

# The thin line between individualism, insurrection and authoritarianism

Tommy Lawson

June 17, 2020

*Recently a number of people who once called themselves anarchists have joined the newly formed Australian Communist Party. The ACP itself is a new split from the Communist Party of Australia over vague accusations of bureaucratism and an inability of the CPA to 'relate to youth.' The current CPA however historically traces its lineage to the proper Stalinist 'Socialist Party of Australia', which in the 60s split from the CPA. The SPA faction supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (the original CPA was the only Comintern Party in the world to denounce the invasion), and was uncritical of Stalin's legacy. When the original CPA fell apart in the 90s, the SPA took the initiative to seize the name and claim the history of the original CPA. So, how have people who not so long ago claimed the political label Anarchist come to join Australia's arch-Stalinist party? It would be remiss of us as anarcho-communists not to address this going-over of anarchists to the ACP.*

---

Anarchism is a political philosophy that seeks the total liberation of human kind from exploitation and domination. Anarchists advocate class-struggle as the means of overthrowing the capitalist relations and the state, and in their place advocate a federalist, socialist society organised through 'self-management' in both the community and the workplace. Anarchism was born in the workers movement in the mid 1800s, and the ideas of workers themselves were articulated by intellectuals like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta. As a political philosophy, anarchism not only aims to analyse the real forms of oppression that exist in society but also to transform human relations to achieve the maximum of human freedom, harmonized with communal development.

Unfortunately, two problematic tendencies developed within anarchism, that would either see the political philosophy as only concerned with individual freedom (individualism), or based itself upon the radical action of tiny minorities (insurrectionism). It has to be acknowledged that the second of these, insurrectionism, is often a collectivist philosophy in its goals, but its strategies and tactics more reflect the nature of individualist philosophies. While it may seem antithetical at first, I want to argue that it is only a small jump from individualist 'anarchism' and insurrectionist tactics to the most degraded form of Marxist politics, Stalinism. As individualism and insurrectionism developed from the decline of anarchism's relationship with the class struggle, so too did Stalinism develop from the destruction of the socialist movement.

Individualist and insurrectionist ideas emerged and made an indelible mark on anarchism during the long, global defeat of the working class movements in the late 1800s and early 1900s, where anarchism slowly lost its place in the social movements of the working class. While this sounds like a broad period of time, as it is, during which working class movements actually blossomed in many nations, it also reflects the uneven geographical development of these movements. All in all though, this entire period was marked by a cyclical uptick in working class movements, and subsequent suppression. Despite different causes for the repression, the general pattern was the same in most nations.

In Europe, Anarchist philosophy had played a major part in the Paris Commune, drowned in blood by the French state in 1871. The anarchist-inspired Free Territories of the Ukraine were crushed by the Bolsheviks in 1921, and the most famous example of anarcho-syndicalism, the Spanish CNT, was crushed by Fascist and Stalinist terror by 1939. Elsewhere across the world, for example Argentina, the FORA collapsed under state repression and the explosion of Bolshevik influence by 1929, and the anarchist free territories of the Korean People's Association fell to Japanese invasion in 1931. These are specific examples, but globally the ruling classes crushed many workers movements as they scrambled to contain communist influence, just as the official Communist parties scrambled to contain workers' struggle within the politics of the Comintern. Disoriented by the collapse of so many powerful movements, many activists turned to acts of isolated acts of terror, sometimes in desperate attempts to inspire change, and sometimes because violent state and capitalist repression had backed them into a corner where armed struggle became a trap. Such was the case of Juan Antonio Moran, head of the dockworkers union in Argentina. Initially taking up arms to defend strikes from repression by the bosses, he found himself trapped in the armed struggle of a waning movement, where he would meet his ultimate demise.

Over time, others still 'dropped out' of society to live in 'communes' and 'illegalist' lifestyles. They had lost faith that the working class was capable of overthrowing capitalism and the state, and retreated from the nature of anarchism as a philosophy of class struggle, to pervert it into a mere bourgeois form of social criticism. As time went on, this divorced form of 'anarchism' perpetuated itself, citing original anarchist theories out of context to justify its liberal interpretation. The most famous adaptation would be Max Stirner's concept of *insurrection* over that of *revolution*;

*"The revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'....Now, as my object is not an overthrow of the established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not political or social but (as directed toward myself and my ownness alone) an egoistic purpose indeed."*

*(Stirner, Ego and His Own)*

It is worth noting that Stirner himself had never been an anarchist, rather his ideas were adopted later by some in the anarchist movement. The quote from Stirner above illustrates the direct connection between individualist philosophy and the 'strategy' of insurrection taken up by some 'collectivists'. Individualist anarchism eventually became a self-perpetuating section of the broader 'anarchist' philosophy, but it still failed to achieve anything meaningful to the mass of workers. It didn't matter if individualist activists 'dropped out', or struggled heroically

for ‘insurrection’ against the oppressive society they so hated. They could not exist outside the totality of capitalist relations. All the poetic theories of insurrectionary action could not cover for the total failure of philosophies divorced from mass struggle.

Simultaneously for Marxists, after the failure of the Russian Revolution to spread to Europe, Revolutionary Socialists faced a situation where the new state capitalist regime in Russia stood stagnate, and then went backwards in terms of developing new social relations. Revolutionaries had to revise their theories of why the revolution had not spread internationally, and what could be done about this. In Russia, the bureaucracies developed by Lenin and Trotsky to manage the crumbling economic system, the political dissidence, and to manage the repression of counter-revolutionaries expanded and took on a life of their own. The centrist Stalin came to prominence by representing the interests of this new bureaucratic ‘class-apart’ from the workers. Stalin and the Comintern developed the theory of ‘Socialism in One Country.’ This was the major retreat of Marxist theory from building mass working class struggle internationally.

However, Stalin and his followers represented a powerful new state, with massive resources, revolutionary rhetoric and global reach. Information on the realities of life under the new ‘Soviet’ regime were hard to access, given the complete state domination of social life in the USSR. Revolutionaries across the globe began to fall under the sway of Stalinist politics. In some cases, these were genuine working class revolutionaries who had fallen prey to the illusions of the Stalinist regime. In others middle-class opportunists latched onto the influence of the new regime to advance their careers.

Those who rejected the politics of the new regime and continued to argue for internationalist revolution however, fell into new camps of division. Anarchist-Communists held to the theories they had since Bakunin that the new regime was a form of State-Capitalism, while Trotskyites saw the new regime as a ‘deformed workers state’, based on the initial, significant, material conquests of the working class, and the subsequent degeneration as the working class movement was crushed. Individualist anarchists however, while rejecting the oppression of the state and the new Soviet regime, also came to question the *ability of the working class* to bring about international revolution. The conclusions they would draw from this would lead them astray, and to certain theoretical views startlingly similar to Stalinists. Because, just as Stalinism is the result of bourgeois degeneration of the first workers revolution, individualist anarchism reflects the crushing of the workers movement and its relationship to anarchism.

This is precisely what happened to Victor Serge, the French anarchist and author who joined the Bolsheviks. Serge had originally come to fame for being a member of the “Bonnot Gang”, a group of individualist anarchists who used poetic language to justify their bank robbing as ‘living free’ from capitalism and work. When he arrived in Russia, he was attracted to what was undoubtedly the genuine concern for the working class of the early Bolsheviks and Lenin. But as the revolution degenerated and Bolshevik methods became another force crushing the free initiative of the working class, Serge became an apologist. The free press was shut down, strikes were banned, and independent workers organisations were silenced under threat of violence, and Serge even ended up defending the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion. As Luigi Fabbri notes in a relevant note on Serge;

*“[Serge] is the very archetype of the anarchist who has moulded anarchy like a beautiful dream of their imagination, because, deep down, [they have] little faith in it: and as soon as events crop up, in the face of which [they are] called upon to abide by their own*

*ideas, even should it cause friction, conflict and sacrifices, they promptly scamper off in the opposite direction”*

*(Luigi Fabbri, Revolution and Dictatorship)*

So let us consider some examples of the similarities of Stalinist and Individualist politics and action.

A core point of individualist anarchism is the abstract ‘freedom’ to do whatever they want to ‘liberate’ themselves from capitalist and state oppression. Given that the concern is not social, but individual in nature, their forms of organisation (or lack thereof) reflect this. Direct action, being a key component of the broader ‘anarchist’ praxis, lends itself when theoretically underdeveloped by individualists to small, secretive, and self-selecting groups deciding upon a course of political action that does not allow the broader class to have a say in what action is appropriate to their needs. When one considers the original conception of direct action, it becomes evident that it relates directly to the mass action of workers, as a tool to develop solidarity and ideas.

*“Direct Action... means that the working class, in constant rebellion against the existing state of affairs, expects nothing from outside people, powers or forces, but rather creates its own conditions of struggle and looks to itself for its means of action. It means that, against the existing society which recognises only the citizen, rises the producer. And that the producer, having grasped that any social grouping models itself upon its system of production, intends to attack directly the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it, by eliminating the employer and thereby achieving sovereignty in the workshop — the essential condition for the enjoyment of real freedom.*

*(Emile Pouget, Direct Action)*

Or as Rudolph Rocker explains ‘education for socialism’ is the ‘effort to make clear to the workers the intrinsic connections among social problems by technical instruction and the development of their administrative capacities.’ Nothing is more ‘fitted for this purpose than the economic fighting organisations of the workers’ because direct and unceasing warfare with the supporters of the present system develops at the same time the ethical concepts without which any social transformation is impossible: vital solidarity with their fellows-in-destiny and moral responsibility for their own actions.’ (Anarcho-Syndicalism; Theory and Practice)

However, insurrectionists put the cart before the horse, declaring that their radical actions would set the example of ideas before the action of the masses. Actions like robbing banks, bombings, and the spate of assassinations in the early 1900s are all attributed to individualist and insurrectionary anarchism. These tactics were particularly articulated by people like Luigi Galleani, Emile Armand and Severino Di Giovanni. Di Giovanni came to prominence in Argentina specifically with the decline of the anarcho-syndicalist FORA, and is considered to have contributed significantly to the alienation of the workers from anarchism and encouraging state repression. Individualist action was never based on any political accountability or had any relationship to the mass democracy of the workers movement.

By the same token, Stalinism was socialism by the decree of an unaccountable vanguard. Akin to their anarchist-terrorist cousins, Stalinist groups commonly formed vanguard armed struggle groups, and used similar campaigns of bombings, assassinations and bank robberies without consultation of mass movements. This was not always the case — but groups like the Red Army

Faction in West Germany and November 17 in Greece were alienated from mass struggle and only brought further state repression down on the working classes for the sake of a self-selected vanguard. Although, armed Stalinist/Leninist groups would still manage to know when to call it a day, unlike insurrectionary anarchists;

*“In Italy...During the '70s, many Leninist groups concluded that capitalism was in the throes of its final crisis, and they moved to armed struggle. These groups acted as professional revolutionaries, reducing their lives to a singular social role. But by the 1980s they came to believe that the time for revolutionary social struggle had ended... This separated them from insurrectionary anarchists who believed that a revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism and the state still continued, for no determinist history could name the correct moment to rebel. In fact, determinist history often becomes an excuse for not acting and only pushes a possible rupture with the present further into the impossible.”*

“Organising for Attack” by the “Do or Die Collective”

The military question is an important one, and genuine anarchists would do better to look at models like the CNT's defence committees than terrorist outfits. The alienation of the Stalinists from the working classes was not only a matter of the military question though, but reflected the entire model of a bureaucracy that organises the masses lives on their behalf. The bureaucratic vanguard interprets the world through its own alienated philosophy and makes economic and political plans and implements them upon the masses of workers.

In another parallel example, in the most extreme examples of individualist anarchist philosophy, such as Stirner, Sidney Parker, Hakim Bey, and (later in life) Benjamin Tucker, there is a great focus on the cult of the individual. Some individualists even drew from philosophers as far removed from the revolutionary tradition as Nietzsche. So too in Stalinist politics, there is the cult of personality, attributing the transcendence of revolutionary politics not to mass struggle, but individual qualities of a great leader who has somehow personally overcome capitalist social relations. Both of these examples exist outside of space and time, and are philosophies based on liberal conceptions of the individual. Again, both represent a parallel in the divorcing of revolutionary ideas from the base of working class mass movements and struggle.

Thirdly, both tendencies gloss over a lack of political content with literary and aesthetic excess. You will commonly see individualist and insurrectionist anarchist propaganda with slogans utterly divorced from the reality of most people's lives; “Blow up Dams!”, “Kill Trump!” It is easy to put forward the most radical slogans you can think of, it is much harder to slowly build the power of the working classes to overcome capitalism.

Stalinists then, will propagate ideas about how great the individual leader is, or abstractions about the masses leading to a promised land of ‘socialism.’ For example, a poster from the Chinese revolution reads; *“Sailing the seas depends on the helmsman, waging revolution depends on Mao Zedong Thought.”* Neither encourage people to actually take concrete, realistic action in their everyday lives, nor reflect popular demands and slogans. Even the modern aesthetic of both these tendencies is an embarrassment. All-black clad, mask wearing anarchists and Stalinists dressing up like Soviet live-action-roleplay.

The same phenomenon that led anarchists to abandon actual anarchist politics for individualism still exists today. When people have spent enough time in circles built on the basis of indi-

vidualist and insurrectionary philosophies and tactics, they usually come to realise these ideas don't work. Unfortunately, rather than take the longer route of developing a politics that has a sophisticated analysis of what is required to overcome capitalism, people can take the shortcut to modern Stalinism. The power of a gigantic state machine that named itself 'socialist' still hangs like a millstone around the neck of the modern left.

Individualist 'anarchism's' theoretical and practical weakness will easily fall prey to the politics of regimes that celebrated cults of personality, cliché stereotypes of workers and state-sanctioned propaganda. A politics based on such incoherent ideas can only fail.

However, it is not enough to only critique individualist anarchism, as though the fault lies only within the individual who has come burning with indignation at injustice in the world, found only half the answers, and turned in other directions. The broader philosophy and practice of anarchism has to answer for these failures too.

Modern anarchism has largely remained isolated from the mass struggles that challenged capital since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. As discussed earlier, when anarchism lost its 'social vector', its inherent relationship with the working class struggle for self-organisation and socialism, bourgeois individualist ideas of rebellion began to take hold. To rescue anarchism from this revolutionary dead end, we must rebuild its place in the workers movement. The relationship of the ideology and its influence on the class is dialectical. The more rooted the ideology is in winning the class struggle, the more the broader anarchist movement will come to have coherent politics of class liberation. The more anarchists that have politics with a clear program of class liberation, the more the class will be influenced by anarchists, and adopt anarchist methods of struggle.

Especifismo is an exception to the severance of anarchism and the working class. In South America anarchist revolutionaries developed the concept of 'Especifismo', or 'specific anarchism' to overcome the loss of the mass relationship in their struggles. Especificismo carries parallels to Platformism or what the Italians call 'Dual Organisationalism.' This means that anarchists form coherent political organisations based around a revolutionary programme. They work together to build tactical and theoretical unity. Organisation is based on collective responsibility and federalist structures. The goal is to maximise the influence of anarchism as a political philosophy in the class struggle. Unlike the Leninist model, especificist organisations are not based on central committees and they do not seek to take state power — rather they seek to help the working classes build their own organs of power and forms of self-management in struggle. Thanks to especificismo, anarchism in Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina has experienced a significant resurgence as a political philosophy that influences working class struggle.

However, this is a tendency that still struggles to find its feet in the English speaking world. This is less so from any lack of applicability as a theory of organisation, but rather that the mass of anarchist politics today is hamstrung by its lack of clarity around ideas, and a social base rooted in class struggle and mass movements.

In the Australian context where no coherent pole of attraction to developed anarchist ideas exists, people have drifted away to other currents — usually either Trotskyist groups or the Greens, but clearly there is a new distinct tendency, with some activists turning to modern Stalinist groups like the Australian Communist Party.

To fix this problem we must overcome the individualist influence on anarchist politics, and we must demonstrate the practicality of anarchist-communist politics in real struggle.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Tommy Lawson

The thin line between individualism, insurrection and authoritarianism  
June 17, 2020

Retrieved on 2020-08-10 from <http://www.redblacknotes.com/2020/06/17/the-thin-line-between-individualism-insurrection-and-authoritarianism/>

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**