

Anarchism and Marxism

Thinking about Anarchism

Conor McLoughlin

1993

Contents

Back To Basics	3
Who can get rid of capitalism?	3
Lets be friends?	3
Workers Power or Dictatorship Over Workers?	4
Ambiguities	4
Socialism by electing 166 TDs?	5
Voluntary or Not At All	5

Marxism and Anarchism have been the two major theories of revolutionary socialism since the middle of the last century. Yet since then they have constantly been at loggerheads. In this article Conor McLoughlin examines and compares the two to see do they, in fact, have anything in common.

Firstly it is essential to define both sets of ideas. What is anarchism? What is Marxism? For the moment I have decided to ignore all the latter-day disciples of both sets of ideas. So I will not talk about the various Stalinist, Leninist and social democratic developments of Marx's ideas. These have already been well dealt with in previous issues of this paper. Instead I wish to concentrate on the basic ideas of Marx and Engels.

Back To Basics

For the anarchist point of view I will use the writings of Bakunin. He was Marx's consistent opponent and his basic arguments are accepted by most anarchists. Neither Marx or Bakunin were ever entirely consistent and the latter's writings are very fragmentary, however this seems to me to be the fairest method of comparison.

A lot of people who call themselves anarchists will probably be extremely annoyed when I say that the most striking thing is how much we have in common with Marxism. Both anarchists and Marxists are materialists. Both believe that the ideas in peoples' heads are shaped by the social and economic conditions in which we live. We see that ideas evolve and change through action. Thought leads to action and action provokes thought.

Who can get rid of capitalism?

Both sides accept Marx's theory that labour creates value and that in production much of this is creamed off by the capitalist as profit, leaving a fraction as wages. Also shared is the view that only the working class by, virtue of their role in production, have the power to destroy capitalism.

Further, it is in their interest to do so. Workers have the power to create a classless society and would benefit from it's creation. Both Anarchists and revolutionary Marxists accept that only revolution can achieve this and that it must be international to succeed.

Marx's 'Capital' is a wide ranging, well researched and referenced assault on the capitalist system. In his own words a synthesis; incorporating a range of ideas from right-wing economists like Weber, Ricardo and Adam Smith to revolutionaries like Proudhon and the Irishman William Thompson. Anarchists accepted and welcomed this critique. In fact Bakunin had begun a translation of the book into Russian (no mean feat if you've ever seen the size of this particular work).

Lets be friends?

So why don't we all just shake hands and let bygones be bygones?

Firstly there has always been a major disagreement on the nature of the state. By State we do not mean the country we live in. It is best described as the 'executive committee' of the ruling class, the mechanism that allows a minority to rule. Ultimately it defends its power through its monopoly of force, its powers of repression to protect the bosses' rule against challenges from below.

Anarchists have always seen it as non-essential for a classless society. However it is vital to the bosses in all forms of class society. It intervenes massively in the running of most average capitalist countries and in some cases may even embody the whole of the ruling class in a kind of collective exploitation (as in the former Stalinist bloc).

Marx and Engels, on the other hand have always been ambiguous about the State. At several stages they stressed that it was a neutral body which could be used by workers in revolution. In 1848, after the Paris uprising, they drafted the 'Communist Manifesto'. In this they repeatedly speak of "The Worker's State" which was to nationalise and centralise all production, finance, transport and communication. There is no mention of how the workers would be able to control "their state".

Workers Power or Dictatorship Over Workers?

However in 'The Civil War in France', written after the 1871 Paris Commune, Marx toyed with the idea of replacing the State with "Communal Power" and "the self-government of producers", though without mentioning exactly how this was to come about. By the time of the publication of 'The Critique of the Gotha Programme' in 1875 he was back to the ambiguous concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat".

In contrast Bakunin consistently and vigorously attacked the idea of a revolutionary role for the State. He predicted the tyranny of Leninism with uncanny accuracy in 'State and Anarchism' written in 1873;

"The new social order (of Marx) should not be organised by the free association of peoples' organisations or unions, local and regional, from the bottom up in accordance with the demands and instincts of the people, but by the dictatorial power of the learned minority which presumes to express the will of the people."

In Russia in 1917 the Bolsheviks attempted to implement Marx's basic programme. As part and parcel of state controlled nationalisation from above, they closed down factory committees and soviets. All other left-wing parties were smashed. The result was the squalid form of State Capitalism which survived until the late 1980s. Bakunin was, unfortunately, all too correct in his predictions.

Ambiguities

At a deeper level there are ambiguities at the very heart of Marxism. In his early works like "Thesis on Feurbach" or "The Holy Family" people are seen as being active in changing history. However in his later works history and economics take over and are seen to sweep us along with them.

There are shades of this thinking in 'Capital'. In this he puts forward the idea that capitalism would become a fetter on the further development of production and would be shuffled off in an unspecified way. He puts up the vague idea that capitalism would become so big and so planned that socialism, purely in terms of efficiency, would be the next logical step. Capitalism would "rationalise itself out of existence" as he put it in his 'Grundrisse' notebooks for 'Capital'.

This is very deterministic thinking. It removes workers from the stage as consciously moulding and changing the world. Socialism becomes a matter of waiting for capitalism to "mature". This

was the reason for some Marxists like the German Social Democrats believing there was no need for a revolution.

Marx, and then Engels after his death, did follow this through to its logical conclusion. They flirted with the idea of bringing about socialism through social democracy and the ballot. In 1869 they supported the German Social Democratic Party's line of forming alliances with right-wing parties.

Bakunin poured scorn on these ideas. He described the democratic state as: "State Centralisation and the actual submission of the sovereign people to the intellectual governing minority".

Socialism by electing 166 TDs?

Soon after the Paris Commune Marx and Engels broke with the Social Democratic Party. But in 1895 the ageing Engels was back to his old tricks again and put the accent on using the ballot box to get into power to change society, (in his introduction to a new edition of 'The Communist Manifesto'). Marx also claimed, at one stage that it was possible to introduce socialism through the ballot box in advanced capitalist countries like Britain and America.

It appears that, except for a brief period around 1871, Marx and Engels never gave any serious consideration to the idea of workers managing society. Even then they didn't look into the matter in any detail. In contrast Proudhon (with whom we would have our differences), Bakunin and Kropotkin did. Marx saw this as very much being a long-term aim.

Bakunin's rejection of Marx's determinism also gave him an insight into the role that small peasants could play in a revolutionary situation. Marx saw the peasants as a reactionary class who would generally not support workers. Bakunin believed that peasants could be revolutionary where they were influenced by revolutionary ideas. He put forward an excellent programme for the peasants in his work 'Letters to a Frenchman in the present Crisis' (1871).

His basic idea was to hand the land over unconditionally to small peasants. and to do away with conscription, taxes, rents and mortgages. With the abolition of the State and by this the loss of inheritance rights the individual would be the only guarantor of his/her property. With a large amount of land suddenly becoming available and with anarchist propaganda pouring in from the city and from landless workers, a programme of voluntary collectivisation would soon suggest itself. This is exactly what happened in Spain in 1936 and the Ukraine in 1921. These ideas might still have relevance in many developing countries.

Voluntary or Not At All

He also warned about the dangers of forced collectivisation — it would have to be voluntary: "collectivism could only be imposed on slaves and that kind of collectivisation would be the negation of humanity".

So there are important and major differences between anarchists and Marxists. Marx was no libertarian and took a very deterministic view of history and class struggle. His disciples from Lenin to Stalin and Mao picked up and expanded on Marx's bad ideas to come up with their theories of 'the party before all else', the rationale for their dictatorships.

On the other hand Marx and Engels have unfairly been demonised by a lot of anarchists. Most anarchists accept the much of the economic analysis put forward in 'Capital'. These ideas are

a synthesis putting together the results of hundreds of years of research and struggle. As such they are not, properly speaking, the property of Marxists. One can accept a materialist method of analysis and Marx's critique of capitalism without accepting the politics of Marx and Engels. These ideas are not the property of theorists, either Marxist or Anarchist. They really belong to all the workers of the world and it is our job to spread them.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Conor McLoughlin
Anarchism and Marxism
Thinking about Anarchism
1993

Retrieved on 12th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 38 – Summer 1993.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net