

Some Lessons from Revolutionary History

Review of Loren Goldner, *Revolution, Defeat, and Theoretical Underdevelopment: Russia, Turkey, Spain, Bolivia* (2017)

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This book brings together a set of analyses of popular struggles in a number of countries—as its subtitle indicates. It is written by a someone within “*the libertarian or left communist milieu*” of Marxism (43), although he expresses a friendly attitude toward anarchism. Overall it has a conclusion, a rejection of “*a methodology repeated again and again whereby different variants of the far-left set themselves up as the cheering section and often minor adjuncts to ‘progressive’ movements and governments strictly committed to the restructuring (or creation) of a nation-state adequate to..world capitalism. This methodology involves imagining...a healthy ‘left’ wing of a bourgeois or nationalist or ‘progressive’ or Third World ‘anti-imperialist’ movement that can be ‘pushed to the left’ by ‘critical support’, opening the way for socialist revolution....Their role is to enlist some of the more radical elements in supporting or tolerating an alien project which sooner or later co-opts or, even worse, represses and sometimes annihilates them.*” (225)

Goldner believes that rejecting this statist and capitalist “methodology” is necessary to rearm the far-left if it is to overcome “*the nearly four decades of quiescence, defeat and dispersion that followed the ebb of the world upsurge of 1968–77...the long post-1970s glaciation....*” (1) “*I nevertheless part ways with a swath of currently fashionable theories; I still see the wage-labor proletariat—the working class on a world scale—as the key force for a revolution against capital.*” (2) He writes, “the key force,” not the “only force,” since he includes peasants and other oppressed as necessary parts of an international revolution.

This overall conception, from a (minority) trend in Marxism, is consistent with revolutionary class-struggle anarchism, as it developed from Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin to the anarcho-syndicalists and anarcho-communists.

However, Goldner shows the limitations of his knowledge of anarchism by a number of errors. For example, he remarks that “*the ideology of pan-Slavism [was] also advocated by their anarchist rival Bakunin....*” (57) Actually Bakunin had been a pan-Slavist before he became an anarchist, not since. Goldner refers to “*the early mutualist (Proudhon-inspired) phase of the Peruvian and Latin American workers’ movement (...superseded by the global impact of the Russian Revolution).*” (171–2) But after an early period, most anarchist influence in the Latin American working class was anarcho-syndicalist (although there was still some interest in credit unions and coops, alongside unions). This is why the Sandinistas and other Central American revolutionaries (nationalist and Marxist) later adopted black and red as their colors. These had traditionally been the colors of the anarcho-syndicalist-influenced workers’ movement.

Lenin and the Russian Revolution

Goldner writes that revolutionary libertarian socialist currents, such as anarchism, syndicalism, council communism, and the IWW, “*were effectively steamrollered by Bolshevism...and the ultimately disastrous international influence of the Russian Revolution....*” (9) In this book, his criticism focuses on Lenin’s misunderstanding of the Russian peasants. Lenin overestimated the extent of the peasants’ production of commodities for sale on the market. He overestimated the extent to which capitalism had taken root among the peasants. He overestimated the decline of the peasants’ communal institutions (the “mir”). He overestimated the class stratification among the peasants. These misunderstandings led to an authoritarian, repressive, and exploitative relationship of the Soviet state to the peasants. They were a major factor in the split between the Bolsheviks (Communists) and the peasant-based Left Social Revolutionary Party. That in

turn contributed to the formation of the single-party dictatorship. (See Sirianni 1982) “*The Soviet Union emerged from the civil war in 1921 with the nucleus of a new ruling class in power...*” (43)

Goldner also reviews the relations of the early Soviet Union with Turkey, then led by the nationalist, Kemal Attaturk. Goldner had previously believed, with the Trotskyists, that it was only under Stalin that international Communist parties were turned into agents of the Russian state and the world revolution subordinated to Russian national interests. But he found that the government of Lenin and Trotsky had sought close relations with the Turkish nationalists, even as the Turkish government was repressing and murdering Turkish communists. He quotes a memo from Trotsky at the time, saying that the main issue of revolutionary politics in the “East” was the need for Russia to make a deal with Britain.

However, Goldner defends Marx, and—more oddly—Lenin from anarchist charges of laying the basis for Stalinism. “*I...reject the commonplace view one finds among anarchists who see nothing problematic to be explained in the emergence of Stalinist Russia.*” (43) If he means that the Russian Revolution needs to be analyzed in detail, without assuming any inevitabilities, then I agree. And there are libertarian-democratic, proletarian, and humanistic aspects of Marx’s thought. But anarchists correctly rejected Marx’s program of a revolution in which the working class (or a party speaking for the working class) would seize power over a state and establish a state-owned, centralized, economy. The anarchists had predicted that this would lead to state capitalism and bureaucratic class rule. Whether this is “problematic,” it seems to have been justified by experience.

Goldner denies “*that there exists a straight line, or much of any line, from Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet What Is To Be Done? to Stalin’s Russia.*” (43) Maybe not; there is a democratic aspect of *WITBD?*, a call for the working class party to champion every democratic cause large or small (peasants, minority religions, censored writers, etc.), no matter how indirectly related to working class concerns. But Lenin treated support for democratic issues as instrumental, steps toward his party’s rule, rather than as basic values. Overall he had an authoritarian outlook. This can be demonstrated from much more evidence than just *WITBD?* (See Taber 1988.)

Anarchists and Trotskyists

Discussing the Spanish revolution/civil war of the ‘thirties, Goldner is “*anything but unsympathetic to the Spanish anarchist movement.*”(119) His views are similar to that of the council communists (libertarian Marxists) Karl Korsch and Paul Mattick. Then living in the U.S., they were supportive of the anarchist-syndicalists in the conflict (Pinta 2017). Goldner writes, “*The Spanish working class and parts of the peasantry in the Republican [anti-fascist—WP] zones arrived at the closest approximation of a self-managed society, sustained in different forms over two and half years, ever achieved in history.*” (118) He quotes Trotsky saying pretty much the same thing.

However, “*Spain was the supreme historical test for anarchism, which it failed...*,” adding, “*in the same way that Russia was, to date, the supreme test of, at least, Leninism, if not of Marxism itself.*” (118) Instead of organizing the workers and peasants in their democratic unions, factory councils, communes, and militia units, to replace the collapsed national and regional states—the mainstream anarcho-syndicalists joined the national Popular Front government and the Catalan regional government. “*The Spanish anarchists had made the revolution, beyond their wildest ex-*

pectations, and did not know what to do with it...Everything in the anarchists' history militated against 'taking power' as 'authoritarian' [and] 'centralist'..." (126-7)

Goldner does note that there were some anarchists who advocated a revolutionary program, not of joining the bourgeois government or of "taking **state** power," but of organizing a democratic federation of workers, peasants, and militia organization to manage the economy and the war. In particular, there were the Friends of Durruti who "*called for a new revolution.*" (141) (For more on the Friends of Durruti, see Guillamon 1996.)

The main lesson Goldner draws from the anarchists in the Spanish Revolution is the need for radicals "*to think more concretely about what to do in the immediate aftermath of a successful revolutionary takeover...[to devote] serious energy to outlining a concrete transition out of capitalism.*" (149)

Discussing the Bolivian revolution of 1952, Goldner shows how the Trotskyists made the same sort of errors as the anarchists had in Spain. There was a revolutionary situation, where the Trotskyists for once had a large influence among the rebellious (and armed) working class. Instead of advocating independent power to the mass workers' organizations, the Trotskyists gave support to radical (bourgeois) nationalists, claiming that they were really on the road to socialism (although, Goldner demonstrates, the nationalists had fascist influences in their formation). "*The Trotskyist POR...ended up providing a far-left cover for the establishment of the new [bourgeois] state.*" (214) Eventually, the Trotskyists were no longer useful to the nationalists and were repressed (the classical "squeezed lemon" process). The regime swung to the right. This was another illustration of the "*methodology*" of radicals tailing "*progressive' movements and governments strictly committed to the ... nation-state [and] capitalism,*" as I quoted in the first paragraph.

Anti-Imperialism? Anti-Capitalism? National Liberation?

I find Goldner's opinions on "anti-imperialism" and national liberation to be unclear. He is correct in rejecting the left program which substitutes national struggles for class struggles, which ignores class (and other) conflicts within oppressed nations, and which spreads illusions about the "socialist" nature of nationalist and Stalinist rulers. But it is unclear whether he regards national oppression as a real issue for millions of workers and peasants. If we recognize this as a real concern, then libertarian socialists can be in solidarity with the people of oppressed nations, while opposing their nationalist would-be rulers. It becomes possible to advocate national liberation through social revolution and to propose a class struggle road to national freedom.

This would seem to be consistent with Goldner's agreement with Lenin's WITBD? strategy of revolutionary working class support for all democratic struggles, as well as Goldner's expressed agreement with Trotsky's theory of "permanent revolution." He specifically condemns the Popular Front government in the Spanish civil war for "*the failure of the Republic to offer independence or even autonomy to Spanish Morocco (...) which could have had the potential of undercutting Franco's rearguard, his base of operations, and, in the Moroccan legionaries, an important source of his best troops.*" (129) That is, the liberal-socialist-Stalinist-anarchist coalition failed to adopt anti-imperialist policies (due to Spain's imperialism and its attempted alliance with French and British imperialism).

This is a fascinating book, with detailed analyses of revolutionary turning points in world history. Loren Goldner's discussion of these events and the issues which arise from them is important and useful for anti-authoritarian revolutionaries to consider.

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