Workers' Solidarity Movement
Marx & the State

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However the later writings of Marx and Engels concentrate more and more on the outcome of capitalist development and less and less on how to win workers to revolution. This combined with a blind respect for authority (see starting quote) leads Marxism to be a great recipe for incipient dictatorship even assuming the best intentions of the two authors.

The political ideas of Marx and Engels (despite their excellent economic analysis of capitalism) are ambiguous and contradictory. Even at their best they in no way approach the clarity and depth of Bakunin's conception of socialism.

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So the leopard has changed its spots a little. But the monopoly capitalism of today has no more resemblance to socialism than the free enterprise capitalism of Marx's time.

This idea was to be taken up and expanded on by Lenin who believed that:

> Socialism is merely a state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and to this extent has ceased to be a state capitalist monopoly[14]

As I have said already this is the exact opposite of socialism. Socialism is about freedom and collective participation, not some bureaucratic dictatorship or state capitalism.

Bakunin is particularly good on the topic of 'scientific' socialism:

> History is made, not by abstract individuals but by acting, living and passing individuals[15]

He opposed the idea of the political scientists leading humanity by the nose to an enlightened dictatorship:

> What I preach then is, to a certain extent, the revolt of life against science, or rather against the government of science, not to destroy science, that would be high treason to humanity, but to remand it to its place so it cannot leave it again

It is worth noting, to be fair, that the young Marx did consider the subjective element especially in works like his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* where he declares that the political form of the destruction of private property will be Universal human emancipation

[14]Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol. 25 p358

[15]Both quotes from *God and State* (1872)

tion than the old one. The transition from socialism to capitalism is seen by him as coming about as inevitably as the change from slavery to feudalism. Here Marx is wrong. For the first time in history a transition from one social system to another requires mass participation. Capitalism, like feudalism and the systems that went before, already contains the seeds of its own destruction in that it creates its grave-diggers: the working class. But Marx in much of his later work went way beyond this and implied that the death of capitalism was inevitable:

> Capitalist production begets with the inexorability of a law of nature its own negation ... (*Capital* Vol. I, p 837)

Further on, in the same chapter he even goes so far as to describe capitalism as:

> already practically resting on socialised production

Or, as he puts it in *Grundrisse* (notes for *Capital*) :

> beyond a certain point, the development of the powers of production becomes a barrier for capital Its violent destruction must come about as a condition of its own preservation

This is pure determinism. It takes away the central role of people in changing their own destiny. It removes workers, as thinking and acting individuals, from the centre stage. It ignores the very seeds which might blossom into revolution: the workers. If the destruction of capitalism is inherent in its own evolution then there is no reason to fight against it. If maximising production is the key then why not work harder to help it along?

In fact, historically, capitalism, with increasing productivity, has been very slow to disappear. Instead it has become more centralised and bureaucratic, with the state playing an increasing role.

> Indeed how do these people propose to run a factory, operate a railway or steer a ship without having, in the last resort, one deciding will, without single management they do not tell us[1]
>
> Engels

Since the Nineteenth century Marxism and anarchism have confronted each other as the two dominant strains of revolutionary thought. Some Marxists claim that in fact Marxism is not a statist or vanguardist ideology. Like all Marxists they also generally dismiss anarchism as utopian, marginal and non-scientific.

The aim of this article is to show that Marx and Engels were deeply ambiguous on the nature of the state and the party, and that the criticisms by anarchists of them were and remain valid. Far from being utopian anarchism has the same materialist origins as Marxism and, far from being marginal, has had a huge influence among workers since the nineteenth century. As Daniel Guerin put it:

> Anarchism and Marxism at the start , drank at the same proletarian spring[2]

Since then many anarchists have, unfortunately, tended to demonise Marx. The genius of Marx and Engels was in the way they were able to combine the materialism of Hegel with various economic theories to come up with a critique of capitalism. By Marx's own admission Capital his major economic work is a synthesis of ideas from right-wing economists like Adam Smith to socialists like the Irishman William Thompson.

One of Marx's main contributions was to popularise the labour theory of value (though he was not the first to come up with this

[1] Engels *On Authority* (1872).
[2] in *Anarchism and Marxism* (1973).

idea). Put crudely this is the idea that all material goods or commodities have another value besides their actual usefulness (or use-value). This value is determined by the amount of labour required to produce them. The capitalist does not pay this full value in wages (which only provide enough to feed and maintain the worker) the rest is held back as surplus value or profit.[3]

Thus workers have a real material interest in overthrowing capitalism. As well as this Marx pointed to capitalism's tendency to bring workers together in large workplaces where they can struggle together. This creates the social basis for labour organisation and the realisation of collective class interests.

Before Marx socialists were aware that workers were exploited but they had no explanation of the economic basis of this exploitation. The mechanics of capitalism were not understood.

Bakunin and his followers fully accepted this and other ideas in Marx's critique of capitalism. In fact Bakunin began the translation of *Capital* into Russian and the Italian anarchist Carlo Cafiero published a summary of the same work in Italian.

With regards to materialism Bakunin begins his seminal work *God and State*[4] by clearly taking sides. He asks:

> Who are right, The idealists or the materialists? The question, once stated in this way, hesitation becomes impossible. Undoubtedly the idealists are wrong and the materialists are right.

What are the divisions between anarchists and Marxists? You don't need a degree in political science to figure out the major one:

[3]This is only a very simple picture. In reality there are a host of other factors such as competition that reduces prices, mechanisation that reduces the amount of labour, costs of raw materials and energy etc, but further explanation is outside the scope of this article.

[4]Written in 1872.

Do away with Capitalism and the State will fall by it-self says Engels (On Authority 1872). Tragically he was wrong. As we shall see Marx's and Engels ambiguity on this springs from deeper problems. In fact, there are major problems in their whole conception of socialism.

What is socialism?

The anarchist answer to this question is that socialism, at base, must be about freedom. A society run collectively to maximise the amount of choice available to the individual. A society based on satisfying the needs and wants of many and not on the profit of the few, with full participation at all levels.

A revolution is a conscious act by workers to liberate themselves from the constraints of class society. It is a subjective act.

There is a fundamental contradiction in Marxism between subjective and objective.[13] Humanity according to Marx goes through a series of distinct historical stages based on ever increasing levels of production. Certainly it is true that the level of production in a given society does determine the range of possibilities open to those trying to change it. However Marx tends to reduce all human development to this single cause. Just as feudalism gives way to capitalism, so capitalism gives way to socialism. He leaves out or minimises the importance of other variables like the role of political institutions, culture, ideology and individuals. To Marx all these 'subjective' things are totally conditioned by the 'objective conditions' of economic development.

Social and political systems rise and fall because of their ability or inability to materially improve the life of their populations. Each new order arises because it does a better job at improving produc-

[13]Objective conditions are those over which the individual has no control. For example whether it rains or not tomorrow. One could, however, take the subjective decision to bring an umbrella.

> The mode of struggle of 1848[11] is today obsolete in every respect

Why? Simple:

> They [the German workers] rendered a second great service to their cause…they supplied their comrades in all countries with a new weapon, and one of the sharpest, when they showed them how to make use of universal suffrage

He quotes Marx[12] on how voting had been:

> transformed by them from a means of deception, which it was, into an instrument of emancipation

We are not so crazy as to let ourselves be driven to street fighting in order to please them (the bourgeois) says Engels in 1895

However in Marx's 1869 *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and in an 1879 letter by the two to Bebel, the German Social Democratic Party is savagely attacked for supporting parliamentary elections:

> We cannot therefore co-operate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves

Confused? You should be. Marx and Engels are about as consistent (in their writings on the state) as a Labour Party manifesto and at many stages actually sound like such a manifesto. We are treated to Marx the democrat, the communist, the partisan of workers control and Marx the fan of representative democracy. The state, to Marx and Engels was just the executive committee of a particular class. Once capitalism went so would the State.

[11] Revolution, workers self government and all that

[12] Preamble to the Constitution of the French Workers Party (1880).

The State

Marx and Engels saw the State as being a product of class struggle. It was the executive committee of the ruling class. It was an instrument by which one class rules another. In most of their writings they seem to see the State as a neutral tool. It can be taken and used by either workers or capitalists.

Their classical political statement is *The Communist Manifesto*[5]. In its 10 main demands it calls for the centralisation of credit, transport and means of production under the State. This is justified (according to Marx) because:

> political power, properly called, is merely the instrument of one class for oppressing another

Here we have the idea of the State as a tool to be used by either class (capitalists or workers).

In his Comments on Bakunin[6] Marx claims that the workers:

> must employ forcible means hence governmental means

This is a common trend in Marx and Engels thinking (see also first quote). Kropotkin describes it well as:[7]

> the German school which insists on confusing the state with society

Workers will probably have to use force in a revolution but why does this imply a government?

[5] First published in 1847 and continually reprinted in unaltered form. (If you disagree with an original position you usually change it in your next version!)

[6] 1874.

[7] *The State, its Historical Role* (1897).

Bakunin vigorously opposed the Marxist conception of the State. The State was more than simply a product of class antagonism. If the programme of the manifesto was realised then a new bureaucratic class based on it rather than the market could arise. This for Bakunin would have nothing to do with socialism:

> The most fatal combination that could possibly be formed, would be to unite socialism to absolutism[8]

Bakunin was right. Getting rid of competition and the law of value did not stop the Leninist states from being class societies. The state embodied the interests of the ruling class and extracted profit from workers by brute force and ruthless exploitation. The state failed to wither away. The prediction by Engels that the seizing and centralising of property would be the state's last official act[9] proved to be a sick joke on the workers of the Stalinist countries.

At the end of the day no state can encapsulate the interests of the masses better than the masses themselves. As Bakunin says in *The Paris Commune* and the *Idea of the State*[10]:

> where are those brains powerful enough and wide ranging enough to embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real interests, aspirations, wishes and needs whose sum constitutes the collective will of the people?

Marx the Libertarian?

Of course many libertarian Marxists will point out that Marx and Engels did sometimes move beyond the position of the *Manifesto on the State*. After the 1848 uprising in Berlin and the Paris Commune

[8] *Bakunin on Anarchy* (edited by Sam Dolgoff) p.4

[9] *Anti Duhring* (1878).

[10] Written just after the commune in 1871 and published in 1878.

of 1871, for example. In *The Civil War in France* (1871) Marx says that the State has:

> assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour…of an engine of class despotism…

Therefore:

> the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready made State machinery and weld it for its own purposes
>
> and the liberation of the working class cannot come about without the destruction of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class

He also calls for self-government of the producers and delegation from communes to higher organs of power by recallable delegates. However even here he fails to outline with any precision the forms of workers self-rule which might emerge: the ideas of worker's councils, militias, collectives on the land etc. (all of which are taken up by Bakunin in *Letters to a Frenchman* (1871)

In his 1850 *Address to the Communist League* (again a comparatively libertarian and revolutionary speech) Marx comes closest to outlining this by saying that workers must:

> immediately establish their own revolutionary governments, whether in the form of municipal committees and municipal councils or in the form of worker's clubs or worker's committees

Marx the Democrat

However if you were to pick up the 1895 edition of this address you would be confronted by a new introduction by Engels. In it he informs us: