larger social movements. The range of organizing work members engaged in ranged from abortion clinic defense, Latin American solidarity, cop watch, anti-war mobilizations and more.

Importantly members of the organization went on to participate in the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, Bring the Ruckus (of which the late Joel Olson was an important figure), and later in Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation.

“In Defense of Anarchism: A Reply to Chris Day” by Ron Tabor is an important but previously unknown piece in the history of Love & Rage and the debates surrounding its demise. Tabor had been a leading figure in the Revolutionary Socialist League, a Trotskyist group that became critical of Leninism and disbanded immediately prior to the founding of Love & Rage which he participated in. The essay is a response to the better-known polemic “The Historical Failure of Anarchism” by Chris Day, which criticized anarchism as a political tradition and laid the groundwork for Day and his supporters to leave anarchism altogether. Tabor's response had not previously circulated outside of the organization until it was scanned by a former member in 2017. This is the first time it has appeared publicly in print form.

The piece is long and detailed but carries its share of important insights. Tabor argues that Day and others are right to critique the failures of anarchism, but that Marxist authoritarian revolutions provide no solutions either, instead they offer a track record of failure themselves. “Yes, anarchism has been a failure,” he writes, “but let's be clear about something: Marxism has also been a failure, and an abysmal one at that.” Authoritarian Marxism, Tabor argues, whether under Stalin's influence in revolutionary Spain or Mao in China, has not created workers' liberation. Even Lenin's leadership in Russia, which contributed to the October Revolution, developed “only to strangle [the revolution] ruthlessly in the year or so afterward and to build in its place one of the most monstrous and violent state-dominated societies the world has ever seen.”

But Tabor is not without hope; he argues that revolutionaries must continually strive for liberation, and in the words of Marx, contribute to the task of the working class liberating themselves. He writes, “to raise people's political consciousness, including their understanding of the nature of Marxism and all authoritarian ideologies and social structures, is one of the chief tasks of anarchists and anti-authoritarians.” Even in the face of failure, Tabor tells us, transforming consciousness is part and parcel of authentic, liberatory revolutionary struggle.

Note: This piece has been extensively edited for clarity and length. The full version can be found [here](#).

Introduction by Bill Bachmann

Although 22 years old, Ron Tabor's reply to Chris Day's Historical Failure of Anarchism is as relevant today as it was then. The fact that the Kasama Project, a neo-Maoist group which went defunct in 2016, continued to circulate Day's essay and left publisher Kersplebedeb reprinted it in 2010 speaks to the issue. At the time Tabor's reply was written, Day and company had been moving from anarchism to a sort of warmed-over Maoism within Love & Rage. Day addressed some very real questions in anarchism, but did so not from an anarchist point of view, but from one rooted in Marxism. His celebration of the Chinese Revolution, standing armies and the Stalinist two-stage revolution theory introduced a strongly authoritarian current into the anti-authoritarian Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation.

Needless to say, Day's piece played a large role in splintering Love & Rage into two polarized factions: a mushy Maoist (really, social democratic state capitalist) faction, many of whose members eventually joined Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO/OSCL); and an anarchist one, whose members remain in anti-authoritarian organizations to this day.

In the essay below, Tabor exposes Day's misrepresentations of both the Chinese and Spanish Revolutions. He offers a critique of the two-stage theory and Marxist 'objective conditions.' He holds to the point of view that revolutionaries should push uprisings in the most anti-authoritarian directions internationally rather than settle for something 'second best' (really, not better at all). Most important, he emphasizes that people, including revolutionaries, define themselves by their actions, not by whatever banner they may be waving.

Bill Bachmann was a member of Love & Rage and prior to that a member of the Revolutionary Socialist League together with Ron Tabor. He currently lives in New York City and is a member of Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation.

In Defense of Anarchism: A Reply to Chris Day

By Ron Tabor | July 28, 1996

At the risk of seeming uncomradely, let me state my conclusions here at the beginning. When I began my series on Marxism several years ago, I expected to see a revival of Marxism on the left with which anarchists/anti-authoritarians would have to contend. What I didn't expect and what we are now seeing is the revival of Marxism within the anarchist movement and within Love and Rage in particular. To my even greater surprise, what we are getting — that is, what Chris is advocating — is not even the left-wing "libertarian Marxism" that the Revolutionary Socialist League, of which I was a member, advocates, but a form of warmed-over Maoism. Finally, this Maoism is not even of the radical variety that dresses itself in anarchistic garb, but one that is really a variant of Social Democracy, that is, a form of reformist, statist socialism (actually state capitalism).

What's happening, it seems to me, is that for the first time Chris has looked at some of the concrete problems anti-authoritarian revolutions have faced and will face, and then, despairing of finding anti-authoritarian solutions, has embraced elitist, authoritarian proposals as the "next best thing." To be sure, Chris raises these issues as questions to be considered. Yet his discussion is

largely an apology, and a distorted, shallow one at that, of the methods of the Chinese Communist Party. The methods of this Stalinist organization were authoritarian in the extreme and led not to any kind of anti-authoritarian revolution, but to a thoroughly bourgeois/capitalist one, and at the expense of the lives of millions of people, to boot.

Marxism and Anarchism

Before we proceed further, let me say here that I agree, somewhat, with three of the points that Chris makes. First, I agree that anarchism has failed in the sense that there has been no worldwide anti-authoritarian revolution, or even a successful anti-authoritarian revolution in one country. Second, I agree that the anarchist movement has not been very impressive in developing its theory, and that its efforts to explain its defeats have not been fully convincing. Third, I agree that it is not possible to carry out an anti-authoritarian revolution in one country alone. But I draw entirely different conclusions from all this than Chris does.

Yes, anarchism has been a failure in the sense that Chris means, but let's be clear about something: Marxism has also been a failure, and an abysmal one at that. There is today no international classless, stateless society that Marxism advocates and predicts, nor is there socialism (or even a dictatorship of the proletariat), even in one country. In my opinion, Marxists did lead a proletarian revolution in Russia in 1917, only to strangle it ruthlessly in the year or so afterward and to build in its place one of the most monstrous and violent state-dominated societies the world has ever seen. Is this any less of a failure than that of anarchism? If anything, it is more so: anarchism doesn't have the blood of many tens of millions of people on its hands.

Marxism has been "successful" only if one fails to see, or willfully obscures, the fact that Marxism did not carry out anything like the socialist transformations they predicted, but bourgeois, that is, pro-capitalist ones which, whatever their achievements, resulted in the torture and murder of millions of people.

This is something that Chris's document slides over. Chris pays lip service to the bourgeois nature of the Chinese Revolution, but he never discusses what this really means. Of course, we can support bourgeois revolutions, just as we may support various bourgeois reforms under capitalism, but we should not dress up bourgeois revolutions in anti-authoritarian clothes. Nor should we transform ourselves into bourgeois revolutionaries just because bourgeois revolutions have been successful and anti-authoritarian ones have not.

It is also true that the anarchist movement has not been particularly strong in the development of its theory, including an analysis of its failures and weaknesses. But has Marxism been as successful in this realm as Chris implies? In my opinion, Marxism's theoretical "success" is on a par with its practical accomplishments. Marxist theory is very impressive in its sheer bulk. But what about its substance?

Failures of Marxist Theory and Practice

Marxist theory has contributed an impressive analysis of capitalism, capitalist ideology and various facets of human history. This material is often insightful, but not as original or as telling as it appears. Moreover, its implications are thoroughly authoritarian and represent the opposite of Marxism's proletarian and liberationist claims.

Marxism's attempts to understand itself, both as an ideology and in terms of its practical results, has been sadly deficient. Marxism has shown itself to be totally incapable of grasping what it has actually accomplished and what it really is. Marxist analysis of Communist revolutions and the societies they have created range from bald-faced apologetics to self-serving excuses, rarely getting close to a serious explanation. The best Marxism has been able to do are the state-capitalist analyses of the Communist system, such as those of Tony Cliff in Great Britain and Raya Dunayeskaya and C.L.R. James in the US. And neither of these, nor any of the other less insightful analysis, has even tried to address the responsibility of Marxism itself for this very system. Indeed, one of their chief aims is to SAVE Marxism from being judged by and rejected because of the gruesome regimes it has created. For a worldview that claims to be self-conscious, in contrast to the "false consciousness" that afflicts everyone else, this is not very impressive.

I agree that the various explanations that anarchists have offered for the defeats of anarchist movements and revolutions have been deficient: it isn't enough to say that they were defeated/betrayed by their enemies. Yet, however limited these explanations are, they are true as far as they go. But Chris's discussion doesn't even give these analyses the credence they deserve. These revolutionary movements, such as those in the Ukraine and Spain, faced not only the combined animosity of all the old ruling classes of the world, but also the systematic sabotage of the Communists and the Soviet Union. These were indeed overwhelming odds, and even if the workers, peasants and anarchist militants in each arena had been smart enough to adopt Chris's suggestions, they probably still would have been defeated.

Beginning in 1918, no methods were too vile, too dishonest or ruthless, in the Communists' campaign to slander, isolate and destroy every left-wing organization, tendency, and individual that dared even to criticize them, let alone actually oppose them. They had millions of dollars at their disposal which they used to finance newspapers, magazines and books, in fact, an enormous worldwide propaganda apparatus. They had an army of agents, not just diplomats and spies but world-famous intellectuals, who repeated every lie, no matter how absurd, and every slander, no matter how outrageous, about those labeled "anti-Soviet." All left-wing critics and opponents of the Soviet Union and the particular policies it advocated at any given moment were denounced and, where this was feasible, killed, as counter-revolutionaries, fascists and agents of Hitler.

The results, over several decades, was a dramatic alteration of the entire left, the effects of which are still with us. Most important for our purposes, virtually all of the political trends to the left of the Communists — anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, left-wing socialist, Trotskyists — were either destroyed or politically marginalized.

The Example of Spain

The Soviet role in Spain is particularly instructive here, and those who are not familiar with it should not leave it to Chris's shabby presentation to satisfy their curiosity. A knowledge of these events is not only relevant to the immediate point we are discussing, but crucial to understanding virtually all the issues Chris raises. (For those are familiar with these developments, please forgive the digression. For those who are not, please forgive the sketchy nature of the discussion.)

In February, 1936, a coalition of liberal and left-wing parties and organizations known as the Popular Front won the elections held under the newly-formed Spanish Republic. Claiming the need to resist the imminent "Sovietization" of Spain, a group of fascist generals under the leader-

ship of Francisco Franco revolted in July and, from various parts of the country, began to march on Madrid to crush the republic. In response, workers and peasants throughout Spain rose up to resist them. They not only organized militias that put up a determined and largely effective resistance. They also seized factories, workshops, the means of transportation and communication in the cities, the land in the countryside, and ran out the capitalists and landlords, their allies and agents. Not least, they set up collectives and councils to manage what they had confiscated.

While the fascist forces were being financed and armed by Hitler and Mussolini, the Republican government was internationally isolated. The US was officially neutral, while England and France pursued a policy of appeasement, that is, giving Hitler whatever he wanted in the hopes that he would leave their countries (and their colonial empires) alone. The only country that offered to aid the Spanish Republic was the Soviet Union, but at a price. In exchange for military and other assistance Stalin insisted that the social revolution in Spain be rolled back and that the revolutionary struggle there be transformed into a traditional-style war between two bourgeois armies.

Stalin in Spain

There were two interrelated reasons behind Stalin's policy. First, consistent with his theory of "Socialism in One Country," (that is, the defense of state capitalism in Russia), he wanted to convince Britain, France and the US to form an anti-Fascist alliance with the Soviet Union and was worried that the Revolutionary events in Spain would scare them off. Second, following from his theory of the two-stage revolution, he had decided that the objective conditions in Spain were not ripe for a socialist revolution, but only a bourgeois one.

But in Spain, most of the bourgeoisie had fled and/or had sided with Franco and most of the state apparatus had collapsed. As a result, Stalin's policy meant bringing back the institutions, including the police and standing army, of the old regime, seizing the land and factories from the peasants and workers, smashing the revolutionary organizations they had built and imprisoning and murdering thousands of leaders and militants of those left-wing organizations that opposed his policies.

Robbed of the revolutionary conquests, forced to submit to the oppressive conditions of the old system, and shorn of many of their leaders, the workers and peasants became demoralized. In part as a result, the Republican forces, deprived of the mass participation in revolutionary enthusiasm of the workers and peasants and forced to wage a traditional military campaign, were defeated.

Chris's discussion of the Spanish Revolution is superficial and mechanical, and conveniently forgets to mention that it entailed the murder of the most militant and politically conscious workers and peasants. Chris discusses the militias only in terms of their traditional military efficiency, and entirely omits the role of the consciousness and morale of the Spanish workers and peasants. (As we will see, this is also a major problem with his discussion of the Chinese Revolution.) Undoubtedly, the militias left a lot to be desired militarily (and probably could have profited from an increase in discipline and the coordination of their forces). But the liquidation of these outfits and the replacement by a traditional army, based on a traditional military hierarchy and discipline, was inseparable from the liquidation of the revolutionary conquests and the resulting political demoralization of the workers and peasants.

And all this, including the execution of their political enemies, was inseparable from the Stalinists' view that the Spanish Revolution was, and had to be, a bourgeois one. Believing in the inevitability of the bourgeois revolution in Spain, the Stalinists did everything in their power to make sure that this, and only this, kind of revolution occurred.

One of the main reasons the Stalinist were able to do what they did in Spain and elsewhere was the fact that millions of people, both in Spain and around the world, believed that the Soviet Union was socialist, a workers' state, some other kind of progressive alternative to capitalism, or, at the very least, the only force capable of waging a consistent fight against fascism. In other words, millions believed that if the Russians did or said something, it must be right.

The Need for Popular Consciousness

In light of this, the traditional anarchist explanation for the defeat of the revolution in Spain has a great deal of truth to it, although I don't think the most significant conclusions have been drawn from it. What I believe the defeat of the revolution in Spain and of anti-authoritarian movements elsewhere and the long list of Marxist "victories" we've seen throughout the century reveal is that humanity as a whole has not yet been ready to carry out the transformation that the anarchist vision entails. But this is not primarily a question of so-called "objective conditions," but of "subjective" ones, the political consciousness and understanding of the majority of oppressed people. Not only have they accepted the lies about capitalism and lacked faith in their ability to take over and manage society, millions of those who did wish to change society believed in Communism and were willing to follow Marxists. We human beings may well have been insufficiently prepared for an anti-authoritarian revolution in other ways, but this one was sufficient.

To raise people's political consciousness, including their understanding of the nature of Marxism and all authoritarian ideologies and social structures, is one of the chief tasks of anarchists and anti-authoritarians in general. But we won't be able to do this if we become attracted to and begin to promote authoritarian ideologies because they've been more successful or have more impressive theory. It seems to me that it is of the very nature of anti-authoritarianism to be on the losing side of popular struggles for liberation until humanity achieves the transformation we envision. This is something we should be proud of, not something we should sell for the chance to emulate authoritarian revolutionaries.

I realize that my claim that humanity has not been ready for an anti-authoritarian social transformation because of our illusions in Marxism and other authoritarian ideologies has not always been popular in the anarchist movement (nor, of course, in the Marxist one). Anarchists often argue, or seem to argue, that humanity has always been ready for anarchism but has been thwarted by the actions of Marxists and other authoritarians. This downplays human beings' responsibility for our own conditions. If the state is bad, where does it come from? If capitalism and other class societies are brutal and oppressive, why do they arise and why do we put up with them? Why do so many people believe Marxism's claim to be liberatory, despite all the evidence to the contrary? This is one area in which anarchist theory, it seems to me, needs to be developed.

Of Necessity and Authoritarianism

But instead of furthering this theoretical development, Chris has gone over to an authoritarian standpoint, but without being explicit about it. He puts forward several propositions which, as he puts it, “challenge some basic anarchist prejudices.” One is that “in a world characterized by gross disparities in the level of economic development as a consequence of imperialism, it has simply not been possible to overthrow capitalism in most (if not all) of the imperialized [read: colonized] countries. Revolutions in those countries have been of necessity capitalist (and usually state capitalist) revolutions that have swept away certain horribly oppressive pre-capitalist features and renegotiated the terms of capitalist exploitation.”

The crucial words here are “of necessity.” What Chris is actually arguing without drawing out the conclusions is: (1) that the economic and social conditions in the imperialized countries have guaranteed that revolutions in these countries have been, *and could only have been*, bourgeois revolutions, (2) that efforts on the part of anarchists and others to carry out more radical transformations have been mistakes, (3) that, since the same objective conditions apply, attempts to carry out anti-authoritarian revolutions in imperialized countries in the future will inevitably fail and should not be attempted, and (4) that revolutionaries in these countries (and perhaps in the “advanced” industrialized countries), should aim at carrying out state-capitalist revolutions.

There is a lot to be said about this complex of issues, so let me limit myself to several points.

Chris uses the term “objective conditions” to justify his position. This term, as utilized in the Marxist milieu, refers to the economic and social conditions of a given country which determine that country’s supposed ripeness to carry out a given kind of revolution. Prior to 1917, it was used by most Marxists to insist, as Chris now does, that the imperialized countries were not ripe for socialist revolutions, but first had to experience bourgeois ones.

The problem with this concept of the “objective conditions” is that it is very abstract and obscures the actual realities of the countries to which it refers. Economic and social conditions in all countries are very uneven. No country is uniformly advanced: nor is any country totally backward. This is especially the case since the development of imperialism, which has brought about a tremendous intermingling of economic, social, political and ideological forms. As a result, most imperialized countries have been characterized, and are still characterized by complex combinations of conditions, ranging from extremely archaic to extraordinarily modern. It is therefore very difficult to determine which country is or isn’t ripe for a particular kind of revolution.

Russia and “Objective Conditions”

For example, at the turn of the century Russia was considered by most revolutionaries, and certainly by Marxists, to be a “backward” country (indeed, most Marxists looked to Marxism as a means to modernize the country, which is what happened). Yet, as Leon Trotsky and others observed, this characterization was simplistic and obscured the concrete nature of Russian reality. While it was true that the vast majority of the people in what was then the Russian Empire were peasants who lived under barbaric conditions and that the country was ruled by an absolute monarch, etc., the country also contains some of the world’s largest and most technologically advanced factories, in part as a result of imperialism. Because of such industry, the country also

contained a small but highly concentrated working class which had a tremendous amount of power at its disposal if only it chose to use it.

As a result of all this, it is incorrect simply to say that Russia lacked the objective conditions for a socialist revolution. This is especially so when one considers not merely the objective conditions but also the subjective conditions, that is, the consciousness of the popular classes. Throughout the centuries, the Russian peasants, “normally” quiescent, profoundly conservative and under the domination of religious and ancient superstitions, periodically rose up in vast, powerful upheavals. Although generally led by someone who claims to be the true Tsar, as opposed to the “pretender” who occupied the throne, these uprisings threatened, for a time, the social structure, indeed the very existence, of the entire country. Moreover, the working class, only recently come into existence, was extremely receptive to revolutionary ideas, not only Marxism, but anarchism and anarchist-like programs as well.

When we consider these subjective conditions (which are objective from the point of view of revolutionaries, that is, they are something we face as objective reality, not something we have control over), we can see that it is profoundly misleading simply to judge of any given country that the objective conditions are not right for socialist revolution. This is especially so when we consider another facet of the question.

It’s always easy, after the fact, to say that something happened *of necessity*, that is, that it was inevitable that things happened as they did. This is especially true of social and historical developments. Once some particular social event has occurred, it’s relatively easy to come up with a theory that appears to explain it. But to develop a theory that can predict social developments is something else again. This is a major weakness of bourgeois sociology and its radical manifestation, Marxism.

Objective Conditions and Predetermined Futures

The same consideration applies to revolutions, especially so when we are considering revolutionary defeats. Once a revolution has been smashed, it sounds convincing to say that this was inevitable. The person who says this, particularly if he blames the defeat on “objective conditions,” comes across as scientific. The revolution *was* defeated and science, which at this level is deterministic, comes up with explanations to explain why this happened. By the same token, those who argue that the defeat was not inevitable appear to have their heads in the clouds. In short, reality is hard to argue against.

As a result, when Chris and others contend that a given revolution, say in China, could only have been a bourgeois one, this seems to make sense. But this claim then becomes a justification for what actually happened and an apology for the policy pursued by those who led the (bourgeois) revolution: since they won, they must have been right. Simultaneously, the contention becomes the condemnation of those who tried to carry out a more radical revolution and an argument against trying to lead similarly radical transformations in the future.

The problem for revolutionaries is that prior to a revolutionary outbreak neither we nor anyone else can know what will happen. But what we believe *may* happen will determine how we act, and how we act may determine what actually occurs, that is, what kind of revolution takes place. Thus, if at the beginning of a revolution, we assume that the objective conditions for an anti-authoritarian revolution are not ripe and that such a revolution will of necessity be defeated, we

will tend to act in a way that will further that result. This is in fact what happened in Spain and China.

In Spain, as we saw, Stalin assumed that the country was not ready for a socialist revolution but only a bourgeois one. He therefore ordered his agents and followers to dismantle the socialist aspects of the revolution, that is, to limit the revolution to the so-called bourgeois stage. But since revolutions can't be so neatly divided in two stages or any other way, the Stalinist efforts to limit the revolution led to the destruction of the entire revolution, including the bourgeois one.

China and the Two-Stage Revolution

Something very similar happened in China. In the 1920s, as part of his struggle against his opponents in the Russian Communist Party, Stalin adopted the slogan "Socialism in One Country." As we discussed, this meant foregoing attempts to encourage socialist revolutions in other countries in order to appease the imperialist powers into leaving Russia (and its state capitalist system) alone. This slogan was integrally connected to Stalin's theory of the two stage revolution.

Having decided that the objective conditions in China did not exist for a socialist revolution, Stalin urged the Chinese Communist Party to maintain an alliance with the leader of the bourgeois nationalists, Chiang Kai-shek, at all costs, in order to carry out the revolution in China. This meant subordinating the struggle of the Chinese workers to the interests of the Chinese capitalists, whom Chiang represented. Despite these orders, the workers mounted a wave of increasingly militant, widespread and coordinated strikes. In 1926, Chiang carried out a coup in the southern city of Canton and began his "Northern Expedition" to root out the reactionary warlords who controlled much of southern China. As Chiang approached the port city of Shanghai in early 1927, the workers there rose up to liberate the city. They mounted two general strikes, took over the city and set up a provisional government in March, 1927.

Chiang halted outside the city and began negotiations with local landlords and capitalists and representatives of the imperialists to seize control of the city. Consistent with his strategy of not scaring off Chiang and the Chinese bourgeoisie, Stalin directed the Chinese Communists to order the Communist-controlled unions to offer no resistance to Chiang and to have the workers bury their arms. Trusting their leaders, the workers did so. When Chiang entered the city, his troops slaughtered over 20,000 workers. Among other things, this led to the elimination of the most revolutionary workers, destroyed the Communist Party in Shanghai and ultimately led to the peasant-based strategy championed by Mao.

The crucial point to understand here is that if revolutionaries decide before the fact that the objective conditions in a given country mean that the revolution is there "of necessity" will be a bourgeois one, they will act to oppose those struggles that go beyond the bourgeois revolution. In more graphic terms, they will become the executioner's of the most revolutionary workers and peasants and will in all likelihood destroy the revolution altogether.

Failures of Mao

After the defeat and slaughter of the Chinese workers in Shanghai, a section of the Chinese Communist Party and eventually the party as a whole gave up entirely on organizing the working class and instead focused on the peasantry. But the result was not a spontaneous peasant uprising

of the sort that powered the French, Russian and Spanish Revolutions. The peasants in China did not spontaneously rise up, slaughter the landlords, seize the land and work it under their own direction. The Chinese Communist certainly organized peasant armies, but it would be more accurate to describe these as armies of peasants. The peasants were organized into formations that were firmly controlled by the Communists from the top down through officers and party functionaries.

Moreover, throughout most of the struggle, these armies did not attack the landlords and let the peasants seize and manage the land as they saw fit. Quite the contrary, consistent with the theory of the two-stage revolution, the Chinese Communist strategy centered on maintaining a united front of all patriotic Chinese, including Chiang Kai-shek, the capitalists and landlords, in a purely nationalist struggle against the Japanese, who invaded Manchuria in 1931 and attempted to conquer the rest of China several years later. In the areas they controlled, the Communists merely limited the extent to which the landlords exploited the peasants by lowering rents and interest rates. All spontaneous peasant movements were either absorbed into the Communist armies or ruthlessly suppressed as “bandits.”

Even after the Japanese were defeated and the Communists turned their full attention against Chiang, the Communist pursued a purely bourgeois program and maintained firm, bureaucratic control over the peasants. Consistent with this, when their armies surround the city, the Communists did not urge the workers to rise up, throw out the capitalists and take over the factories. Instead, the workers were urged to remain at work under the firm control of the capitalists, who continued to exploit them as before and were assured by the Communists that their ownership and control of the factories would not be infringed. In fact, Mao advocated lowering wage rates and lengthening working hours in order to increase production.

It was not until the 1950s, that is, after the Communists had defeated Chiang and consolidated their power, that they moved to introduce land reform and expropriate the capitalists. Even then, these processes were well controlled by the Communist Party; at no point were the workers encouraged to form autonomous factory committees or given control over the factories; nor were the peasants given full and autonomous control over the land. Meanwhile, the capitalists were compensated for their property and often hired as managers at generous salaries to run their former plants, while their children were guaranteed entry into Chinese colleges and universities.

Authoritarian Revolution: Great Leap Forward

The authoritarian nature of the Chinese Revolution is revealed by developments that occurred after the Communist victory in 1949. In the early 1950s, the Communists encouraged the formation of cooperatives in the countryside, to which the peasants responded eagerly. But consistent with their conviction that centralization is economically more efficient and socially progressive than small-scale production, the Communists in the late 1950s forced the peasants to enter vast “communes.” Like forced collectivization in Russia, this meant taking the land away from the peasants and putting it into the hands of party and state bureaucrats.

The purpose of forming these “communes” was to free up large numbers of peasants to work in new, poorly conceived and hastily constructed rural industrial projects, including small, backyard steel furnaces. One result of this “Great Leap Forward” was several years of poor harvests, a massive famine in which an estimated 40 million people died (!) and years of economic con-

traction. China did not recover from this debacle, which was only possible because of the rigidly hierarchic nature of Communist rule, until nearly 10 years later.

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. For the last several years, China has been undergoing the transition from a form of state capitalism in which bureaucrats attempted, not very effectively, to plan production and manage industry to one in which privately owned and managed industry is increasingly dominant. If this plan is successful, China may emerge as one of the world's most powerful capitalist and imperialist powers in the 21st century.

In effect, the Chinese Communists eliminated the traditional capitalist class, believing that they (the Communist Party) could carry out the industrial transformation of the country more efficiently than the capitalists. As it turned out, in China (as well as Russia, North Korea, Eastern Europe and Cuba), state-run industry was inefficient and corrupt. As the economy stagnated and fell behind other, traditional capitalist countries, the only solution was to attempt to recreate an indigenous traditional capitalist class. In Russia, the attempts to do this led to the rapid demise of the Communist regime. In China, the Communist government has managed to hold onto power. But if the economic transformation is to continue, the regime will most likely evolve into an autocratic, but non-Communist Chinese state.

This development demonstrates the bourgeois, authoritarian nature of the Chinese revolution. The current economic transformation can only take place as smoothly as it has because the country is and always has been controlled by a bureaucratic elite, rather than the Chinese people.

Authoritarian and Cultural Revolution

In the 1960s and 70s, it was fashionable in Maoist circles to contend that Mao tried to forestall and then reverse the “bureaucratization” of the revolution. The Cultural Revolution, it was said, was his last effort in this campaign. But Mao never stood for or encouraged the independent mobilization and organization, let alone the self-rule, of the workers and peasants. From the beginning, out of power or in power, Mao believed in tight, centralized, hierarchic control of the economy and the country as a whole.

But the Chinese state capitalist ruling class, like other nationalist elites, has often been divided over which measures would best promote the economic development of the country. Some elements, such as those around Chou En-lai, sought to encourage economic growth by borrowing Western technology and leaving workers, peasants and managers alone to pursue their appointed tasks and daily lives in relative peace.

Mao and the faction he represented believes that this process would be too slow and would result in China falling victim to its enemies, particularly the United States, Japan and the Soviet Union. To avoid this, he sought to “hothouse” economic growth through periodic bureaucratic mobilizations of the population. One such campaign, the Great Leap Forward led, as we saw, to mass starvation and an actual decline in economic growth. In its aftermath, Mao was discredited within the elite and politically marginalized. The Cultural Revolution was his attempt to organize idealistic, that is, fanatically pro-Communist, students to fight his opponents within the bureaucracy and regain the autocratic power he once had.

At no point did Mao encourage workers and peasants to organize independently and rise up against the state capitalist ruling class as a whole. If anything, the student Red Guards attacked (physically as well as ideologically) workers and peasants as counterrevolutionaries. As in his

earlier efforts, millions of ordinary people, not just bureaucrats, suffered imprisonment, internal exile, cruel beatings and death.

A Bourgeois Revolution

What took place, in fact, was a well-ordered bourgeois revolution in which the peasants were used by the Communists as a massive club to carry out their bourgeois-nationalist program. Rather than the peasant armies being the instrument for the establishment of the workers' and peasants' self-rule, they represented the embryo of a new state apparatus through which the Communists, substituting themselves for the traditional bourgeoisie, established their own rule over the workers and peasants.

Chris justifies the Maoist strategy in part by claiming that the workers were not ready to take over and run industry. This is classic Maoist apologetics, conveniently omitting any mention of the fact that the Chinese workers were *politically* ready to take over industry, and had in fact done so, as far back as 1927, until they were ordered to give it back by their Communist leaders and had been slaughtered for their obedience. If the Chinese workers were not technically ready to direct production, neither are workers today, in the imperialist countries as well as the imperialized countries, ready to do so. Do the members of Love and Rage need to be reminded that this is the chief argument raised by supporters of capitalism against all radical programs and especially against anti-authoritarianism?

Anti-authoritarians can certainly defend the Chinese Revolution as representing a victory for the Chinese people, insofar as it unified China, eliminated reactionary social classes and archaic social practices and improved the country's bargaining power vis-a-vis imperialism. But one can only pretend that this Revolution was in any way anti-authoritarian by grossly insulting the truth.

Equally important, while we can and should support nationalist/bourgeois revolutions against imperialism, this does not mean that we should identify with the new bourgeois elites and defend their politics of intensifying the exploitation of the workers and peasants, as Chris does. On the contrary, our job is to defend the workers' and peasants' efforts to resist capitalist exploitation and to prepare the ground for an anti-authoritarian revolution.

Marxist Methods

But Chris would have us see the Chinese Revolution as some kind of model for anti-authoritarian revolutionaries. To make this absurdity seem plausible, Chris exhibits the same "convenient amnesia" when discussing China as he does when discussing Spain. In the case of Spain, Chris fails to mention the Stalinists' assassinations of their political opponents, which was the logical consequence of their belief that the revolution in Spain was "of necessity" of bourgeois one. In the case of China, Chris ends his discussion in the early 1950s, before the Communist regime starts killing millions of people in the interests of capitalist industrialization, likewise the logical consequence of their belief that the revolution in their country was, and had to be, bourgeois.

In his document, Chris is careful to claim that he is simply criticizing anarchists and anarchism, implying that the perspective he is now promoting can be accommodated under the anti-

authoritarian banner. But, as I have argued, Chris's new perspective and the Chinese Revolution that impresses him so much are/were authoritarian in the extreme.

Rather than being a model for anti-authoritarians, the Chinese Revolution reveals the logic of Marxists' attitudes toward methods. Unlike anarchists, Marxists are generally not restrained by particular scruples about the methods they employ. This is especially the case when they have the power of the state at their disposal. Whatever they may claim, they have always acted as if all means, no matter how brutal, dishonest and disgusting, are justified in their struggle against capitalism. These methods become *ipso facto* progressive because, they believe, they represent the proletariat, socialism and the liberation of all humanity.

Brutal Marxism

But what Marxists don't see is that such methods undermine their own goals. It is not, as they see it, a question of abstract morality, but of long-term effectiveness. In the short- and perhaps even the medium-run, brutal, dishonest methods may win some gains, but they will ultimately destroy the revolution, even a Marxist one. After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks centralized all political and economic power in their hands, built a revolutionary army and police apparatus and smashed their political opponents in order to maintain their rule. In the short- and medium-run, this worked, but they never built socialism and now they don't even have state capitalism anymore.

The Chinese Stalinists believed it was easier to carry out a bourgeois revolution than a socialist one, more effective to organize a hierarchical army of peasant soldiers than to encourage independent struggles and organizations of workers and peasants. They succeeded in seizing state power, but only to see the revolution serve as an incubator for a new, traditional capitalist class.

Chris's attitude toward revolutionary strategy and tactics suffers from the same problem. In the short run, the methods he's advocating may seem more realistic, more successful, than the seemingly abstract, ineffective and overly moralistic methods of anarchists. But the measures Chris is urging us to consider — state capitalist revolutions in imperialized countries, revolutionary armies, etc. — will not lead to our goal, but to new authoritarian societies, not to mention the millions of deaths that these regimes have a tendency to cause.

Chris appears to be arguing nearly that Love and Rage should drop the term anarchist from its name and consider certain perspectives that run counter to traditional anarchism, while remaining committed to anti-authoritarianism. But what Chris is really proposing is the first step in the political redefinition of Love and Rage. If he gets his way, we will start out by dropping the term anarchism and allowing authoritarian perspectives to be described as anti-authoritarian and promoted within the organization. We will then accept such perspectives as the perhaps distasteful but necessary application of anti-authoritarian politics to concrete reality. Finally, having started down the slippery slope, we will wind up adopting increasingly authoritarian politics and dropping the term anti-authoritarianism as abstract and moralistic.

You Are What You Do

Chris's insistence that the objective conditions for anti-authoritarian revolutions did not exist in China, Spain and other imperialized countries and that the revolutions in these countries were

“of necessity” bourgeois thus raises two interrelated questions. The first is: What policy does Chris think revolutionaries should have followed in these countries? Virtually the entire thrust of his argument points to the conclusion that Chris believes revolutionaries should have supported the Stalinist policy.

The second question raised by Chris’s insistence that the Revolutions in Spain, China and other imperialized countries were of necessity bourgeois is: what should revolutionaries in the imperialized the countries do today? Since these countries are still imperialized, they still do not have, according to Chris’s definition, the objective conditions to carry out anti-authoritarian revolutions. It follows that revolutionaries in those countries, including our comrades in Mexico, should not fight for an anti-authoritarian revolution, but instead should aim at a bourgeois, probably state capitalist, revolution.

But in politics, particularly revolutionary politics, you are what you do. If you claim to be an anti-authoritarian but decide, for whatever reason (perhaps because the objective conditions are not right), to try to carry out a bourgeois revolution, you are no longer an anti-authoritarian: you are a bourgeois, that is, an authoritarian, revolutionist. By the same token, if Love and Rage were to adopt Chris’s perspective, Love and Rage would no longer be an anti-authoritarian organization, but would join the ranks of the authoritarians. Although Chris does not explicitly discuss the question of revolution in the imperialist countries, the logic of his argument, as well as his new-found infatuation with authoritarian institutions such as standing armies, suggest that he is, or will soon be, advocating authoritarian revolutions for these countries too.

For Permanent Revolution

The revolutionary, anti-authoritarian solution to the questions Chris is raising is not to go over to state capitalist Maoism but to defend an international anti-authoritarian revolutionary perspective. In fact, no country in the world today, taken by itself, has the full economic, social and political prerequisites to carry out and maintain for an indefinite period of time an anti-authoritarian revolution. But this does not mean that we settle for carrying out state capitalist revolutions. An anti-authoritarian strategy can be found in the general perspective that I first encountered under the term “The Permanent Revolution,” put forward by Leon Trotsky. Shorn of its Marxist trappings, this perspective can serve as a general framework for a worldwide anti-authoritarian revolution.

Basing himself on the uneven nature of the objective conditions, what he called combined and uneven development, Trotsky argued that the social revolution in an imperialized country could not be divided into discrete stages. Instead, what might begin as a bourgeois revolution, addressing such issues as the elimination of the landed aristocracy and the division of the land, the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic, would soon go beyond these tasks and take on more radical questions. For example, workers, going into motion over the struggle for higher wages and shortening the work day, might launch a general strike, occupy factories and take over whole cities.

It is therefore the job of revolutionaries in any one country to encourage the revolution to go as far as possible, even if that country lacks the complete prerequisites for an anti authoritarian revolution. Meanwhile, it is also the task of revolutionaries to encourage revolutions in other countries, so that the revolution becomes an international one. The revolution is thus permanent

in two senses: (1) Within one country, the revolution does not limit itself to any one stage, but seeks to proceed as far as possible; (2) the revolution does not limit itself to one country, but aims to be international.

It is of the very nature of an anti-authoritarian revolution to be a worldwide phenomenon. We are, in fact, speaking of a transformation of the human species. It either happens relatively rapidly or it won't happen at all. If the people in any one country, even an economically "advanced" one, carry out an anti-authoritarian revolution and it remains isolated, it will be defeated. There remains nothing that anti-authoritarians can do about this but to pick up and start over. Adopting authoritarian measures, such as a standing army based on traditional centralization, hierarchy and discipline, will not save the revolution but will destroy it from within.

Hope for the Future

This perspective is not as far-fetched as it may seem. It should be clear that human society as it is currently organized is rapidly undermining the conditions for its own existence; among other things, it is destroying the planet on which we live. Human beings will increasingly be confronted with the need to make a radical transformation in the way we treat each other and the Earth as a whole. These two questions are thoroughly interconnected: we must stop viewing other human beings and the Earth as a whole as tools to increase our own individual and/or group power. Do we carry out this transformation or do we all get destroyed?

I have hopes that human beings will make the right decision. I believe we have the intelligence and moral potential to carry out a global anti-authoritarian revolution, one that establishes a truly cooperative, stateless and classless society, a society in which people truly care for each other and the planet and work cooperatively to meet the needs of the greater whole of which we are a part. If we can't carry out such transformation, the human race will face extinction, and will deserve it.

Chris seems to have decided that he'd rather lead any revolution, even if it is an authoritarian one, than be part of an anti-authoritarian revolution that is defeated. I would like to be part of an anti-authoritarian revolution that wins, and I'm willing to risk being defeated if this is the price to pay.

Chris has the right to argue for whatever perspective for Love and Rage he chooses. But let's be clear about what we are talking about. We are not merely discussing whether to drop the term anarchism from our name and consider certain perspectives that anarchists have refused to entertain in the past. We are discussing the very nature and direction of the Federation. Will we continue to advocate and seek to carry out an anti-authoritarian revolution, or will we abandon our anti-authoritarian principles and program and turn ourselves into bourgeois revolutionaries in the interests of a short-sighted conception of revolutionary efficiency?

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Ron Tabor
In Defense of Anarchism
A Reply to Chris Day
July 28, 1996 (original); September 11, 2018 (revised)

Retrieved on 2020-04-07 from blackrosefed.org
This is a reply to *The Historical Failure of Anarchism* written by Chris Day.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net