

# An Anarchist FAQ

## Section H - Why do anarchists oppose state socialism?

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## Section H - Why do anarchists oppose state socialism?

The socialist movement has been continually divided, with various different tendencies and movements. The main tendencies of socialism are state socialism (Social Democracy, Leninism, Maoism and so on) and libertarian socialism (anarchism mostly, but also libertarian Marxists and others). The conflict and disagreement between anarchists and Marxists is legendary. As Benjamin Tucker noted:

*"[I]t is a curious fact that the two extremes of the [socialist movement] . . . though united . . . by the common claim that labour should be put in possession of its own, are more diametrically opposed to each other in their fundamental principles of social action and their methods of reaching the ends aimed at than either is to their common enemy, existing society. They are based on two principles the history of whose conflict is almost equivalent to the history of the world since man came into it . . .*

*"The two principles referred to are AUTHORITY and LIBERTY, and the names of the two schools of Socialistic thought which fully and unreservedly represent one or the other are, respectively, State Socialism and Anarchism. Whoso knows that these two schools want and how they propose to get it understands the Socialistic movement. For, just as it has been said that there is no half-way house between Rome and Reason, so it may be said that there is no half-way house between State Socialism and Anarchism." [The Individualist Anarchists, pp. 78-9]*

In addition to this divide between libertarian and authoritarian forms of socialism, there is another divide between reformist and revolutionary wings of these two tendencies. *"The term 'anarchist,'" Murray Bookchin wrote, "is a generic word like the term 'socialist,' and there are probably as many different kinds of anarchists as there are socialists. In both cases, the spectrum ranges from individuals whose views derive from an extension of liberalism (the 'individualist anarchists', the social-democrats) to revolutionary communists (the anarcho-communists, the revolutionary Marxists, Leninists and Trotskyites)." [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 138f]*

In this section of the FAQ we concentrate on the conflict between the revolutionary wings of both movements. Here we discuss why communist-anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and other revolutionary anarchists reject Marxist theories, particularly the ideas of Leninists and Trotskyites. We will concentrate almost entirely on the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky as well as the Russian Revolution. This is because many Marxists reject the Chinese, Cuban and other revolutions as being infected from the start by Stalinism. In contrast, there is a general agreement in Marxist circles that the Russian Revolution was a true socialist revolution and the ideas of Lenin (and usually Trotsky) follow in Marx's footsteps. What we say against Marx and Lenin is also applicable to their more controversial followers and, therefore, we ignore them. We also dismiss out of hand any suggestion that the Stalinist regime was remotely socialist. Unfortunately many serious revolutionaries consider Lenin's regime to be an example of a valid socialist revolution so we have to discuss why it was not.

As noted, two main wings of the revolutionary socialist movement, anarchism and Marxism, have always been in conflict. While, with the apparent success of the Russian revolution, the anarchist movement was overshadowed by Leninism in many countries, this situation has been changing. In recent years anarchism has seen a revival as more and more people recognise the fundamentally anti-socialist nature of the Russian "experiment" and the politics that inspired it. With this re-evaluation of socialism and the Soviet Union, more and more people are rejecting Marxism and embracing libertarian socialism. As can be seen from the press coverage from such events as the anti-Poll Tax riots in the UK at the start of the 1990s, the London J18 and N30 demonstrations in 1999 as well as those in Prague, Quebec, Genoa and Gothenburg anarchism has become synonymous with anti-capitalism.

Needless to say, when anarchists re-appear in the media and news bulletins the self-proclaimed "vanguard(s) of the proletariat" become worried and hurriedly write patronising articles on "anarchism" (without bothering to really understand it or its arguments against Marxism). These articles are usually a mishmash of lies, irrelevant personal attacks, distortions of the anarchist position and the ridiculous assumption that anarchists are anarchists because no one has bothered to inform of us of what "Marxism" is "really" about. We do not aim to repeat such "scientific" analysis in our FAQ so we shall concentrate on politics and history. By so doing we will indicate that anarchists are anarchists because we understand Marxism and reject it as being unable to lead to a socialist society.

It is unfortunately common for many Marxists, particularly Leninist influenced ones, to concentrate on personalities and not politics when discussing anarchist ideas. In other words, they attack **anarchists** rather than present a critique of **anarchism**. This can be seen, for example, when many Leninists attempt to "refute" the whole of anarchism, its theory and history, by pointing out the personal failings of specific anarchists. They say that Proudhon was anti-Jewish and sexist, that Bakunin was racist, that Kropotkin supported the Allies in the First World War and so anarchism is flawed. Yet this is irrelevant to a critique of anarchism as it does not address anarchist ideas but rather points to when anarchists fail to live up to them. Anarchist ideas are ignored by this approach, which is understandable as any critique which tried to do this would not only fail but also expose the authoritarianism of mainstream Marxism in the process.

Even taken at face value, you would have to be stupid to assume that Proudhon's misogyny or Bakunin's racism had equal weighting with Lenin's and the Bolsheviks' behaviour (for example, the creation of a party dictatorship, the repression of strikes, free speech, independent working class organisation, the creation of a secret police force, the attack on Kronstadt, the betrayal of the Makhnovists, the violent repression of the Russian anarchist movement, etc.) in the league table of despicable activity. It seems strange that personal bigotry is of equal, or even more, importance in evaluating a political theory than its practice during a revolution.

Moreover, such a technique is ultimately dishonest. Looking at Proudhon, for example, his anti-Semitic outbursts remained unpublished in his note books until well after his ideas and, as Robert Graham points out, "*a reading of General Idea of the Revolution will show, anti-Semitism forms no part of Proudhon's revolutionary programme.*" [*"Introduction"*, **The General Idea of the Revolution**, p. xxxvi] Similarly, Bakunin's racism is an unfortunate aspect of his life, an aspect which is ultimately irrelevant to the core principles and ideas he argued for. As for Proudhon's sexism it should be noted that Bakunin and subsequent anarchists totally rejected it and argued for complete equality between the sexes. Likewise,

anarchists from Kropotkin onwards have opposed racism in all its forms (and the large Jewish anarchist movement saw that Bakunin's anti-Semitic comments were not a defining aspect to his ideas). Why mention these aspects of their ideas at all?

Nor were Marx and Engels free from racist, sexism or homophobic comments yet no anarchist would dream these were worthy of mention when critiquing their ideology (for those interested in such matters, Peter Fryer's essay "**Engels: A Man of his Time**" should be consulted. This is because the anarchist critique of Marxism is robust and confirmed by substantial empirical evidence (namely, the failures of social democracy and the Russian Revolution).

If we look at Kropotkin's support for the Allies in the First World War we discover a strange hypocrisy on the part of Marxists as well as an attempt to distort history. Why hypocrisy? Simply because Marx and Engels supported Prussia during the Franco-Prussian war while, in contrast, Bakunin argued for a popular uprising and social revolution to stop the war. As Marx wrote to Engels on July 20th, 1870:

*"The French need to be overcome. If the Prussians are victorious, the centralisation of the power of the State will be useful for the centralisation of the German working class. Moreover, German ascendancy will transfer the centre of gravity of the European worker's movement from France to Germany . . . On a world scale, the ascendancy of the German proletariat the French proletariat will at the same time constitute the ascendancy of our theory over Proudhon's."* [quoted by Arthur Lehning, **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 284]

Marx, in part, supported the deaths of working class people in war in order to see **his** ideas become more important than Proudhon's! The hypocrisy of the Marxists is clear - if anarchism is to be condemned for Kropotkin's actions, then Marxism must be equally condemned for Marx's.

This analysis also rewrites history as the bulk of the Marxist movement supported their respective states during the conflict. A handful of the parties of the Second International opposed the war (and those were the smallest ones as well). The father of Russian Marxism, George Plekhanov, supported the Allies while the German Social Democratic Party (the jewel in the crown of the Second International) supported its nation-state in the war. There was just one man in the German Reichstag in August 1914 who did not vote for war credits (and he did not even vote against them, he abstained). While there was a small minority of the German Social-Democrats did not support the war, initially many of this anti-war minority went along with the majority of party in the name of "discipline" and "democratic" principles.

In contrast, only a **very** small minority of anarchists supported any side during the conflict. The bulk of the anarchist movement (including such leading lights as Malatesta, Rocker, Goldman and Berkman) opposed the war, arguing that anarchists must "*capitalise upon every stirring of rebellion, every discontent in order to foment insurrection, to organise the revolution to which we look for the ending of all of society's iniquities.*" [**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2., p. 36] As Malatesta noted at the time, the pro-war anarchists were "*not numerous, it is true, but [did have] amongst them comrades whom we love and respect most.*" He stressed that the "*almost all*" of the anarchists "*have remained faithful to their convictions*" namely "*to awaken a consciousness of the antagonism of interests between*

*dominators and dominated, between exploiters and workers, and to develop the class struggle inside each country, and solidarity among all workers across the frontiers, as against any prejudice and any passion of either race or nationality.*" [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 243, p. 248 and p. 244] By pointing to Kropotkin, Marxists hide the facts that he was very much in a minority within the anarchist movement and that it was the official Marxist movement which betrayed the cause of internationalism, not anarchism. Indeed, the betrayal of the Second International was the natural result of the "*ascendancy*" of Marxism over anarchism that Marx had hoped. The rise of Marxism, in the form of social-democracy, ended as Bakunin predicted, with the corruption of socialism in the quagmire of electioneering and statism. As Rudolf Rocker correctly argued, "*the Great War of 1914 was the exposure of the bankruptcy of political socialism.*" [Marx and Anarchism]

Here we will analyse Marxism in terms of its theories and how they worked in practice. Thus we will conduct a scientific analysis of Marxism, looking at its claims and comparing them to what they achieved in practice. Few, if any, Marxists present such an analysis of their own politics, which makes Marxism more a belief system than analysis. For example, many Marxists point to the success of the Russian Revolution and argue that while anarchists attack Trotsky and Lenin for being statist and authoritarians, that statism and authoritarianism saved the revolution. In reply, anarchists point out that the revolution did, in fact, **fail**. The aim of that revolution was to create a free, democratic, classless society of equals. It created a one party dictatorship based around a class system of bureaucrats exploiting and oppressing working class people and a society lacking equality and freedom. As the stated aims of the Marxist revolution failed to materialise, anarchists would argue that it failed even though a "Communist" Party remained in power for over 70 years. And as for statism and authoritarianism "saving" the revolution, they saved it for Stalin, not socialism. That is nothing to be proud of.

From an anarchist perspective, this makes perfect sense as "*[n]o revolution can ever succeed as factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSE to be achieved.*" [Emma Goldman, My Disillusionment in Russia, p. 261] In other words, statist and authoritarian means will result in statist and authoritarian ends. Calling a new state a "workers state" will not change its nature as a form of minority (and so class) rule. It has nothing to do with the intentions of those who gain power, it has to do with the nature of the state and the social relationships it generates. The state structure is an instrument of minority rule, it **cannot** be used by the majority because it is based on hierarchy, centralisation and the empowerment of the minority at the top at the expense of everyone else. States have certain properties **just because they are states**. They have their own dynamics which place them outside popular control and are not simply a tool in the hands of the economically dominant class. Making the minority Socialists within a "workers' state" just changes the minority in charge, the minority exploiting and oppressing the majority. As Emma Goldman put it:

*"It would be an error to assume that the failure of the Revolution was due entirely to the character of the Bolsheviks. Fundamentally, it was the result of the principles and methods of Bolshevism. It was the authoritarian spirit and principles of the State which stifled the libertarian and liberating aspirations [unleashed by the revolution]. . . Only this understanding of the underlying forces that crushed the Revolution can present the true lesson of that world-stirring event."* [Op. Cit., p. 250]

Similarly, in spite of over 100 years of socialists and radicals using elections to put forward their ideas and the resulting corruption of every party which has done so, most Marxists still call for socialists to take part in elections. For a theory which calls itself scientific this ignoring of empirical evidence, the facts of history, is truly amazing. Marxism ranks with economics as the "science" which most consistently ignores history and evidence.

As this section of the FAQ will make clear, this name calling and concentration on the personal failings of individual anarchists by Marxists is not an accident. If we take the ability of a theory to predict future events as an indication of its power then it soon becomes clear that anarchism is a far more useful tool in working class struggle and self-liberation than Marxism. After all, anarchists predicted with amazing accuracy the future development of Marxism. Bakunin argued that electioneering would corrupt the socialist movement, making it reformist and just another bourgeois party (see [section J.2](#)). This is what in fact happened to the Social-Democratic movement across the world by the turn of the twentieth century (the rhetoric remained radical for a few more years, of course).

If we look at the "workers' states" created by Marxists, we discover, yet again, anarchist predictions proved right. Bakunin argued that "*[b]y popular government they [the Marxists] mean government of the people by a small under of representatives elected by the people... [T]hat is,] government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people.*"

**[Statism and Anarchy, p. 178]** The history of every Marxist revolution proves his critique was correct.

Due to these "workers' states" socialism has become associated with repressive regimes, with totalitarian state capitalist systems the total opposite of what socialism is actually about. Nor does it help when self-proclaimed socialists (such as Trotskyites) obscenely describe regimes that exploit, imprison and murder wage labourers in Cuba, North Korea, and China as 'workers' states'. While some neo-Trotskyists (like the British SWP) refuse to defend, in any way, Stalinist states (as they argue - correctly, even if their analysis is flawed - that they are state capitalist) most Trotskyists do not. Little wonder many anarchists do not use the terms "socialist" or "communist" and just call themselves "anarchists." This is because such terms are associated with regimes and parties which have nothing in common with our ideas, or, indeed, the ideals of socialism as such.

This does not mean that anarchists reject everything Marx wrote. Far from it. Much of his analysis of capitalism is acceptable to anarchists, for example (both Bakunin and Tucker considered Marx's economic analysis as important). Indeed, there are some schools of Marxism which are very libertarian and are close cousins to anarchism (for example, council communism and Autonomist Marxism are close to revolutionary anarchism). Unfortunately, these forms of Libertarian Marxism are a minority current within that movement. So, Marxism is not all bad - unfortunately the vast bulk of it is and those elements which are not found in anarchism anyway. For most, Marxism is the school of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, not Marx, Pannekoek, Gorter, Ruhle and Mattick.

The minority libertarian trend of Marxism is based, like anarchism, on a rejection of party rule, electioneering and creating a "workers' state." Its supporters also, like anarchists,

advocate direct action, self-managed class struggle, working class autonomy and a self-managed socialist society. These Marxists oppose the dictatorship of the party over the proletariat and, in effect, agree with Bakunin on many key issues (such as anti-parliamentarianism, direct action, workers' councils, etc.).

These libertarian forms of Marxism should be encouraged and not tarred with the same brush as Leninism and social democracy (indeed Lenin commented upon "*the anarchist deviation of the German Communist Workers' Party*" and the "*semi-anarchist elements*" of the very groups we are referring to here under the term libertarian Marxism. [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 252 and p. 514]). Over time, hopefully, such comrades will see that the libertarian element of their thought outweighs the Marxist legacy. So our comments in this section of the FAQ are mostly directed to the majority form of Marxism, not to its libertarian wing.

One last point. We must note that in the past many leading Marxists have slandered anarchists. Engels, for example, wrote that the anarchist movement survived because "*the governments in Europe and America are much too interested in its continued existence, and spend too much money on supporting it.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 414] So there is often no love lost between the two schools of socialism. Indeed, Marxists have argued that anarchism and socialism were miles apart and some even asserted that anarchism was not even a form of socialism. Lenin (at times) and leading American Marxist Daniel De Leon took this line, along with many others. This is true, in a sense, as anarchists are not **state** socialists - we reject such "socialism" as deeply authoritarian. However, all anarchists **are** members of the socialist movement and we reject attempts by Marxists to monopolise the term. Be that as it may, sometimes in this section we may find it useful to use the term socialist/communist to describe "state socialist" and anarchist to describe "libertarian socialist/communist." This in no way implies that anarchists are not socialists. It is purely a tool to make our arguments easier to read.

## H.1 Have anarchists always opposed state socialism?

Yes. Anarchists have always argued that real socialism cannot be created using a state. The basic core of the argument is simple. Socialism implies equality, yet the state signifies inequality - inequality in terms of power. As we argued in [section B.2](#), anarchists consider one of the defining aspects of the state is its hierarchical nature. In other words, the delegation of **power** into the hands of a few. As such, it violates a core idea of socialism, namely social equality. Those who make up the governing bodies in a state have more power than those who have elected them (see [section I.1](#)).

It is with this perspective that anarchists have combated the idea of state socialism and Marxism (although we should stress that libertarian forms of Marxism, such as council communism, have strong similarities to anarchism). In the case of the Russian Revolution, the anarchists were amongst the first on the left to be suppressed by the Bolsheviks. Indeed, the history of Marxism is, in part, a history of its struggles against anarchists just as the history of anarchism is also, in part, a history of its struggle against the various forms of Marxism and its offshoots.

While both Stirner and Proudhon wrote many pages against the evils and contradictions of state socialism, anarchists have only really been fighting the Marxist form of state socialism since Bakunin. This is because, until the First International, Marx and Engels were relatively unknown socialist thinkers. Proudhon was aware of Marx (they had meant in France in the 1840s and had corresponded) but Marxism was unknown in France during his life time and so Proudhon did not directly argue against Marxism (he did, however, critique Louis Blanc and other French state socialists). Similarly, when Stirner wrote **The Ego and Its Own** Marxism did not exist bar a few works by Marx and Engels. Indeed, it could be argued that Marxism finally took shape after Marx and Engels had read Stirner's classic work and produced their notoriously inaccurate diatribe, **The German Ideology**, against him. However, like Proudhon, Stirner attacked **other** state socialists and communists.

Before discussing Bakunin's opposition and critique of Marxism in the [next section](#), we should consider the thoughts of Stirner and Proudhon on state socialism. These critiques contain many important ideas and so are worth summarising. However, it is worth noting that when both Stirner and Proudhon were writing communist ideas were all authoritarian in nature. Libertarian communism only developed after Bakunin's death in 1876. This means that when Proudhon and Stirner were critiquing "communism" they were attacking a specific form of communism, the form which subordinated the individual to the community. Anarchist communists like Kropotkin and Malatesta also opposed such kinds of "communism" (as Kropotkin put it, *"before and in 1848"* communism *"was put forward in such a shape as to fully account for Proudhon's distrust as to its effect upon liberty. The old idea of Communism was the idea of monastic communities . . . The last vestiges of liberty and of individual energy would be destroyed, if humanity ever had to go through such a communism."* [Act for Yourselves, p. 98]). Of course, it may be likely that Stirner and Proudhon would have rejected libertarian communism as well, but bear in mind that not all forms of "communism" are identical.

For Stirner, the key issue was that communism (or socialism), like liberalism, looked to the *"human"* rather than the unique. *"To be looked upon as a mere part, part of society,"* asserted Stirner, *"the individual cannot bear - because he is more; his uniqueness puts from it this limited conception."* As such, his protest against socialism was similar to his protest against liberalism (indeed, he drew attention to their similarity by calling it *"social liberalism"*). Stirner was aware that capitalism was not the great defender of freedom it was claimed to be by its supporters. *"Restless acquisition,"* he argued, *"does not let us take breath, take a claim enjoyment: we do not get the comfort of our possessions."* Communism, by the *"organisation of labour,"* can *"bear its fruit"* so that *"we come to an agreement about human labours, that they may not, as under competition, claim all our time and toil."* However, communism *"is silent"* over *"for whom is time to be gained."* He, in contrast, stresses that it is for the individual, *"To take comfort in himself as the unique."* [**The Ego and Its Own**, p. 265 and pp. 268-9] Thus state socialism does not recognise that the purpose of association is to free the individual and instead subjects the individual to a new tyranny:

*"it is not another State (such as a 'people's State') that men aim at, but their union, uniting, this ever-fluid uniting of everything standing - A State exists even without my co-operation . . . the independent establishment of the State founds my lack of independence; its condition as a 'natural growth,' its organism, demands that my nature do not grow freely, but be cut to fit it."* [Op. Cit., p. 224]

Similarly, Stirner argued that "*Communism, by the abolition of all personal property, only presses me back still more into dependence on another, to wit, on the generality or collectivity*" which is "*a condition hindering my free movement, a sovereign power over me. Communism rightly revolts against the pressure that I experience from individual proprietors; but still more horrible is the might that it puts in the hands of the collectivity.*" [Op. Cit., p. 257] History has definitely confirmed this fear. By nationalising property, the various state socialist regimes turned the worker from a servant of the capitalist into a serf of the state. In contrast, communist-anarchists argue for free association and workers' self-management as the means of ensuring that socialised property does not turn into the denial of freedom rather than as a means of ensuring it. As such, Stirner's attack on what Marx termed "*vulgar communism*" is still important and finds echoes in communist-anarchist writings as well as the best works of Marx and his more libertarian followers (see [section I.4](#) on how libertarian communism is not "*silent*" on these matters and incorporates Stirner's legitimate concerns and arguments).

Similar arguments to Stirner's can be found in Proudhon's works against the various schemes of state socialism that existing in France in the middle of the nineteenth century. He particularly attacked the ideas of Louis Blanc. Blanc, whose most famous book was **Organisation du Travail (Organisation of Work)**, first published in 1840) argued that social ills resulted from competition and they could be solved by means of eliminating it via government initiated and financed reforms. More specifically, Blanc argued that it was "*necessary to use the whole power of the state*" to ensure the creation and success of workers' associations (or "*social workshops*"). Since that "*which the proletarians lack to free themselves are the tools of labour,*" the government "*must furnish them*" with these. "*The state,*" in short, "*should place itself resolutely at the head of industry.*" [quoted by K. Steven Vincent, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 139] Capitalists would be encouraged to invest money in these workshops, for which they would be guaranteed interest payments but the workers would keep the remaining profits generated by the workshops. Such state-initiated workshops would soon prove to be more efficient than privately owned industry and, by charging lower prices, force privately owned industry either out of business or to change into social workshops, so eliminating competition.

Proudhon objected to this scheme on many levels. He argued that Blanc's scheme appealed "*to the state for its silent partnership; that is, he gets down on his knees before the capitalists and recognises the sovereignty of monopoly.*" Given that Proudhon saw the state as an instrument of the capitalist class, asking that state to abolish capitalism was illogical and impossible. Moreover, by getting the funds for the "*social workshop*" from capitalists, Blanc's scheme was hardly undermining their power. "*Capital and power,*" Proudhon argued, "*secondary organs of society, are always the gods whom socialism adores; if capital and power did not exist, it would invent them.*" [quoted by Vincent, Op. Cit., p. 157] He stressed the authoritarian nature of Blanc's scheme:

*"M. Blanc is never tired of appealing to authority, and socialism loudly declares itself anarchistic; M. Blanc places power above society, and socialism tends to subordinate it to society; M. Blanc makes social life descend from above, and socialism maintains that it springs up and grows from below; M. Blanc runs after politics, and socialism is in quest of science. No more hypocrisy, let me say to M. Blanc: you desire neither Catholicism nor monarchy nor nobility, but you must have a God, a religion, a dictatorship, a censorship, a hierarchy, distinctions, and ranks. For my part, I deny*

*your God, your authority, your sovereignty, your judicial State, and all your representative mystifications.*" [System of Economical Contradictions, p. 263]

Equally, Proudhon opposed the "top-down" nature of Blanc's ideas. As it was run by the state, the system of workshops would hardly be libertarian as "*hierarchy would result from the elective principle . . . as in constitutional politics. But these social workshops again, regulated by law, - will they be anything but corporations? What is the bond of corporations? The law. Who will make the law? The government.*" Such a regime, Proudhon argued, would be unlikely to function well and the net result would be "*all reforms ending, now in hierarchical corporation, now in State monopoly, or the tyranny of communism.*" [Op. Cit., p. 269 and p. 271] This was because of the perspective of state socialists:

*"As you cannot conceive of society without hierarchy, you have made yourselves the apostles of authority; worshippers of power, you think only of strengthening it and muzzling liberty; your favourite maxim is that the welfare of the people must be achieved in spite of the people; instead of proceeding to social reform by the extermination of power and politics, you insist on a reconstruction of power and politics."* [Op. Cit., p. 397]

Instead of reform from above, Proudhon stressed the need for working class people to organise themselves for their own liberation. As he put it, the "*problem before the labouring classes . . . [is] not in capturing, but in subduing both power and monopoly, - that is, in generating from the bowels of the people, from the depths of labour, a greater authority, a more potent fact, which shall envelop capital and the state and subjugate them.*" For, "*to combat and reduce power, to put it in its proper place in society, it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave.*" This was because the state "*finds itself inevitably enchain[ed] to capital and directed against the proletariat.*" [Op. Cit., p. 398, p. 397 and p. 399] Unsurprisingly, Proudhon stressed in 1848 that "*the proletariat must emancipate itself without the help of the government.*" [quoted by George Woodcock, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, p. 125] In addition, by guaranteeing interest payments, Blanc's scheme insured the continued exploitation of labour by capital and, of course, while opposing capitalist competition, Proudhon did not consider it wise to abolish all forms of the market.

Proudhon argued for a two-way approach to undermining capitalism from below: the creation of workers associations and the organisation of credit. By creating mutual banks, which provided credit at cost, workers could create associations to compete with capitalist firms, drive them out of business and so eliminate exploitation once and for all by workers' self-management. In this way, the working class would emancipate itself from capitalism and build a socialist society from below upwards by their own efforts and activities. Proudhon, as Marxist Paul Thomas notes, "*believed fervently . . . in the salvation of working men, by their own efforts, through economic and social action alone . . . Proudhon advocated, and to a considerable extent inspired, the undercutting of this terrain [of the state] from without by means of autonomous working-class associations.*" [Karl Marx and the Anarchists, pp. 177-8] Rejecting violent revolution (as well as strikes as counter-productive), Proudhon argued for economic means to end economic exploitation and, as such, he saw anarchism as coming about by reform (unlike later social anarchists, who were generally revolutionaries and argued that capitalism cannot be reformed away and so supported strikes and other forms of collective working class direct action, struggle and combative organisation).

Unsurprisingly, Proudhon's ideas were shaped by the society in lived and agitated in. In the mid-nineteenth century, the bulk of the French working class were artisans and peasants and so such an approach reflected the social context in which it was proposed. With a predominance of small-scale industry, the notion of free credit provided by mutual banks as the means of securing working class people access to the means of production is theoretically feasible. It was this social context which informed Proudhon's ideas (see [section H.2.3](#)). He never failed to stress that association would be tyranny if imposed upon peasants and artisans (rather, he thought that associations would be freely embraced by these workers if they thought it was in their interests to). However, he did not ignore the rise of large-scale industry and explicitly proposed workers' associations (i.e., co-operatives) for those industries which objectively needed it (i.e. capitalist industry) and for those other toilers who desired it. The net effect was the same, though, namely to abolish wage labour.

It was this opposition to wage labour which drove Proudhon's critique of state socialism. He continually stressed that state ownership of the means of production was a danger to the liberty of the worker and simply the continuation of capitalism with the state as the new boss. As he put it in 1848, he *"did not want to see the State confiscate the mines, canals and railways; that would add to monarchy, and more wage slavery. We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers' associations . . . these associations [will] be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic social Republic."* He contrasted workers' associations run by and for their members to those *"subsidiised, commanded and directed by the State,"* which would crush *"all liberty and all wealth, precisely as the great limited companies are doing."* [**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 62 and p. 105]

Marx, of course, had replied to Proudhon's work **System of Economic Contradictions** with his **Poverty of Philosophy**. However, Marx's work aroused little interest when published although Proudhon did carefully read and annotate his copy of it, claiming it to be *"a libel"* and a *"tissue of abuse, calumny, falsification and plagiarism"* (he even called Marx *"the tapeworm of Socialism."*) [quoted by Woodcock, **Op. Cit.**, p. 102] Sadly, Proudhon did not reply publicly to Marx's work due to an acute family crisis and then the start of the 1848 revolution in France. However, given his views of Louis Blanc and other socialists who saw socialism being introduced after the seizing of state power, he would hardly have been supportive of Marx's ideas.

So while none of Proudhon's and Stirner's arguments were directly aimed at Marxism, their critiques are applicable to much of mainstream Marxism as this inherited many of the ideas of the state socialism they attacked. Much of their analysis was incorporated in the collectivist and communist ideas of the anarchists that followed them (some directly, as from Proudhon, some by co-incidence as Stirner's work was quickly forgotten and only had an impact on the anarchist movement when he was rediscovered in the 1890s). This can be seen from the fact that Proudhon's ideas on the management of production by workers' associations, opposition to nationalisation as state-capitalism and the need for action from below by working people themselves, all found their place in communist-anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism and in their critique of mainstream Marxism (such as social democracy) and Leninism. Echoes of these critiques can be found Bakunin's comments of 1868:

*"I hate Communism because it is the negation of liberty and because for me humanity is unthinkable without liberty. I am not a Communist, because Communism*

*concentrates and swallows up in itself for the benefit of the State all the forces of society, because it inevitably leads to the concentration of property in the hands of the State . . . I want to see society and collective or social property organised from below upwards, by way of free associations, not from above downwards, by means of any kind of authority whatsoever . . . That is the sense in which I am a Collectivist and not a Communist." [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 67-8]*

It is with Bakunin that Marxism and Anarchism came into direct conflict as it was Bakunin who lead the struggle against Marx in the **International Workingmen's Association** between 1868 and 1872. It was in these exchanges that the two schools of socialism (the libertarian and the authoritarian) clarified themselves. With Bakunin, the anarchist critique of Marxism (and state socialism in general) starts to reach its mature form. We discuss Bakunin's critique in the [next section](#).

### H.1.1 What was Bakunin's critique of Marxism?

Bakunin and Marx famously clashed in the first **International Working Men's Association** between 1868 and 1872. This conflict helped clarify the anarchist opposition to the ideas of Marxism and can be considered as the first major theoretical analysis and critique of Marxism by anarchists. Later critiques followed, of course, particularly after the degeneration of Social Democracy into reformism and the failure of the Russian Revolution (both of which allowed the theoretical critiques to be enriched by empirical evidence) but the Bakunin/Marx conflict laid the ground for what came after. As such, an overview of Bakunin's critique is essential as anarchists continued to develop and expand upon it (particularly after the experiences of actual Marxist movements and revolutions confirmed it).

First, however, we must stress that Marx and Bakunin had many similar ideas. They both stressed the need for working people to organise themselves to overthrow capitalism by a social revolution. They argued for collective ownership of the means of production. They both constantly stressed that the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves. They differed, of course, in exactly how these common points should be implemented in practice. Both, moreover, had a tendency to misrepresent the opinions of the other on certain issues (particularly as their struggle reached its climax). Anarchists, unsurprisingly, argue Bakunin has been proved right by history, so confirming the key aspects of his critique of Marx.

So what was Bakunin's critique of Marxism? There are six main areas. Firstly, there is the question of current activity (i.e. whether the workers' movement should participate in "politics" and the nature of revolutionary working class organisation). Secondly, there is the issue of the form of the revolution (i.e. whether it should be a political **then** an economic one, or whether it should be both at the same time). Thirdly, there is the prediction that state socialism will be exploitative, replacing the capitalist class with the state bureaucracy. Fourthly, there is the issue of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Fifthly, there is the question of whether political power **can** be seized by the working class as a whole or whether it can only be exercised by a small minority. Sixthly, there was the issue of whether the revolution be centralised or decentralised in nature. We shall discuss each in turn.

On the issue of current struggle, the differences between Marx and Bakunin are clear. For Marx, the proletariat had to take part in bourgeois elections as an organised political party. As the resolution of the (gerrymandered) Hague Congress of First International put it: *"In its struggle against the collective power of the propertied classes the proletariat cannot act as a class except by constituting itself a political party, distinct from and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes . . . The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class."* [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 243]

This political party must stand for elections and win votes. As Marx argued in the preamble of the French Workers' Party, the workers must turn the franchise "*from a means of deception . . . into an instrument of emancipation.*" This can be considered as part of the process outlined in the **Communist Manifesto**, where it was argued that the "*immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties,*" namely the "*conquest of political power by the proletariat,*" the "*first step in the revolution by the working class*" being "*to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.*" Engels later stressed (in 1895) that the "**Communist Manifesto** had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat" and that German Social Democracy had showed workers of all countries "*how to make use of universal suffrage.*" [Marx and Engels Reader, p. 566, p. 484, p. 490 and p. 565]

With this analysis in mind, Marxist influenced political parties have consistently argued for and taken part in election campaigns, seeking office as a means of spreading socialist ideas and as a means of pursuing the socialist revolution. The Social Democratic parties which were the first Marxist parties (and which developed under the watchful eyes of Marx and Engels) saw revolution in terms of winning a majority within Parliamentary elections and using this political power to abolish capitalism (once this was done, the state would "wither away" as classes would no longer exist). In effect, as we discuss in [section H.3.10](#), these parties aimed to reproduce Marx's account of the forming of the Paris Commune on the level of the national Parliament.

Bakunin, in contrast, argued that while the communists "*imagine they can attain their goal by the development and organisation of the political power of the working classes . . . aided by bourgeois radicalism*" anarchists "*believe they can succeed only through the development and organisation of the non-political or anti-political power of the working classes.*" The Communists "*believe it necessary to organise the workers' forces in order to seize the political power of the State,*" while anarchists "*organise for the purpose of destroying it.*" Bakunin saw this in terms of creating new organs of working class power in opposition to the state, organised "*from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, starting with the associations, then going on to the communes, the region, the nations, and, finally, culminating in a great international and universal federation.*" In other words, a system of workers' councils. As such, he constantly argued for workers, peasants and artisans to organise into unions and join the **International Workingmen's Association**, so becoming "*a real force . . . which knows what to do and is therefore capable of guiding the revolution in the direction marked out by the aspirations of the people: a serious international organisation of workers' associations of all lands capable of replacing this departing world of states.*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, pp. 262-3, p. 270 and p. 174] To Marx's argument that workers should organise politically (i.e., send their representations to Parliament) Bakunin realised that when "*common workers*" are sent "*to Legislative Assemblies*" the result is that the "*worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of*

*purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois . . . For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.*" [The Basic Bakunin, p. 108]

As far as history goes, the experience of Social Democracy confirmed Bakunin's analysis. A few years after Engels death in 1895, German Social Democracy was racked by the "revisionism" debate. This debate did not spring from the minds of a few leaders, isolated from the movement, but rather expressed developments **within** the movement itself. In effect, the revisionists wanted to adjust the party rhetoric to what the party was actually doing and so the battle against the revisionists basically represented a battle between what the party **said** it was doing and its actual practice. As one of the most distinguished historians of this period put it, the "*distinction between the contenders remained largely a subjective one, a difference of ideas in the evaluation of reality rather than a difference in the realm of action.*" [C. Schorske, **German Social Democracy**, p. 38] By the start of the First World War, the Social Democrats had become so corrupted by its activities in bourgeois institutions they supported its state (and ruling class) and voted for war credits rather than denounce the war as Imperialist slaughter for profits. Clearly, Bakunin was proved right. (see also [section J.2.6](#) for more discussion on the effect of electioneering on radical parties).

However, we must stress that because Bakunin rejected participating in bourgeois politics, it did not mean that he rejected "politics" or "political struggle" in general (see [section J.2.10](#)). Bakunin clearly advocated what would later be termed a syndicalist strategy (see [section H.2.8](#)). This union movement would be complemented by a specific anarchist organisation which would work within it to influence it towards anarchist aims by the "*natural influence*" of its members (see [section J.3.7](#)).

Comparing Bakunin and Marx, it is clear whom history has validated. Even that anti-anarchist Stalinist hack Eric Hobsbawm could not avoid admitting that "*the remarkable achievement of Spanish anarchism which was to create a working-class movement that remained genuinely revolutionary. Social democratic and . . . even communist trade unions have rarely been able to escape either schizophrenia [i.e., revolutionary rhetoric hiding reformist practice] or betrayal of their socialist convictions.*" [Revolutionaries, p. 104] This is probably the only accurate comment made in his various diatribes on anarchism but, of course, he did not allow the implications of his statement to bother his faith in Leninist ideology. So given the long history of reformism and betrayal of socialist principles by radicals utilising elections and political parties, it comes as no surprise that anarchists consider both Bakunin's critique and alternative to be confirmed by experience ([section J.2](#) discusses direct action and electioneering).

Which brings us to the second issue, namely the nature of the revolution itself. For Bakunin, a revolution meant a **social** revolution from below. This involved both the abolition of the state **and** the expropriation of capital. In his words, "*the revolution must set out from the first [to] radically and totally to destroy the State.*" The "*natural and necessary consequences*" of which will be the "*confiscation of all productive capital and means of production on behalf of workers' associations, who are to put them to collective use . . . the federative Alliance of all working men's associations . . . will constitute the Commune.*" There "*can no longer be any successful political . . . revolution unless the political revolution is transformed into social revolution.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 170 and p. 171]

Which, incidentally, disproves Engels' claims that Bakunin "*does not regard capital . . . but the state as the main evil to be abolished*" after which "*capitalism will go to blazes of itself.*" [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 728] This misrepresents Bakunin's position, as he always stressed that economic and political transformation "*must be accomplished together and simultaneously.*" [The Basic Bakunin, p. 106] Given that Bakunin thought the state was the protector of capitalism, no economic change could be achieved until such time as it was abolished. This also meant that Bakunin considered a political revolution before an economic one to mean the continued slavery of the workers. As he argued, "*[t]o win political freedom first can signify no other thing but to win this freedom only, leaving for the first days at least economic and social relations in the same old state, - that is, leaving the proprietors and capitalists with their insolent wealth, and the workers with their poverty.*" With capitalists' economic power intact, could the workers' **political** power remain strong? As such, "*every political revolution taking place prior to and consequently without a social revolution must necessarily be a bourgeois revolution, and a bourgeois revolution can only be instrumental in bringing about bourgeois Socialism - that is, it is bound to end in a new, more hypocritical and more skilful, but no less oppressive, exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeois.*" [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 294 and p. 289]

Did Marx and Engels hold this position? Apparently so. Discussing the Paris Commune, Marx noted that it was "*the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour,*" and as the "*political rule of the producer cannot coexist with the perpetuation of his social slavery*" the Commune was to "*serve as a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes.*" Engels argued that the "*proletariat seizes the public power, and by means of this transforms the . . . means of production . . . into public property.*" In the **Communist Manifesto** they argued that "*the first step in the revolution by the working class*" is the "*rais[ing] the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.*" The proletariat "*will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeois, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organised as the ruling class.*" [Op. Cit., p. 635, p. 717 and p. 490]

This is made even clearer in Engels' "*Principles of Communism*" (often considered as a draft of the **Manifesto**). That document stressed that it was not possible for "*private property to be abolished at one stroke*", arguing that "*the proletarian revolution will transform existing society gradually.*" The revolution "*will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct or indirect dominance of the proletariat. Direct in England, where the proletarians are already a majority of the people.*" "*Democracy*", Engels went on, "*would be quite useless to the proletariat if it were not immediately used as a means of carrying through further measures directly attacking private ownership.*" [Collected Works, vol. 6, p. 350] Decades later, when Marx discussed what the "dictatorship of the proletariat" meant, he argued (in reply to Bakunin's question of "*over whom will the proletariat rule?*") that it simply meant "*that so long as other classes continue to exist, the capitalist class in particular, the proletariat fights it (for with the coming of the proletariat to power, its enemies will not yet have disappeared), it must use measures of force, hence governmental measures; if it itself still remains a class and the economic conditions on which the class struggle and the existence of classes have not yet disappeared, they must be forcibly removed or transformed, and the process of their transformation must be forcibly accelerated.*" [The Marx-Engels Reader, pp. 542-3] Note, "capitalists," not "former capitalists," so implying that the members of the proletariat are, in fact, still proletarians after the "socialist" revolution

and so still subject to wage slavery under economic masters. Which makes perfect sense, as otherwise the term "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" would be meaningless.

Then there is the issue of when the working class could seize political power. As Engels put it, the struggle "*between bourgeoisie and proletariat can only be fought out in a republic.*" This is "*the form in which the struggle must be fought out*" and in countries without a republic, such as Germany at the time, workers would "*have to conquer it.*" [Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 264] Decades previously, Engels has argued that the "*first, fundamental condition for the introduction of community of property is the political liberation of the proletariat through a democratic constitution.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 6, p. 102] Thus the bourgeois revolution would come first, then the proletarian one. The **Communist Manifesto** had raised the possibility of a bourgeois revolution in Germany being "*but a prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.*" [**Selected Writings**, p. 63] Within two years, Marx and Engels argued that this was wrong, that a socialist revolution was not possible in Continental Europe for some time. Even in the 1880s, Engels was still arguing that a proletarian revolution was not immediately possible in Germany and the first results of any revolution would be a bourgeois republic within which the task of social democracy was to build its forces and influence.

Clearly, then, Marx and Engels considered the creation of a republic in a well developed capitalist economy as the basis for seizing of state power as the key event and, later, the expropriation of the expropriators would occur. Thus the economic power of the capitalists would remain, with the proletariat utilising political power to combat and reduce it.

Anarchists argue that if the proletariat does not hold economic power, its political power would at best be insecure and would in fact degenerate. Would the capitalists just sit and wait while their economic power was gradually eliminated by political action? And what of the proletariat during this period? Will they patiently obey their bosses, continue to be oppressed and exploited by them until such time as the end of their "social slavery" has been worked out (and by whom)? Would they be happy to fight for a bourgeois republic first, then wait for an unspecified period of time before the party leadership proclaimed that the time was ripe to introduce socialism?

As the experience of the Russian Revolution showed, the position of Marx and Engels proved to be untenable. Bakunin's perspective was repeated by a Russian worker in 1906 when he expressed his impatience with Menshevik strategy:

*"Here [the Mensheviks] . . . tells us that the workers' congress is the best means of assuring the independence of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution; otherwise, we workers will play the role of cannon fodder in it. So I ask: what is the insurance for? Will we really make the bourgeois revolution? Is it possible that we will spill blood twice - once for the victory of the bourgeois revolution, and the time for the victory of our proletarian revolution? No, comrades, it is not to be found in the party programme [that this must be so]; but if we workers are to spill blood, then only once, for freedom and socialism."* [quoted by Abraham Ascher, **The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution**, p. 43]

In 1917, this lesson was well learned and the Russian workers initially followed Bakunin's path (mostly spontaneously and without significant influence by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists). The Mensheviks repeated their mistakes of 1905 as they "*proved unable to harness this revolutionary potential to any practical purpose. They were blinded by their*

*rigid marxist formula of 'bourgeois revolution first, socialist revolution later' and tired to restrain the masses. They preached self-abnegation to them, told them to stand aside until such times as the bourgeoisie had built a solid capitalist system. This made no sense to workers and peasants - why should they renounce the power that was in their hands already?"* Leading Menshevik Fedor Dan "admitted in 1946 that the Menshevik concept of the bourgeois revolution rested on 'illusions'" [Vera Broido, **Lenin and the Mensheviks**, p 14 and p. 15] Once Lenin returned to Russia, the Bolsheviks broke with this previously shared perspective and started to support and encourage the radicalisation of the workers and so managed to gain popular support. However, they did so partially and incompletely and, as a consequence, finally held back and so fatally undermined the revolution.

After the February revolution paralysed the state, the workers organised factory committees and raised the idea and practice of workers self-management of production. The Russian anarchists supported this movement whole-heartedly, arguing that it should be pushed as far as it would go. In contrast, Lenin argued for "*workers' control over the capitalists.*" [**The Lenin Anthology**, p. 402] This was, unsurprisingly, the policy applied immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power. However, as one Leninist writer admits, "[*t*]wo overwhelmingly powerful forces obliged the Bolsheviks to abandon this '*reformist*' course." One was the start of the civil war, the other "*was the fact that the capitalists used their remaining power to make the system unworkable. At the end of 1917 the All Russian Congress of employers declared that those 'factories in which the control is exercised by means of active interference in the administration will be closed.'* The workers' natural response to the wave of lockouts which followed was to demand that their [sic!] state nationalise the factories." [John Rees, *"In Defence of October"*, pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 42] By July 1918, only one-fifth of nationalised firms had been done so by the state, the rest by local committees from below (which, incidentally, shows the unresponsiveness of centralised power). Clearly, the idea that a social revolution can come after a political was shown to be a failure - the capitalist class used its powers to disrupt the economic life of Russia.

Faced with the predictable opposition by capitalists to their system of "control" the Bolsheviks nationalised the means of production. Sadly, **within** the nationalised workplace the situation of the worker remained essentially unchanged. Lenin had been arguing for one-man management (appointed from above and armed with "dictatorial" powers) since late April 1918 (see [section H.3.14](#)). This aimed at replacing the capitalists with state appointed managers, **not** workers self-management. In fact, as we discuss in [section H.6.2](#) the party leaders repeatedly overruled the factory committees' suggestions to build socialism based on their management of the economy in favour of centralised state control. Bakunin's fear of what would happen if a political revolution preceded a social one came true. The working class continued to be exploited and oppressed as before, first by the bourgeoisie and then by the new bourgeoisie of state appointed managers armed with all the powers of the old ones (plus a few more). Russia confirmed Bakunin's analysis that a revolution must immediately combine political and economic goals in order for it to be successful.

The experience of Bolshevik Russia also confirms Bakunin's prediction that state socialism would simply be state capitalism. As Bakunin stressed, the state "*is the government from above downwards of an immense number of men [and women], very different from the point of view of the degree of their culture, the nature of the countries or localities that they inhabit, the occupations they follow, the interests and aspirations directing them - the State is the government of all these by one or another minority.*" The state "*has always been the patrimony of some privileged class*" and "*when all other classes have exhausted themselves*"

it "becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class." The Marxist state "will not content itself with administering and governing the masses politically" it will "also administer the masses economically, concentrating in the hands of the State the production and distribution of wealth." This will result in "a new class, a new hierarchy of real and counterfeit scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge, and an immense ignorant majority. And then, woe unto the mass of ignorant ones!" Thus exploitation by a new bureaucratic class would be the only result when the state becomes "the sole proprietor" and "the only banker, capitalist, organiser, and director of all national labour, and the distributor of all its products." [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, pp. 317-8, p. 318 and p. 217] Subsequent anarchists have tended to call such a regime **state capitalism** (see [section H.3.13](#)).

The Bolshevik leadership's rejection of the factory committees and their vision of socialism also confirmed Bakunin's fear that Marxism urges the people "*not only not abolish the State, but, on the contrary, they must strengthen it and enlarge it, and turn it over to . . . the leaders of the Communist party . . . who will then liberate them in their own way.*" The economic regime imposed by the Bolsheviks, likewise, confirmed Bakunin critique as the state "*control[led] all the commerce, industry, agriculture, and even science. The mass of the people will be divided into two armies, the agricultural and the industrial under the direct command of the state engineers, who will constitute the new privileged political-scientific class.*" Unsurprisingly, this new state-run economy was a disaster which, again, confirmed his warning that unless this minority "*were endowed with omniscience, omnipresence, and the omnipotence which the theologians attribute to God, [it] could not possibly know and foresee the needs of its people, or satisfy with an even justice those needs which are most legitimate and pressing.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 332, pp. 332-3 and p. 318]

Which brings us to the "dictatorship of the proletariat." While many Marxists basically use this term to describe the defence of the revolution and so argue that anarchists do not see the for that, this is incorrect. Anarchists from Bakunin onwards have argued that a revolution would have to defend itself from counter revolution and yet we reject the concept totally (see [section H.2.1](#) for a refutation of claims that anarchists think a revolution does not need defending). To understand why Bakunin rejected the concept, we must provide some historical context.

Anarchists in the nineteenth century rejected the idea of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in part because the proletariat was a **minority** of working class people at the time. To argue for a dictatorship of the proletariat meant to argue for the dictatorship of a **minority** class, a class which excluded the majority of toiling people. When Marx and Engels wrote the **Communist Manifesto**, for example, over 80% of the population of France and Germany were peasants or artisans - what they termed the "petit-bourgeois". This meant that their claim that the "*proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority*" was simply not true. Rather, for Marx's life-time (and for many decades afterwards) the proletarian movement was like "[a]ll previous movements," namely "*movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities.*" Not that Marx and Engels were unaware of this for they also noted that "*[i]n countries like France*" the peasants "*constitute far more than half of the population.*" In 1875 Marx commented that "*the majority of the 'toiling people' in Germany consists of peasants, and not of proletarians.*" He stressed elsewhere around the same time that "*the peasant . . . forms a more or less considerable majority . . . in the countries of the West European continent.*" [**The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 482, p. 493, p. 536 and p. 543]

Clearly, then, Marx and Engels vision of proletarian revolution was one which involved a minority dictating to the majority and so Bakunin rejected it. His opposition rested on the fact that a "dictatorship of the proletariat," at the time, actually meant a dictatorship by a **minority** of working people and so a "revolution" which excluded the majority of working people (i.e. artisans and peasants). As he argued in 1873:

*"If the proletariat is to be the ruling class . . . then whom will it rule? There must be yet another proletariat which will be subject to this new rule, this new state. It may be the peasant rabble . . . which, finding itself on a lower cultural level, will probably be governed by the urban and factory proletariat."* [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 177-8]

For Bakunin, to advocate the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in an environment where the vast majority of working people were peasants would be a disaster. It is only when we understand this social context that we can understand Bakunin's opposition to Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat" - it would be a dictatorship of a minority class over the rest of the working population (he took it as a truism that the capitalist and landlord classes should be expropriated and stopped from destroying the revolution!). Bakunin continually stressed the need for a movement and revolution of **all** working class people (see [section H.2.7](#)) and that the peasants "*will join cause with the city workers as soon as they become convinced that the latter do not pretend to impose their will or some political or social order invented by the cities for the greater happiness of the villages; they will join cause as soon as they are assured that the industrial workers will not take their lands away.*" For an "*uprising by the proletariat alone would not be enough; with that we would have only a political revolution which would necessarily produce a natural and legitimate reaction on the part of the peasants, and that reaction, or merely the indifference of the peasants, would strangle the revolution of the cities.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 401 and p. 378]

This explains why the anarchists at the St. Imier Congress argued that "*every political state can be nothing but organised domination for the benefit of one class, to the detriment of the masses, and that should the proletariat itself seize power, it would in turn become a new dominating and exploiting class.*" As the proletariat was a minority class at the time, their concerns can be understood. For anarchists then, and now, a social revolution has to be truly popular and involve the majority of the population in order to succeed. Unsurprisingly, the congress stressed the role of the proletariat in the struggle for socialism, arguing that "*the proletariat of all lands . . . must create the solidarity of revolutionary action . . . independently of and in opposition to all forms of bourgeois politics.*" Moreover, the aim of the workers' movement was "*free organisations and federations . . . created by the spontaneous action of the proletariat itself, [that is, by] the trade bodies and the autonomous communes.*" [quoted in **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 438, p. 439 and p. 438]

Hence Bakunin's comment that "*the designation of the proletariat, the world of the workers, as class rather than as mass*" was "*deeply antipathetic to us revolutionary anarchists who unconditionally advocate full popular emancipation.*" To do so, he argued, meant "*[n]othing more or less than a new aristocracy, that of the urban and industrial workers, to the exclusion of the millions who make up the rural proletariat and who . . . will in effect become subjects of this great so-called popular State.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, pp. 253-4]

Again, the experiences of the Russian Revolution confirm Bakunin's worries. The Bolsheviks implemented the dictatorship of the city over the countryside, with disastrous results (see [section H.6.2](#) for more details).

One last point on this subject. While anarchists reject the "dictatorship of the proletariat" we clearly do not reject the key role the proletariat must play in any social revolution (see [section H.2.2](#) on why the Marxist assertion anarchists reject class struggle is false). We only reject the idea that the proletariat must dictate over other working people like peasants and artisans. We do not reject the need for working class people to defend a revolution, nor the need for them to expropriate the capitalist class nor for them to manage their own activities and so society.

Then there is the issue of whether, even if the proletariat **does** seize political power, whether the whole class can actually exercise it. Bakunin raised the obvious questions:

*"For, even from the standpoint of that urban proletariat who are supposed to reap the sole reward of the seizure of political power, surely it is obvious that this power will never be anything but a sham? It is bound to be impossible for a few thousand, let alone tens or hundreds of thousands of men to wield that power effectively. It will have to be exercised by proxy, which means entrusting it to a group of men elected to represent and govern them, which in turn will unfailingly return them to all the deceit and subservience of representative or bourgeois rule. After a brief flash of liberty or orgiastic revolution, the citizens of the new State will wake up slaves, puppets and victims of a new group of ambitious men."* [Op. Cit., pp. 254-5]

He repeated this argument: "*What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class'?*' Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 millions be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one will be ruled. Then there will be no government, no state; but if there is a state, there will also be those who are ruled, there will be slaves." Bakunin argued that Marxism resolves this dilemma "*in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage - the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school - is a lie behind which lies the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will.*" [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 178]

So where does Marx stand on this question. Clearly, the self-proclaimed followers of Marx support the idea of "socialist" governments (indeed, many, including Lenin and Trotsky, went so far as to argue that party dictatorship was essential for the success of a revolution - see [next section](#)). Marx, however, is less clear. He argued, in reply to Bakunin's question if all Germans would be members of the government, that "*[c]ertainly, because the thing starts with the self-government of the township.*" However, he also commented that "*[c]an it really be that in a trade union, for example, the entire union forms its executive committee,*" suggesting that there **will** be a division of labour between those who govern and those who obey in the Marxist system of socialism. [**The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 545 and p. 544] Elsewhere he talks about "*a socialist government*" coming "*to the helm in a country*". [**Collected Works**, vol. 46, p. 66] As we discuss in [section H.3.10](#), both Marx and Engels saw universal suffrage in a republic as expressing the political power of the working class.

So Bakunin's critique holds, as Marx clearly saw the "dictatorship of the proletariat" involving a socialist government having power. For Bakunin, like all anarchists, if a political party is the government, then clearly its leaders are in power, not the mass of working people they claim to represent. Anarchists have, from the beginning, argued that Marx made a grave mistake confusing working class power with the state. This is because the state is the means by which the management of people's affairs is taken from them and placed into the hands of a few. It signifies delegated **power**. As such, the so-called "workers' state" or "dictatorship of the proletariat" is a contradiction in terms. Instead of signifying the power of the working class to manage society it, in fact, signifies the opposite, namely the handing over of that power to a few party leaders at the top of a centralised structure. This is because "*all State rule, all governments being by their very nature placed outside the people, must necessarily seek to subject it to customs and purposes entirely foreign to it. We therefore declare ourselves to be foes . . . of all State organisations as such, and believe that the people can be happy and free, when, organised from below upwards by means of its own autonomous and completely free associations, without the supervision of any guardians, it will create its own life.*" [Bakunin, **Marxism, Freedom and the State**, p. 63] Hence Bakunin's constant arguments for a decentralised, federal system of workers councils organised from the bottom-up. Again, the transformation of the Bolshevik government into a dictatorship **over** the proletariat during the early stages of the Russian Revolution supports Bakunin's critique of Marxism.

Related to this issue is Bakunin's argument that Marxism created a privileged position for socialist intellectuals in both the current social movement and in the social revolution. This was because Marx stressed that his theory was a "scientific socialism" and, Bakunin argued, that implied "*because thought, theory and science, at least in our times, are in the possession of very few, these few ought to be the leaders of social life*" and they, not the masses, should organise the revolution "*by the dictatorial powers of this learned minority, which presumes to express the will of the people.*" This would be "*nothing but a despotic control of the populace by a new and not at all numerous aristocracy of real and pseudoscientists*" and so there would "*be a new [ruling] class, a new hierarchy of real and counterfeit scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge, and an immense ignorant majority. And then, woe unto the mass of ignorant ones!*" Thus "*every state, even the pseudo-People's State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.*" The Russian anarchist predicted that "*the organisation and the rule of the new society by socialist savants*" would be "*the worse of all despotic governments!*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, pp. 328-9, p. 331, p. 319, p. 338 and p. 295] History proved Bakunin right, with the Bolshevik regime being precisely that. As we discuss in [section H.5](#), Lenin's vanguardism did produce such a result, with the argument that the party leadership knew the objective needs of working class people better than they themselves did being used to justify party dictatorship and the strict centralisation of social life in the hands of its leadership.

Which brings us to the last issue, namely whether the revolution will be decentralised or centralised. For Marx, the issue is somewhat confused by his support for the Paris Commune and its federalist programme (written, we must note, by a follower of Proudhon). However, in 1850, Marx stood for extreme centralisation of power, arguing that the workers "*must not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority.*" He argued that in a nation like Germany "*where there is so many relics of the Middle Ages to be abolished*"

it "must under no circumstances be permitted that every village, every town and every province should put a new obstacle in the path of revolutionary activity, which can proceed with full force from the centre." He stressed that "[a]s in France in 1793 so today in Germany it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralisation." [The Marx-Engels Reader, pp. 509-10] Lenin followed this aspect of Marx's ideas, arguing that "Marx was a centralist" and applying this perspective both in the party and once in power [The Essential Works of Lenin, p. 310]

Obviously, this issue dove-tails into the question of whether the whole class exercises power under the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In a centralised system, obviously, power **has to be** exercised by a few (as Marx's argument in 1850 showed). Centralism, by its very nature excludes the possibility of extensive participation in the decision making process. Moreover, the decisions reached by such a body could not reflect the real needs of society. In the words of Bakunin:

*"What man, what group of individuals, no matter how great their genius, would dare to think themselves able to embrace and understand the plethora of interests, attitudes and activities so various in every country, every province, locality and profession."*

[Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 240]

He stressed that "*the revolution should be and should everywhere remain independent of the central point, which must be its expression and product - not its source, guide and cause . . . the awakening of all local passions and the awakening of spontaneous life at all points, must be well developed in order for the revolution to remain alive, real and powerful.*" Anarchists reject centralisation because it destroys the mass participation a revolution requires in order to succeed. Therefore we do "*not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.*" Rather, the revolution "*everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations . . . organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 179-80, p. 237 and p. 172]

This, we must stress, does not imply isolation. Bakunin always emphasised the importance of federal organisation to co-ordinate struggle and defence of the revolution. As he put it, all revolutionary communes would need to federate in order "*to organise the necessary common services and arrangements for production and exchange, to establish the charter of equality, the basis of all liberty - a charter utterly negative in character, defining what has to be abolished for ever rather than the positive forms of local life which can be created only by the living practice of each locality - and to organise common defence against the enemies of the Revolution.*" [Op. Cit., p. 179]

Ironically, it is a note by Engels to the 1885 edition of Marx's 1850 article which shows the fallacy of the standard Marxist position on centralisation and the validity of Bakunin's position. As Engels put it, "*this passage is based on a misunderstanding*" and it was now "*a well known fact that throughout the whole [Great French] revolution . . . the whole administration of the departments, arrondissements and communes consisted of authorities elected by the respective constituents themselves, and that these authorities acted with complete freedom within general state laws [and] that precisely this provincial and local*

*self-government . . . became the most powerful lever of the revolution."* [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 510f] Marx's original comments imply the imposition of freedom by the centre on a population not desiring it (and how could the centre be representative of the majority in such a case?). Moreover, how could a revolution be truly social if it was not occurring in the grassroots across a country? Unsurprisingly, local autonomy has played a key role in every real revolution.

As such, Bakunin has been proved right. Centralism has always killed a revolution and, as he always argued, real socialism can only be worked from below, by the people of every village, town, and city. The problems facing the world or a revolution cannot be solved by a few people at the top issuing decrees. They can only be solved by the active participation of the mass of working class people, the kind of participation centralism and government by their nature exclude.

Given Marx's support for the federal ideas of the Paris Commune, it can be argued that Marxism is not committed to a policy of strict centralisation (although Lenin, of course, argued that Marx **was** a firm supporter of centralisation). What is true is, to quote Daniel GuÃ©rin, that Marx's comments on the Commune differ "*noticeably from Marx's writings of before and after 1871*" while Bakunin's were "*in fact quite consistent with the lines he adopted in his earlier writings.*" [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 167] Indeed, as Bakunin himself noted, while the Marxists "*saw all their ideas upset by the uprising*" of the Commune, they "*found themselves compelled to take their hats off to it. They went even further, and proclaimed that its programme and purpose were their own, in face of the simplest logic and their own true sentiments.*" This modification of ideas by Marx in the light of the Commune was not limited just to federalism, he also praised its system of mandating recallable delegates. This was a position which Bakunin had been arguing for a number of years previously but which Marx had never advocated. In 1868, for example, Bakunin was talking about a "*Revolutionary Communal Council*" composed of "*delegates . . . vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 261 and pp. 170-1] As such, the Paris Commune was a striking confirmation of Bakunin's ideas on many levels, **not** Marx's (who adjusted his ideas to bring them in line with Bakunin's!).

Since Bakunin, anarchists have deepen this critique of Marxism and, with the experience of both Social-Democracy and Bolshevism, argue that he predicted key failures in Marx's ideas. Given that his followers, particularly Lenin and Trotsky, have emphasised (although, in many ways, changed them) the centralisation and "socialist government" aspects of Marx's thoughts, anarchists argue that Bakunin's critique is as relevant as ever. Real socialism can only come from below.

For more on Bakunin's critique of Marxism, Mark Leier's excellent biography of the Russian Anarchist (**Bakunin: The Creative Passion**) is worth consulting, as is Brian Morris's **Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom**. John Clark has two useful essays on this subject in his **The Anarchist Moment** while Richard B. Saltman's **The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin** contains an excellent chapter on Bakunin and Marx. A good academic account can be found in Alvin W. Gouldner's "*Marx's Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International*" (**Theory and Society**, Vol. 11, No. 6) which is a revised and shortened version of a chapter of his **Against Fragmentation: the Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals**. Obviously, though, Bakunin's original writings should be the first starting point.

## H.1.2 What are the key differences between Anarchists and Marxists?

There are, of course, important similarities between anarchism and Marxism. Both are socialist, oppose capitalism and the current state, support and encourage working class organisation and action and see class struggle as the means of creating a social revolution which will transform society into a new one. However, the differences between these socialist theories are equally important. In the words of Errico Malatesta:

*"The important, fundamental dissension [between anarchists and Marxists] is [that]. . . [Marxist] socialists are authoritarians, anarchists are libertarians.*

*"Socialists want power . . . and once in power wish to impose their programme on the people. . . Anarchists instead maintain, that government cannot be other than harmful, and by its very nature it defends either an existing privileged class or creates a new one; and instead of inspiring to take the place of the existing government anarchists seek to destroy every organism which empowers some to impose their own ideas and interests on others, for they want to free the way for development towards better forms of human fellowship which will emerge from experience, by everyone being free and, having, of course, the economic means to make freedom possible as well as a reality." [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 142]*

The other differences derive from this fundamental one. So while there are numerous ways in which anarchists and Marxists differ, their root lies in the question of power. Socialists seek power (in the name of the working class and usually hidden under rhetoric arguing that party and class power are the same). Anarchists seek to destroy hierarchical power in all its forms and ensure that everyone is free to manage their own affairs (both individually and collectively). From this comes the differences on the nature of a revolution, the way the working class movement should organise and the tactics it should apply and so on. A short list of these differences would include the question of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", the standing of revolutionaries in elections, centralisation versus federalism, the role and organisation of revolutionaries, whether socialism can only come "*from below*" or whether it is possible for it come "*from below*" and "*from above*" and a host of others (i.e. some of the differences we indicated in the [last section](#) during our discussion of Bakunin's critique of Marxism). Indeed, there are so many it is difficult to address them all here. As such, we can only concentrate on a few in this and the following sections.

One of the key issues is on the issue of confusing party power with popular power. The logic of the anarchist case is simple. In any system of hierarchical and centralised power (for example, in a state or governmental structure) then those at the top are in charge (i.e. are in positions of power). It is **not** "the people," nor "the proletariat," nor "the masses," it is those who make up the government who have and exercise real power. As Malatesta argued, government means "*the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few*" and "*if . . . , as do the authoritarians, one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government.*" [**Anarchy**, p. 40 and p. 36] Therefore, anarchists argue, the replacement of party power for working class power is inevitable because of the nature of the state. In the words of Murray Bookchin:

*"Anarchist critics of Marx pointed out with considerable effect that any system of representation would become a statist interest in its own right, one that at best would work against the interests of the working classes (including the peasantry), and that at worst would be a dictatorial power as vicious as the worst bourgeois state machines. Indeed, with political power reinforced by economic power in the form of a nationalised economy, a 'workers' republic' might well prove to be a despotism (to use one of Bakunin's more favourite terms) of unparalleled oppression . . .*

*"Republican institutions, however much they are intended to express the interests of the workers, necessarily place policy-making in the hands of deputies and categorically do not constitute a 'proletariat organised as a ruling class.' If public policy, as distinguished from administrative activities, is not made by the people mobilised into assemblies and confederally co-ordinated by agents on a local, regional, and national basis, then a democracy in the precise sense of the term does not exist. The powers that people enjoy under such circumstances can be usurped without difficulty . . . [I]f the people are to acquire real power over their lives and society, they must establish - and in the past they have, for brief periods of time established - well-ordered institutions in which they themselves directly formulate the policies of their communities and, in the case of their regions, elect confederal functionaries, revocable and strictly controllable, who will execute them. Only in this sense can a class, especially one committed to the abolition of classes, be mobilised as a class to manage society." ["The Communist Manifesto: Insights and Problems", pp. 14-17, **Black Flag**, no. 226, pp. 16-7]*

This is why anarchists stress direct democracy (self-management) in free federations of free associations. It is the only way to ensure that power remains in the hands of the people and is not turned into an alien power above them. Thus Marxist support for statist forms of organisation will inevitably undermine the liberatory nature of the revolution.

Thus the **real** meaning of a workers state is simply that the **party** has the real power, not the workers. That is nature of a state. Marxist rhetoric tends to hide this reality. As an example, we can point to Lenin's comments in October, 1921. In an essay marking the fourth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin stated that the Soviet system "*provides the maximum of democracy for the workers and peasants; at the same time, it marks a break with bourgeois democracy and the rise of a new, epoch-making type of democracy, namely, proletarian democracy, or the dictatorship of the proletariat.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 33, p. 55] Yet Lenin's comments came just a few months after factions within the Communist Party had been banned and after the Kronstadt rebellion and a wave of strikes calling for free soviet elections had been repressed. It was written years after Lenin had asserted that "[w]hen we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party . . . we say, 'Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position . . .'" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 29, p. 535] And, of course, they had not shifted from that position! Clearly, the term "*proletarian democracy*" had a drastically different meaning to Lenin than to most people!

The identification of party power and working class power reaches its height (or, more correctly, depth) in the works of Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin, for example, argued that "*the Communists' correct understanding of his tasks*" lies in "*correctly gauging the conditions and the moment when the vanguard of the proletariat can successfully assume power, when it will be able - during and after the seizure of power - to win adequate support from sufficiently*

*broad strata of the working class and of the non-proletarian working masses, and when it is able thereafter to maintain, consolidate, and extend its rule by educating, training and attracting ever broader masses of the working people.*" Note, the vanguard (the party) seizes power, **not** the masses. Indeed, he stressed that the "*mere presentation of the question - 'dictatorship of the party or dictatorship of the class: dictatorship (party) of the leaders or dictatorship (party) of the masses?'* - testifies to most incredible and hopelessly muddled thinking" and "[t]o go so far . . . as to contrast, **in general**, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid." [The Lenin Anthology, p. 575, p. 567 and p. 568]

Lenin stressed this idea numerous times. For example, he argued that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts . . . that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard . . . Such is the basic mechanism of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the essentials of transition from capitalism to communism . . . for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.*"

[Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 21] This position had became Communist orthodoxy both in Russia and internationally since early 1919. The American socialist John Reed, author of **Ten Days that Shook the World**, was a defender of "*the value of centralisation*" and "*the dictatorship of a revolutionary minority*" (noting that "*the Communist Party is supreme in Russia*"). [Shaking the World, p. 238] Similarly with the likes of Amedeo Bordiga, the first leader of the Communist Party in Italy.

Victor Serge, the ex-anarchist and enthusiastic convert to Bolshevism, argued this mainstream Bolshevik position until the mid-1930s. In 1919, it was a case that "*dictatorship*" was not some kind of "proletarian" dictatorship by the masses. He, like the leading Bolsheviks, explicitly argued against this. Yes, he wrote, "*if we are looking at what should, that is at what ought to, be the case*" but this "*seems doubtful*" in reality. "*For it appears that by force of circumstances one group is obliged to impose itself on the others and to go ahead of them, breaking them if necessary, in order then to exercise exclusive dictatorship.*" The militants "*leading the masses . . . cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often unaware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past.*" So "*revolutionaries will have to take on the dictatorship without delay.*" The experience of Russia "*reveals an energetic and innovative minority which is compelled to make up for the deficiencies in the education of the backward masses by the use of compulsion.*" And so the party "*is in a sense the nervous system of the class. Simultaneously the consciousness and the active, physical organisation of the dispersed forces of the proletariat, which are often ignorant of themselves and often remain latent or express themselves contradictorily.*" And what of the masses? What was their role? Serge was equally blunt. While the party is "*supported by the entire working population,*" strangely enough, "*it maintains its unique situation in dictatorial fashion*" while the workers are "*[b]ehind* the communists, "*sympathising instinctively with the party and carrying out the menial tasks required by the revolution.*" [Revolution in Danger, p. 106, p. 92, p. 115, p. 67, p. 66 and p. 6]

Such are the joys of socialist liberation. The party thinks for the worker while they carry out the "menial tasks" of the revolution. Like doing the work and following the orders - as in any class system.

Trotsky agreed with this lesson and in 1926 opined that the "*dictatorship of the party does not contradict the dictatorship of the class either theoretically or practically; but is the expression of it, if the regime of workers' democracy is constantly developed more and more.*" [**The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926-27)**, p. 76] The obvious contradictions and absurdities of this assertion are all too plain. Needless to say, when defending the concept of "*the dictatorship of the party*" he linked it to Lenin (and so to Leninist orthodoxy):

*"Of course, the foundation of our regime is the dictatorship of a class. But this in turn assumes . . . it is class that has come to self-consciousness through its vanguard, which is to say, through the party. Without this, the dictatorship could not exist . . . Dictatorship is the most highly concentrated function of function of a class, and therefore the basic instrument of a dictatorship is a party. In the most fundamental aspects a class realises its dictatorship through a party. That is why Lenin spoke not only of the dictatorship of the class but also the dictatorship of the party and, in a certain sense, made them identical."* [Op. Cit., pp. 75-6]

He repeated this position on party dictatorship into the late 1930s, long after it had resulted in the horrors of Stalinism:

*"The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities - the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history. . . The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the 'dictatorship' of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses."* [**Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37**, pp. 513-4]

Significantly, this was the year after his apparent (and much belated) embrace of soviet democracy in **The Revolution Betrayed**. Moreover, as we discuss in [section H.3.8](#), he was just repeating the same arguments he had made while in power during the Russian Revolution. Nor was he the only one. Zinoviev, another leading Bolshevik, argued in 1920 along the same lines:

*"soviet rule in Russia could not have been maintained for three years - not even three weeks - without the iron dictatorship of the Communist Party. Any class conscious worker must understand that the dictatorship of the working class can be achieved only by the dictatorship of its vanguard, i.e., by the Communist Party . . . All questions of economic reconstruction, military organisation, education, food supply - all these questions, on which the fate of the proletarian revolution depends absolutely,*

*are decided in Russia before all other matters and mostly in the framework of the party organisations . . . Control by the party over soviet organs, over the trade unions, is the single durable guarantee that any measures taken will serve not special interests, but the interests of the entire proletariat." [quoted by Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, pp. 239-40]*

Three years later, at the Communist Party's congress, he made light of "*comrades who think that the dictatorship of the party is a thing to be realised in practice but not spoken about.*" He went on to argue that what was needed was "*a single powerful central committee which is leader of everything . . . in this is expressed the dictatorship of the party.*" The Congress itself resolved that "*the dictatorship of the working class cannot be assured otherwise than in the form of a dictatorship of its leading vanguard, i.e., the Communist Party.*" [quoted by E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923**, vol. 1, p. 236, pp. 236-7 and p. 237]

How these positions can be reconciled with workers' democracy, power or freedom is not explained. As such, the idea that Leninism (usually considered as mainstream Marxism) is inherently democratic or a supporter of power to the people is clearly flawed. Equally flawed are the attempts by Leninists to distance themselves from, and rationalise, these positions in terms of the "objective circumstances" (such as civil war) facing the Russian Revolution. As we discuss in [section H.6](#), Bolshevik authoritarianism started **before** these problems began and continued long after they ended (in part because the policies pursued by the Bolshevik leadership had roots in their ideology and, as a result, that ideology itself played a key role in the failure of the revolution).

Ultimately, though, the leading lights of Bolshevism concluded from their experiences that the dictatorship of the proletariat could only be achieved by the dictatorship of the party and they generalised this position for **all** revolutions. Even in the prison camps in the late 1920s and early 1930s, "*almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that 'freedom of party' would be 'the end of the revolution.' 'Freedom to choose one's party - that is Menshevism,' was the Trotskyists' final verdict.*" [Ante Ciliga, **The Russian Enigma**, p. 280] While few Leninists today would subscribe to this position, the fact is when faced with the test of revolution the founders of their ideology not only practised the dictatorship of the party, they raised it to an ideological truism. Sadly, most modern day Trotskyists ignore this awkward fact in favour of inaccurate claims that Trotsky's **Left Opposition** "*framed a policy along [the] lines*" of "*returning to genuine workers' democracy*". [Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 19] In reality, as "*Left Oppositionist*" Victor Serge pointed out, "*the greatest reach of boldness of the Left Opposition in the Bolshevik Party was to demand the restoration of inner-Party democracy, and it never dared dispute the theory of single-party government - by this time, it was too late.*" [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, p. 181]

Significantly, this position on party rule has its roots in the uneven political development within the working class (i.e. that the working class contains numerous political perspectives within it). As the party (according to Leninist theory) contains the most advanced ideas (and, again according to Leninist theory, the working class cannot reach beyond a trade union consciousness by its own efforts), the party must take power to ensure that the masses do not make "mistakes" or "waver" (show "vacillation") during a revolution. From such a perspective to the position of party dictatorship is not far (and a journey that all the leading Bolsheviks, including Lenin and Trotsky did in fact take).

These arguments by leading Bolsheviks confirm Bakunin's fear that the Marxists aimed for "*a tyranny of the minority over a majority in the name of the people - in the name of the stupidity of the many and the superior wisdom of the few.*" [Marxism, Freedom and the State, p. 63]

In contrast, anarchists argue that precisely because of political differences we need the fullest possible democracy and freedom to discuss issues and reach agreements. Only by discussion and self-activity can the political perspectives of those in struggle develop and change. In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is the strongest argument against it. For anarchists, the idea of a revolutionary government is a contradiction. As Malatesta put it, "*if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing a genius from the votes of a mass of fools?*" [Anarchy, pp. 53-4] As such, anarchists think that power should be in the hands of the masses themselves. Only freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school of freedom. That means that, to quote Bakunin, "*since it is the people which must make the revolution everywhere . . . the ultimate direction of it must at all times be vested in the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial organisations . . . organised from the bottom up through revolutionary delegation.*" [No God, No Masters, vol. 1, pp. 155-6]

Clearly, then, the question of state/party power is one dividing anarchists and most Marxists. Again, though, we must stress that libertarian Marxists agree with anarchists on this subject and reject the whole idea that rule/dictatorship of a party equals the dictatorship of the working class. As such, the Marxist tradition as a whole does not confuse this issue, although the majority of it does. So not all Marxists are Leninists. A few (council communists, Situationists, and so on) are far closer to anarchism. They also reject the idea of party power/dictatorship, the use of elections, for direct action, argue for the abolition of wage slavery by workers' self-management of production and so on. They represent the best in Marx's work and should not be lumped with the followers of Bolshevism. Sadly, they are in the minority.

Finally, we should indicate other important areas of difference as summarised by Lenin in his work **The State and Revolution**:

*"The difference between the Marxists and the anarchists is this: 1) the former, while aiming at the complete abolition of the state, recognise that this aim can only be achieved after classes have been abolished by the socialist revolution, as the result of the establishment of socialism which leads to the withering away of the state. The latter want to abolish the state completely overnight, failing to understand the conditions under which the state can be abolished 2) the former recognise that after the proletariat has conquered political power it must utterly destroy the old state machine and substitute for it a new one consisting of the organisation of armed workers, after the type of the Commune. The latter, while advocating the destruction of the state machine, have absolutely no idea of what the proletariat will put in its place and how it will use its revolutionary power; the anarchists even deny that the revolutionary proletariat should utilise its state power, its revolutionary dictatorship; 3) the former demand that the proletariat be prepared for revolution by utilising the present state; the latter reject this."* [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 358]

We will discuss each of these points in the next three sections. Point one will be discussed in [section H.1.3](#), the second in [section H.1.4](#) and the third and final one in [section H.1.5](#).

### H.1.3 Why do anarchists wish to abolish the state "overnight"?

As indicated at the end of the [last section](#), Lenin argued that while Marxists aimed "*at the complete abolition of the state*" they "*recognise that this aim can only be achieved after classes have been abolished by the socialist revolution*" while anarchists "*want to abolish the state completely overnight.*" This issue is usually summarised by Marxists arguing that a new state is required to replace the destroyed bourgeois one. This new state is called by Marxists "***the dictatorship of the proletariat***" or a workers' state. Anarchists reject this transitional state while Marxists embrace it. Indeed, according to Lenin "*a Marxist is one who extends the acceptance of the class struggle to the acceptance of the dictatorship of the proletariat.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 358 and p. 294]

So what does the "dictatorship of the proletariat" actually mean? Generally, Marxists seem to imply that this term simply means the defence of the revolution and so the anarchist rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat means, for Marxists, the denial the need to defend a revolution. This particular straw man was used by Lenin in **The State and Revolution** when he quoted Marx's article "*Indifference to Politics*" to suggest that anarchists advocated workers "*laying down their arms*" after a successful revolution. Such a "*laying down [of] their arms*" would mean "*abolishing the state*" while keeping their arms "*in order to crush the resistance of the bourgeoisie*" would mean "*giv[ing] the state a revolutionary and transitory form,*" so setting up "*their revolutionary dictatorship in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.*" [Marx, quoted by Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 315]

That such an argument can be made, never mind repeated, suggests a lack of honesty. It assumes that the Marxist and Anarchist definitions of "the state" are identical. They are not. For anarchists the state, government, means "*the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few.*" [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 41] For Marxists, the state is "*an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another.*" [Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 274] That these definitions are in conflict is clear and unless this difference is made explicit, anarchist opposition to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" cannot be clearly understood.

Anarchists, of course, agree that the current state is the means by which the bourgeois class enforces its rule over society. In Bakunin's words, "*the political state has no other mission but to protect the exploitation of the people by the economically privileged classes.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 221] "*Throughout history, just as in our time, government is either the brutal, violent, arbitrary rule of the few over the many or it is an organised instrument to ensure that domination and privilege will be in the hands of those who . . . have cornered all the means of life.*" Under capitalism, as Malatesta succulently put, the state is "*the bourgeoisie's servant and gendarme.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 21 and p. 23] The reason why the state is marked by centralised power is due to its role as the protector of (minority) class rule. As such, a state cannot be anything but a defender of minority power as its centralised and hierarchical structure is designed for that purpose. If the working class really were running society, as Marxists claim they would be in the "dictatorship of the proletariat,"

then it would not be a state. As Bakunin put it: "*Where all rule, there are no more ruled, and there is no State.*" [Op. Cit., p. 223]

The idea that anarchists, by rejecting the "dictatorship of the proletariat," also reject defending a revolution is false. We do not equate the "dictatorship of the proletariat" with the need to defend a revolution or expropriating the capitalist class, ending capitalism and building socialism. Anarchists from Bakunin onwards have taken both of these necessities for granted. As we discuss this particular Marxist straw man in [section H.2.1](#), we will leave our comments on anarchist awareness of the need to defend a revolution at this.

Anarchists, then, do not reject defending a revolution and our opposition to the so-called "revolutionary" or "socialist" state is not based on this, regardless of what Marx and Lenin asserted. Rather, we argue that the state can and must be abolished "overnight" during a social revolution because any state, including the so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat", is marked by hierarchical power and can only empower the few at the expense of the many. The state will not "wither away" as Marxists claim simply because it excludes, by its very nature, the active participation of the bulk of the population and ensures a new class division in society: those in power (the party) and those subject to it (the working class). Georges Fontenais sums up anarchist concerns on this issue:

*"The formula 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has been used to mean many different things. If for no other reason it should be condemned as a cause of confusion. With Marx it can just as easily mean the centralised dictatorship of the party which claims to represent the proletariat as it can the federalist conception of the Commune.*

*"Can it mean the exercise of political power by the victorious working class? No, because the exercise of political power in the recognised sense of the term can only take place through the agency of an exclusive group practising a monopoly of power, separating itself from the class and oppressing it. And this is how the attempt to use a State apparatus can reduce the dictatorship of the proletariat to the dictatorship of the party over the masses.*

*"But if by dictatorship of the proletariat is understood collective and direct exercise of 'political power', this would mean the disappearance of 'political power' since its distinctive characteristics are supremacy, exclusivity and monopoly. It is no longer a question of exercising or seizing political power, it is about doing away with it all together!*

*"If by dictatorship is meant the domination of the majority by a minority, then it is not a question of giving power to the proletariat but to a party, a distinct political group. If by dictatorship is meant the domination of a minority by the majority (domination by the victorious proletariat of the remnants of a bourgeoisie that has been defeated as a class) then the setting up of dictatorship means nothing but the need for the majority to efficiently arrange for its defence its own social Organisation.*

[...]

*"The terms 'domination', 'dictatorship' and 'state' are as little appropriate as the expression 'taking power' for the revolutionary act of the seizure of the factories by the workers.*

*"We reject then as inaccurate and causes of confusion the expressions 'dictatorship of the proletariat', 'taking political power', 'workers state', 'socialist state' and 'proletarian state'."* [Manifesto of Libertarian Communism, pp. 22-3]

So anarchists argue that the state has to be abolished "overnight" simply because a state is marked by hierarchical power and the exclusion of the bulk of the population from the decision making process. It cannot be used to implement socialism simply because it is not designed that way. To extend and defend a revolution a state is not required. Indeed, it is a hindrance:

*"The mistake of authoritarian communists in this connection is the belief that fighting and organising are impossible without submission to a government; and thus they regard anarchists . . . as the foes of all organisation and all co-ordinated struggle. We, on the other hand, maintain that not only are revolutionary struggle and revolutionary organisation possible outside and in spite of government interference but that, indeed, that is the only effective way to struggle and organise, for it has the active participation of all members of the collective unit, instead of their passively entrusting themselves to the authority of the supreme leaders.*

*"Any governing body is an impediment to the real organisation of the broad masses, the majority. Where a government exists, then the only really organised people are the minority who make up the government; and . . . if the masses do organise, they do so against it, outside it, or at the very least, independently of it. In ossifying into a government, the revolution as such would fall apart, on account of its awarding that government the monopoly of organisation and of the means of struggle."* [Luigi Fabbri, "Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism", pp. 13-49, The Poverty of Statism, Albert Meltzer (ed.), p. 27]

This is because of the hierarchical nature of the state, its delegation of power into the hands of the few and so a so-called "revolutionary" government can have no other result than a substitution of the few (the government) for the many (the masses). This, in turn, undermines the mass participation and action from below that a revolution needs to succeed and flourish. *"Instead of acting for themselves,"* Kropotkin argued, *"instead of marching forward, instead of advancing in the direction of the new order of things, the people, confiding in their governors, entrusted to them the charge of taking the initiative."* However, social change is the product of *"the people in action"* and *"the brain of a few individuals [are] absolutely incapable of finding solutions"* to the problems it will face *"which can only spring from the life of the people."* For anarchists, a revolution *"is not a simple change of governors. It is the taking possession by the people of all social wealth"* and this cannot be achieved *"be decrees emanating from a government."* This *"economic change"* will be *"so immense and so profound"* that it is *"impossible for one or any individual to elaborate the different social forms which must spring up in the society of the future. This elaboration of new social forms can only be made by the collective work of the masses"* and *"[a]ny authority external to it will only be an obstacle, a 'drag on the action of the people.'* A revolutionary state, therefore, *"becomes the greatest obstacle to the revolution"* and to *"dislodge it"* requires the people *"to take up arms, to make another revolution."* [Anarchism, p. 240, p. 241, pp. 247-8, p. 248, p. 249, p. 241 and p. 242] Which, we should stress, was exactly what happened in Russia, where anarchists and others (such as the Kronstadt rebels) called for a *"Third Revolution"* against the Bolshevik state and the party dictatorship and state capitalism it had created.

For anarchists, the abolition of the state does not mean rejecting the need to extend or defend a revolution (quite the reverse!). It means rejecting a system of organisation designed by and for minorities to ensure their rule. To create a state (even a "workers' state") means to delegate power away from the working class and eliminate their power in favour of party power (*"the principle error of the [Paris] Commune, an unavoidable error, since it derived from the very principle on which power was constituted, was precisely that of being a government, and of substituting itself for the people by force of circumstances."* [Elisée Reclus, quoted John P. Clark and Camille Martin, **Anarchy, Geography, Modernity**, p. 72]).

In place of a state anarchists' argue for a free federation of workers' organisations as the means of conducting a revolution (and the framework for its defence). Most Marxists seem to confuse centralism and federalism, with Lenin stating that *"if the proletariat and the poor peasants take state power into their own hands, organise themselves quite freely in communes, and unite the action of all the communes in striking at capital . . . won't that be centralism? Won't that be the most consistent democratic centralism and, moreover, proletarian centralism?"* No, it would be federalism, the most consistent federalism as advocated by Proudhon and Bakunin and, under the influence of the former, suggested by the Paris Commune. Lenin argued that some *"simply cannot conceive of the possibility of voluntary centralism, of the voluntary fusion of the proletarian communes, for the sole purpose of destroying bourgeois rule and the bourgeois state machine."* [**The Lenin Anthology**, p. 348] Yet "voluntary centralism" is, at best, just another way of describing federalism - assuming that "voluntary" really means that, of course. At worse, and in practice, such centralism simply places all the decision making at the centre, at the top, and all that is left is for the communes to obey the decisions of a few party leaders.

As we discuss in the [next section](#), anarchists see this federation of workers' associations and communes (the framework of a free society) as being based on the organisations working class people create in their struggle against capitalism. These self-managed organisations, by refusing to become part of a centralised state, will ensure the success of a revolution.

#### **H.1.4 Do anarchists have "*absolutely no idea*" of what to put in place of the state?**

Lenin's second claim was that anarchists, *"while advocating the destruction of the state machine, have absolutely no idea of what the proletariat will put in its place"* and compared this to the Marxists who argued for a new state machine *"consisting of armed workers, after the type of the [Paris] Commune."* [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 358]

For anarchists, Lenin's assertion simply shows his unfamiliarity with anarchist literature and need not be taken seriously - anyone familiar with anarchist theory would simply laugh at such comments. Sadly, most Marxists are **not** familiar with that theory, so we need to explain two things. Firstly, anarchists have very clear ideas on what to "replace" the state with (namely a federation of communes based on working class associations). Secondly, that this idea is based on the idea of armed workers, inspired by the Paris Commune (although predicted by Bakunin).

Moreover, for anarchists Lenin's comment seems somewhat incredulous. As George Barrett put it, in reply to the question *"if you abolish government, what will you put it its place,"* this

*"seems to an Anarchist very much as if a patient asked the doctor, 'If you take away my illness, what will you give me in its place?' The Anarchist's argument is that government fulfils no useful purpose . . . It is the headquarters of the profit-makers, the rent-takers, and of all those who take from but who do not give to society. When this class is abolished by the people so organising themselves to run the factories and use the land for the benefit of their free communities, i.e. for their own benefit, then the Government must also be swept away, since its purpose will be gone. The only thing then that will be put in the place of government will be the free organisation of the workers. When Tyranny is abolished, Liberty remains, just as when disease is eradicated health remains."* [Objections to Anarchism, p. 356]

Barrett's answer contains the standard anarchist position on what will be the organisational basis of a revolutionary society, namely that the *"only thing then that will be put in the place of government will be the free organisation of the workers."* This is a concise summary of anarchist theory and cannot be bettered. This vision, as we discuss in [section I.2.3](#) in some detail, can be found in the work of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and a host of other anarchist thinkers. Since anarchists from Bakunin onwards have stressed that a federation of workers' associations would constitute the framework of a free society, to assert otherwise (as Lenin did) is little more than a joke or a slander. To quote Bakunin:

*"The future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal."*  
[Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 206]

Similar ideas can easily be found in the works of other anarchists. While the actual names and specific details of these federations of workers' associations may change (for example, the factory committees and soviets in the Russian Revolution, the collectives in Spain, the section assemblies in the French Revolution are a few of them) the basic ideas are the same. Bakunin also pointed to the means of defence, a workers' militia (the people armed, as per the Paris Commune - [section H.2.1](#)).

A major difference between anarchism and Marxism which Lenin points to is, clearly, false. Anarchists are well aware of what should *"replace"* the bourgeois state and have always been so. The **real** difference is simply that anarchists say what they mean while Lenin's "new" state did not, in fact, mean working class power but rather party power.

As for Lenin's comment that we have *"absolutely no ideas"* of how the working class *"will use its revolutionary power"* suggests more ignorance, as we have urged working people to expropriate the expropriators, reorganise production under workers' self-management and start to construct society from the bottom upwards (a quick glance at Kropotkin's **Conquest of Bread**, for example, would soon convince any reader of the inaccuracy of Lenin's comment). This summary by the anarchist Jura Federation (written in 1880) gives a flavour of anarchist ideas on this subject:

*"The bourgeoisie's power over the popular masses springs from economic privileges, political domination and the enshrining of such privileges in the laws. So we must strike at the wellsprings of bourgeois power, as well as its various manifestations."*

*"The following measures strike us as essential to the welfare of the revolution, every bit as much as armed struggle against its enemies:*

*"The insurgents must confiscate social capital, landed estates, mines, housing, religious and public buildings, instruments of labour, raw materials, gems and precious stones and manufactured products:*

*"All political, administrative and judicial authorities are to be deposed . . . What should the organisational measures of the revolution be?*

*"Immediate and spontaneous establishment of trade bodies: provisional assumption by those of . . . social capital . . . : local federation of a trades bodies and labour organisation:*

*"Establishment of neighbourhood groups and federations of same . . .*

*"Organisation of the insurgent forces . . . the federation of all the revolutionary forces of the insurgent Communes . . . Federation of Communes and organisation of the masses, with an eye to the revolution's enduring until such time as all reactionary activity has been completely eradicated . . . Once trade bodies have been established, the next step is to organise local life. The organ of this life is to be the federation of trades bodies and it is this local federation which is to constitute the future Commune."* [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, pp. 246-7]

Clearly, anarchists do have some ideas on what the working class will "replace" the state with and how it will use its "revolutionary power"!

Similarly, Lenin's statement that "*the anarchists even deny that the revolutionary proletariat should utilise its state power, its revolutionary dictatorship*" again distorts the anarchist position. As we argued in [the last section](#), our objection to the "state power" of the proletariat is precisely **because** it cannot, by its very nature as a state, actually allow the working class to manage society directly (and, of course, it automatically excludes other sections of the working masses, such as the peasantry and artisans). We argued that, in practice, it would simply mean the dictatorship of a few party leaders. This position, we must stress, was one Lenin himself was arguing in the year after completing **State and Revolution** and so the leading Bolsheviks confirmed the anarchist argument that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would, in fact, become a dictatorship **over** the proletariat by the party.

Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri summed up the differences well:

*"The Marxists . . . foresee the natural disappearance of the State as a consequence of the destruction of classes by the means of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat,' that is to say State Socialism, whereas the Anarchists desire the destruction of the classes by means of a social revolution which eliminates, with the classes, the State. The Marxists, moreover, do not propose the armed conquest of the Commune by the whole proletariat, but they propose the conquest of the State by the party which imagines that it represents the proletariat. The Anarchists allow the use of direct power by the proletariat, but they understand by the organ of this power to be formed by the entire corpus of systems of communist administration-corporate organisations [i.e. industrial unions], communal institutions, both regional and national-freely constituted outside and in opposition to all political monopoly by parties and endeavouring to a minimum administrative centralisation."* ["Dictatorship of the

*Proletariat and State Socialism*", pp. 51-2, **Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review**, no. 4, p. 52]

Clearly, Lenin's assertions are little more than straw men. Anarchists are not only well aware of the need for a federation of working class associations (workers' councils or soviets) to replace the state, they were advocating it long before Lenin took up this perspective in 1917 (as we discuss in [section H.3.10](#)). The key difference being, of course, anarchists meant it will Lenin saw it as a means of securing Bolshevik party power.

Lastly, it should also be noted that Marxists, having taken so long to draw the same conclusions as anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, have tended to make a fetish of workers councils. As an example, we find Chris Harman of the British SWP complaining that the Argentinean masses organised themselves in the wrong way as part of their revolt against neo-liberalism which started in December 2001. He states that the "*neighbourhood committees and popular assemblies*" created by the revolt "*express the need of those who have overthrown presidents to organise themselves*" and notes "*they have certain similarities with the characteristic forms of mass self organisation that arose in the great working class struggles of the 20th century - the workers' councils or soviets.*" But, he stressed, "*they also have very important differences from these.*" Yet Harman's complaints show his own confusions, seriously arguing that "*the popular assemblies are not yet bodies of delegates. The people at them represent themselves, but do not have an organic connection with some group of people who they represent - and who can recall them if they do not carry out their will.*" [*Argentina: rebellion at the sharp end of the world crisis*", pp. 3-48, **International Socialism**, vol. 94, p. 25] That, of course, is the whole point - they are popular **assemblies!** A popular assembly does not "represent" anyone because its members govern themselves, i.e. are directly democratic. They are the elemental bodies which recall any delegates who do not implement their mandate! But given that Leninism aims at party power, this concern for representation is perfectly understandable, if lamentable.

So rather than celebrate this rise in mass self-management and self-organisation, Harman complains that these "*popular assemblies are not anchored in the workplaces where millions of Argentineans are still drawn together on a daily basis to toil.*" Need it be said that such an SWP approved organisation will automatically exclude the unemployed, housewives, the elderly, children and other working class people who were taking part in the struggle? In addition, any capitalist crisis is marked by rising unemployment, firms closing and so on. While workplaces must and have been seized by their workers, it is a law of revolutions that the economic disruption they cause results in increased unemployment (in this Kropotkin's arguments in **The Conquest of Bread** have been confirmed time and time again). Significantly, Harman admits that they include "*organisations of unemployed workers*" as well as "*that in some of the assemblies an important leading role is played by unemployed activists shaped by their role in past industrial struggles.*" He does not, however, note that creating workers' councils would end their active participation in the revolt. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 25]

That the Argentine working class formed organs of power which were not totally dependent on the workplace was, therefore, a good sign. Factory assemblies and federations must be formed but as a complement to, rather than as a replacement of, the community assemblies. Harman states that the assemblies were "*closer to the sections - the nightly district mass meetings - of the French Revolution than to the workers' councils of 1905 and 1917 in Russia*" and complains that a "*21st century uprising was taking the form of the archetypal 18th century revolution!*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 25 and p. 22] Did the Argentineans not realise that a

21st century uprising should mimic "*the great working class struggles of the 20th century*", particularly that which took place in a mostly pre-capitalist Tsarist regime which was barely out of the 18th century itself? Did they not realise that the leaders of the vanguard party know better than themselves how they should organise and conduct their struggles? That the people of the 21st century knew best how to organise their own revolts is lost of Harman, who prefers to squeeze the realities of modern struggles into the forms which Marxists took so long to recognise in the first place. Given that anarchists have been discussing the possibilities of community assemblies for some time, perhaps we can expect Leninists to recognise their importance in a few decades? After all, the Bolsheviks in Russia were slow to realise the significance of the soviets in 1905 so Harman's position is hardly surprising.

So, it is easy to see what anarchists think of Lenin's assertion that "*Anarchism had failed to give anything even approaching a true solution of the concrete political problems, viz., must the old state machine be smashed? and what should supersede it?*" [Op. Cit., p. 350] We simply point out that Lenin was utterly distorting the anarchist position on social revolution. Revolutionary anarchists had, since the 1860s, argued that workers' councils (soviets) could be both a weapon of class struggle against capitalism and the state as well as the framework of the future (libertarian) socialist society. Lenin only came to superficially similar conclusions in 1917. Which means that when he talked of workers' councils, Lenin was only repeating Bakunin - the difference being we anarchists mean it!

### H.1.5 Why do anarchists reject "*utilising the present state*"?

This is another key issue, the question of Marxists demanding (in the words of Lenin) "*that the proletariat be prepared for revolution by utilising the present state*" while anarchists "*reject this.*" [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 358] By this, Lenin meant the taking part of socialists in bourgeois elections, standing candidates for office and having socialist representatives in Parliament and other local and national state bodies. In other words, what Marx termed "*political action*" and the Bolsheviks "*revolutionary Parliamentarianism.*"

For anarchists, the use of elections does not "prepare" the working class for revolution (i.e. managing their own affairs and society). Rather, it prepares them to follow leaders and let others act for them. In the words of Rudolf Rocker:

*"Participation in the politics of the bourgeois States has not brought the labour movement a hair's-breadth nearer to Socialism, but thanks to this method, Socialism has almost been completely crushed and condemned to insignificance . . . Participation in parliamentary politics has affected the Socialist Labour movement like an insidious poison. It destroyed the belief in the necessity of constructive Socialist activity, and, worse of all, the impulse to self-help, by inoculating people with the ruinous delusion that salvation always comes from above."* [Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 54]

While electoral ("political") activity ensures that the masses become accustomed to following leaders and letting them act on their behalf, anarchists' support direct action as "*the best available means for preparing the masses to manage their own personal and collective interests; and besides, anarchists feel that even now the working people are fully capable of handling their own political and administrative interests.*" Political action, in contrast, needs

centralised "authoritarian organisations" and results in "ceding power by all to someone, the delegate, the representative". "For direct pressure put against the ruling classes by the masses, the Socialist Party has substituted representation" and "instead of fostering the class struggle . . . it has adopted class collaboration in the legislative arena, without which all reforms would remain a vain hope." [Luigi Galleani, **The End of Anarchism?**, pp. 13-4, p. 14 and p. 12]

Anarchists, therefore, argue that we need to reclaim the power which has been concentrated into the hands of the state. That is why we stress direct action. Direct action means action by the people themselves, that is action directly taken by those directly affected. Through direct action, we dominate our own struggles, it is we who conduct it, organise it, manage it. We do not hand over to others our own acts and task of self-liberation. That way, we become accustomed to managing our own affairs, creating alternative, libertarian, forms of social organisation which can become a force to resist the state, win reforms and, ultimately, become the framework of a free society. In other words, direct action creates organs of self-activity (such as community assemblies, factory committees, workers' councils, and so on) which, to use Bakunin's words, are "*creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.*"

The idea that socialists standing for elections somehow prepares working class people for revolution is simply wrong. Utilising the state, standing in elections, only prepares people for following leaders - it does not encourage the self-activity, self-organisation, direct action and mass struggle required for a social revolution. Moreover, as Bakunin predicted use of elections has a corrupting effect on those who use it. The history of radicals using elections has been a long one of betrayal and the transformation of revolutionary parties into reformist ones (see [section J.2.6](#) for more discussion). Using the existing state ensures that the division at the heart of existing society (namely a few who govern and the many who obey) is reproduced in the movements trying to abolish it. It boils down to handing effective leadership to special people, to "leaders," just when the situation requires working people to solve their own problems and take matters into their own hands:

*"The Social Question will be put . . . long before the Socialists have conquered a few seats in Parliament, and thus the solution of the question will be actually in the hands of the workmen [and women] themselves . . .*

*"Under the influence of government worship, they may try to nominate a new government . . . and they may entrust it with the solution of all difficulties. It is so simple, so easy, to throw a vote into the ballot-box, and to return home! So gratifying to know that there is somebody who will arrange your own affairs for the best, while you are quietly smoking your pipe and waiting for orders which you have only to execute, not to reason about."* [Kropotkin, **Act for Yourselves**, p. 34]

Only the struggle for freedom (or freedom itself) can be the school for freedom, and by placing power into the hands of leaders, utilising the existing state ensures that socialism is postponed rather than prepared for. As such, strikes and other forms of direct action "*are of enormous value; they create, organise, and form a workers' army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.*" [Bakunin, **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, pp. 384-5] In contrast, utilising the present state only trains people in following leaders and so socialism "*lost its creative initiative and*

*became an ordinary reform movement . . . content with success at the polls, and no longer attributed any importance to social upbuilding." [Rocker, **Op. Cit.**, p. 55]*

Which highlights another key problem with the notion of utilising the present state as Marxist support for electioneering is somewhat at odds with their claims of being in favour of collective, mass action. There is nothing more isolated, atomised and individualistic than voting. It is the act of one person in a box by themselves. It is the total opposite of collective struggle. The individual is alone before, during and after the act of voting. Indeed, unlike direct action, which, by its very nature, throws up new forms of organisation in order to manage and co-ordinate the struggle, voting creates no alternative social structures. Nor can it as it is not based on nor does it create collective action or organisation. It simply empowers an individual (the elected representative) to act on behalf of a collection of other individuals (the voters). Such delegation will hinder collective organisation and action as the voters expect their representative to act and fight for them - if they did not, they would not vote for them in the first place!

Given that Marxists usually slander anarchists as "individualists" the irony is delicious!

If we look at the anti-Poll-Tax campaign in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we can see what would happen to a mass movement which utilised electioneering. The various left-wing parties, particularly Militant (now the Socialist Party) spent a lot of time and effort lobbying Labour Councillors not to implement the tax (with no success). Let us assume they had succeeded and the Labour Councillors had refused to implement the tax (or "socialist" candidates had been elected to stop it). What would have happened? Simply that there would not have been a mass movement or mass organisation based on non-payment, nor self-organised direct action to resist warrant sales, nor community activism of any form. Rather, the campaign would have consisted to supporting the councillors in their actions, mass rallies in which the leaders would have informed us of their activities on our behalf and, perhaps, rallies and marches to protest any action the government had inflicted on them. The leaders may have called for some form of mass action but this action would not have come from below and so not a product of working class self-organisation, self-activity and self-reliance. Rather, it would have been purely re-active and a case of follow the leader, without the empowering and liberating aspects of taking action by yourself, as a conscious and organised group. It would have replaced the struggle of millions with the actions of a handful of leaders.

Of course, even discussing this possibility indicates how remote it is from reality. The Labour Councillors were not going to act - they were far too "practical" for that. Years of working within the system, of using elections, had taken their toll decades ago. Anarchists, of course, saw the usefulness of picketing the council meetings, of protesting against the Councillors and showing them a small example of the power that existed to resist them if they implemented the tax. As such, the picket would have been an expression of direct action, as it was based on showing the power of our direct action and class organisations. Lobbying, however, was building illusions in "leaders" acting for us and based on pleading rather than defiance. But, then again, Militant desired to replace the current leaders with themselves and so had an interest in promoting such tactics and focusing the struggle on leaders and whether they would act for people or not.

Unfortunately, the Socialists never really questioned **why** they had to lobby the councillors in the first place - if utilising the existing state **was** a valid radical or revolutionary tactic, why has it always resulted in a de-radicalising of those who use it? This would be the inevitable

results of any movement which "complements" direct action with electioneering. The focus of the movement will change from the base to the top, from self-organisation and direct action from below to passively supporting the leaders. This may not happen instantly, but over time, just as the party degenerates by working within the system, the mass movement will be turned into an electoral machine for the party - even arguing against direct action in case it harms the election chances of the leaders. Just as the trade union leaders have done again and again in Britain and elsewhere.

So anarchists point to the actual record of Marxists "*utilising the present state*". Murray Bookchin's comments about the German Social Democrats are appropriate here:

*"[T]he party's preoccupation with parliamentarism was taking it ever away from anything Marx had envisioned. Instead of working to overthrow the bourgeois state, the SPD, with its intense focus on elections, had virtually become an engine for getting votes and increasing its Reichstag representation within the bourgeois state . . . The more artful the SPD became in these realms, the more its membership and electorate increased and, with the growth of new pragmatic and opportunistic adherents, the more it came to resemble a bureaucratic machine for acquiring power under capitalism rather than a revolutionary organisation to eliminate it."* [The Third Revolution, vol. 2, p. 300]

The reality of working within the state soon transformed the party and its leadership, as Bakunin predicted. If we look at Leninism, we discover a similar failure to consider the evidence:

*"From the early 1920s on, the Leninist attachment to pre-WWI social democratic tactics such as electoral politics and political activity within pro-capitalist labour unions dominated the perspectives of the so-called Communist. But if these tactics were correct ones, why didn't they lead to a less dismal set of results? We must be materialists, not idealists. What was the actual outcome of the Leninist strategies? Did Leninist strategies result in successful proletarian revolutions, giving rise to societies worthy of the human beings that live in them? The revolutionary movement in the inter-war period was defeated."* [Max Anger, "The Spartacist School of Falsification", pp. 50-2, Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, no. 43, pp. 51-2]

As Scottish Anarchist Ethel McDonald argued in 1937, the tactics urged by Lenin were a disaster in practice:

*"At the Second Congress of the Third International, Moscow, a comrade who is with us now in Spain, answering Zinoviev, urged faith in the syndicalist movement in Germany and the end of parliamentary communism. He was ridiculed. Parliamentarianism, communist parliamentarianism, but still parliamentarianism would save Germany. And it did . . . Saved it from Socialism. Saved it for Fascism. Parliamentary social democracy and parliamentary communism have destroyed the socialist hope of Europe, has made a carnage of human liberty. In Britain, parliamentarianism saved the workers from Socialism . . . Have you not had enough of this huge deception? Are you still prepared to continue in the same old way, along the same old lines, talking and talking and doing nothing?"* ["The Volunteer Ban", pp. 72-5, Workers City, Farquhar McLay (ed.), p. 74]

When the Nazis took power in 1933 in Germany the 12 million Socialist and Communist voters and 6 million organised workers took no action. In Spain, it was the anarcho-syndicalist CNT which lead the battle against fascism on the streets and helped create one of the most important social revolutions the world has seen. The contrast could not be more clear. And many Marxists urge us to follow Lenin's advice today!

All in all, the history of socialists actually using elections has been a dismal failure and was obviously a failure long before 1917. Subsequent experience has only confirmed that conclusion. Rather than prepare the masses for revolution, it has done the opposite. As we argue in [section J.2](#), this is to be expected. That Lenin could still argue along these lines even after the rise of reformism ("revisionism") in the 1890s and the betrayal of social democracy in 1914 indicates a lack of desire to learn the lessons of history.

The negative effects of "*utilising*" the present state are, sometimes, acknowledged by Marxists although this rarely interferes with their support for standing in elections. Thus we find that advocate of "revolutionary" parliamentarianism, Trotsky, noting that *[i]f parliamentarianism served the proletariat to a certain extent as a training school for revolution, then it also served the bourgeoisie to a far greater extent as the school of counter-revolutionary strategy. Suffice it to say that by means of parliamentarianism the bourgeoisie was able so to educate the Social Democracy that it is today [1924] the main prop of private property.*" [**Lessons of October**, pp. 170-1] Of course, the followers of Lenin and Trotsky are made of sterner stuff than those of Marx and Engels and so utilising the same tactics will have a different outcome. As one-time syndicalist William Gallacher put it in reply to Lenin's question "*[i]f the workers sent you to represent them in Parliament, would you become corrupt?*": "*No, I'm sure that under no circumstances could the bourgeoisie corrupt me.*" [quoted by Mark Shipway, **Anti-Parliamentary Communism**, p. 21] Mere will-power, apparently, is sufficient to counteract the pressures and influences of parliamentarianism which Marx and Engels, unlike Bakunin, failed to predict but whose legacy still haunts the minds of those who claim to be "*scientific socialists*" and so, presumably, base their politics on facts and experience rather than wishful thinking.

This is why anarchists reject the notion of radicals utilising the existing state and instead urge direct action and solidarity outside of bourgeois institutions. Only this kind of struggle creates the spirit of revolt and new popular forms of organisation which can fight and replace the hierarchical structures of capitalist society. Hence anarchists stress the need of working class people to "*rely on themselves to get rid of the oppression of Capital, without expecting that the same thing can be done for them by anybody else. The emancipation of the workmen [and women] must be the act of the workmen [and women] themselves.*" [**Kropotkin, Op. Cit.**, p. 32] Only this kind of movement and struggle can maximise the revolutionary potential of struggles for reforms within capitalism. As history shows, the alternative has repeatedly failed.

It should be noted, however, that not all Marxists have refused to recognise the lessons of history. Libertarian Marxists, such as council communists, also reject "*utilising the present state*" to train the proletariat for revolution (i.e. for socialists to stand for elections). Lenin attacked these Marxists who had drawn similar conclusions as the anarchists (**after** the failure of social-democracy) in his 1920 diatribe **Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder**. In that pamphlet he used the experiences of the Bolsheviks in semi-Feudal Tsarist Russia to combat the conclusions drawn by socialists in the advanced capitalist countries with sizeable social democratic parties. Lenin's arguments for revolutionary Parliamentarianism did not

convince the anti-Parliamentarians who argued that its "*significance lies not in its content, but in the person of the author, for the arguments are scarcely original and have for the most part already been used by others . . . their fallacy resides mainly in the equation of the conditions, parties, organisations and parliamentary practice of Western Europe with their Russian counterparts.*" [Anton Pannekoek, **Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism**, p. 143] While anarchists would disagree with the underlying assumption that Marx was right in considering parliamentarianism as essential and it only became problematic later, we would agree whole-heartedly with the critique presented (unsurprisingly, as we made it first).

Pannekoek's article along with Herman Gorter's **Open Letter to Comrade Lenin** are essential reading for those who are taken in with Lenin's arguments, along with the chapter on "*Socialism*" in Alexander Berkman's **What is Anarchism?**. Interestingly, the Comintern asked Berkman to translate Lenin's **Left-Wing Communism** and he agreed until he read its contents. He then said he would continue if he could write a rebuttal, a request which was rejected. For anarchists, placing the word "revolutionary" in front of "parliamentarianism" does not provide a shield against the negative influences and pressures which naturally arise by utilising that tactic. Given the sorry history of radicals doing so, this is unsurprising. What is surprising is how so many Marxists are willing to ignore that history in favour of Lenin's pamphlet.

### **H.1.6 Why do anarchists try to "*build the new world in the shell of the old*"?**

Another key difference between anarchists and Marxists is on how the movement against capitalism should organise in the here and now. Anarchists argue that it should prefigure the society we desire - namely it should be self-managed, decentralised, built and organised from the bottom-up in a federal structure. This perspective can be seen from the justly famous "*Circular of the Sixteen*" issued at the Sonvillier congress by the libertarian wing of the First International:

*"The future society must be nothing else than the universalisation of the organisation that the International has formed for itself. We must therefore take care to make this organisation as close as possible to our ideal. How could one want an equalitarian and free society to issue from an authoritarian organisation? It is impossible. The International, the embryo of the future human society is held to be henceforward, the faithful image of our principles of liberty and of federation, and is considered to reject any principle tending to authority and dictatorship."* [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 262-3]

Anarchists apply this insight to all organisations they take part in, stressing that the only way we can create a self-managed society is by self-managing our own struggles and organisations today. It is an essential part of our politics that we encourage people to "*learn how to participate in the life of the organisation and to do without leaders and permanent officials*" and "*practice direct action, decentralisation, autonomy and free initiative*." This flows logically from our politics, as it is "*obvious that anarchists should seek to apply to their personal and political lives this same principle upon which, they believe, the whole of human society should be based.*" [Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 94] In this way we turn our class organisations (indeed, the class struggle itself) into practical and effective "*schools*

*of anarchism*" in which we learn to manage our own affairs without hierarchy and bosses and so popular organisations become the cells of the new society:

*"Libertarian forms of organisation have the enormous responsibility of trying to resemble the society they are seeking to develop. They can tolerate no disjunction between ends and means. Direct action, so integral to the management of a future society, has its parallel in the use of direct action to change society. Communal forms, so integral to the structure of a future society, have their parallel in the use of communal forms - collectives, affinity groups, and the like - to change society. The ecological ethics, confederal relationships, and decentralised structures we would expect to find in a future society, are fostered by the values and networks we try to use in achieving an ecological society."* [Murray Bookchin, **The Ecology of Freedom**, pp. 446-7]

Marxists reject this argument. Instead they stress the importance of centralisation and consider the anarchist argument as utopian. For effective struggle, strict centralisation is required as the capitalist class and state is also centralised. In other words, to fight for socialism there is a need to organise in a way which the capitalists have utilised - to fight fire with fire. Unfortunately they forget to extinguish a fire you have to use water. Adding more flame will only increase the combustion, **not** put it out!

Of course, Marx and Engels misrepresented the anarchist position. They asserted that the anarchist position implied that the Paris Communards "*would not have failed if they had understood that the Commune was 'the embryo of the future human society' and had cast away all discipline and all arms, that is, the things which must disappear when there are no more wars!*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 23, p. 115] Needless to say this is simply a slander on the anarchist position particularly as anarchists are well aware of the need to defend a revolution (see [section H.2.1](#)) and the need for **self**-discipline (see [section H.4](#)). Anarchists, as the Circular makes clear, recognise that we cannot totally reflect the future and so the current movement can only be "*as near as possible to our ideal.*" Thus we have to do things, such as fighting the bosses, rising in insurrection, smashing the state or defending a revolution, which we would not have to do in a socialist society. However, we can do these things in a manner which is consistent with our values and our aims. For example, a strike can be run in two ways. Either it can be managed via assemblies of strikers and co-ordinated by councils of elected, mandated and recallable delegates or it can be run from the top-down by a few trade union leaders. The former, of course, is the anarchist way and it reflects "*the future human society*" (and, ironically, is paid lip-service to by Marxists).

Such common sense, unfortunately, was lacking in Marx and Engels, who instead decided to utter nonsense for a cheap polemical point. Neither answered the basic point - how do people become able to manage society if they do not directly manage their own organisations and struggles today? How can a self-managed society come about unless people practice it in the here and now? Can people create a socialist society if they do not implement its basic ideas in their current struggles and organisations? Equally, it would be churlish to note that the Commune's system of federalism by mandated delegates had been advocated by Bakunin for a number of years before 1871 and, unsurprisingly, he took the revolt as a striking, if incomplete, confirmation of anarchism (see [section A.5.1](#)).

The Paris Commune, it must be stressed, brought the contradictions of the Marxist attacks on anarchism to the surface. It is deeply sad to read, say, Engels attacking anarchists for holding

certain position yet praising the 1871 revolution when it implement exactly the same ideas. For example, in his deeply inaccurate diatribe "*The Bakuninists at Work*", Engels was keen to distort the federalist ideas of anarchism, dismissing "*the so-called principles of anarchy, free federation of independent groups.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 23, p. 297] Compare this to his praise for the Paris Commune which, he gushed, refuted the Blanquist notion of a revolution sprung by a vanguard which would create "*the strictest, dictatorial centralisation of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.*" Instead the Commune "*appealed to [the provinces] to form a free federation of all French Communes . . . a national organisation which for the first time was really created by the nation itself. It was precisely the oppressing power of the former centralised government . . . which was to fall everywhere, just as it had fallen in Paris.*" [**Selected Writings**, pp. 256-7]

Likewise, Engels praised the fact that, to combat the independence of the state from society, the Commune introduced wages for officials the same as that "*received by other workers*" and the use of "*the binding mandate to delegates to representative bodies.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 258] Compare this to Engels attack on anarchist support for binding mandates (which, like our support for free federation, pre-dated the Commune). Then it was a case of this being part of Bakunin's plans to control the international "*for a secret society . . . there is nothing more convenient than the imperative mandate*" as all its members vote one way, while the others will "*contradict one another.*" Without these binding mandates, "*the common sense of the independent delegates will swiftly unite them in a common party against the party of the secret society.*" Obviously the notion that delegates from a group should reflect the wishes of that group was lost on Engels. He even questioned the utility of this system for "*if all electors gave their delegates imperative mandates concerning all points in the agenda, meetings and debates of the delegates would be superfluous.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 22, p. 281 and p. 277] It should be noted that Trotsky shared Engels dislike of "representatives" being forced to actually represent the views of their constituents within the party. [**In Defense of Marxism**, pp. 80-1]

Clearly a "*free federation*" of Communes and binding mandates are bad when anarchists advocate them but excellent when workers in revolt implement them! Why this was the case Engels failed to explain. However, it does suggest that anarchist ideas that we must reflect the future in how we organise today is no hindrance to revolutionary change and, in fact, reflects what is required to turn a revolt into a genuine social revolution.

Engels asserted that the anarchist position meant that "*the proletariat is told to organise not in accordance with the requirements of the struggle . . . but according to the vague notions of a future society entertained by some dreamers.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 23, p. 66] In this he was wrong, as he failed to understand that the anarchist position was produced by the class struggle itself. He failed to understand how that struggle reflects our aspirations for a better world, how we see what is wrong with modern society and seek to organise to end such abuses rather than perpetuate them in new forms. Thus the trade unions which Bakunin argued would be the basis of a free society are organised from the bottom-up and based upon the direct participation of the workers. This form of organisation was not forced upon the workers by some intellectuals thinking they were a good idea. Rather they were created to fight the bosses and reflected the fact that workers were sick of being treated as servants and did not wish to see that repeated in their own organisations.

As Bakunin argued, when a union delegates authority to its officials it may be "*very good for the committees, but [it is] not at all favourable for the social, intellectual, and moral*

*progress of the collective power of the International.*" The committees "substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership" while the membership expressed "indifference to general problems" and left "all problems to the decisions of committees." This could only be solved by "call[ing] general membership meetings," that is "popular assemblies." Bakunin goes on to argue that the "organisation of the International, having as its objective not the creation of new despotism but the uprooting of all domination, will take on an essentially different character than the organisation of the State." This must be the "organisation of the trade sections and their representation by the Chambers of Labour" and these "bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself." [Bakunin on Anarchism, pp. 246-7 and p. 255]

Ou Shengbai, a Chinese anarchist, argued that libertarians "*deeply feel that the causes of popular misery are these: (1) Because of the present political system power is concentrated in a few hands with the result that the majority of the people do not have the opportunity for free participation. (2) Because of the capitalist system all means of production are concentrated in the hands of the capitalists with the results that the benefits that ought to accrue to labourers are usurped by capitalists.* [quoted by Arif Dirlik, **Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution**, p. 235] Does it make much sense to organise in ways which reflect these problems? Surely the reason why people become socialists is because they seek to change society, to give the mass of the population an opportunity for free participation and to manage their own affairs. Why destroy those hopes and dreams by organising in a way which reflects the society we oppose rather than the one we desire?

Ultimately, Engels dismissed the practical experiences of working class people, dismissed our ability to create a better world and our ability to dream. In fact, he seems to think there is some division of labour between "*the proletariat*" who do the struggling and "*some dreamers*" who provide the ideas. The notion that working class people can both struggle **and** dream was lost on him, as was the notion that our dreams shape our struggles and our struggles shape our dreams. People resist oppression and exploitation because we want to determine what goes on in our lives and to manage our own affairs. In that process, we create new forms of organisation which allows that to happen, ones that reflect our dreams of a better world. This is not in opposition to the needs of the struggle, as Engels asserted, but are rather an expression of it. To dismiss this process, to advocate organisational methods which are the very antithesis of what working class people have shown, repeatedly, what they want, is the height of arrogance and, ultimately, little more than a dismissal of the hopes, dreams and creative self-activity of working class people. As libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis put it:

*"the organisation's inspiration can come only from the socialist structures created by the working class in the course of its own history. It must let itself be guided by the principles on which the soviet and the factory council were founded . . . the principles of workers' management must govern the operation and structure of the organisation. Apart from them, there are only capitalist principles, which, as we have seen, can only result in the establishment of capitalist relationships."* [Political and Social Writings, vol. 2, pp. 217-8]

Ironically enough, given their own and their followers claims of Marxism's proletarian core, it was Marx and Engels who were at odds with the early labour movement, **not** Bakunin and the anarchists. Historian Gwyn A. Williams notes in the early British labour movement there

were "to be no leaders" and the organisations were "consciously modelled on the civil society they wished to create." [Artisans and Sans-Culottes, p. 72] Lenin, unsurprisingly, dismissed the fact that the British workers "thought it was an indispensable sign of democracy for all the members to do all the work of managing the unions" as "primitive democracy" and "absurd." He also complained about "how widespread is the 'primitive' conception of democracy among the masses of the students and workers" in Russia. [Essential Works of Lenin, pp. 162-3] Clearly, the anarchist perspective reflects the ideas the workers' movement before it degenerates into reformism and bureaucracy while Marxism reflects it during this process of degeneration. Needless to say, the revolutionary nature of the early union movement clearly shows who was correct!

Anarchists, in other words, simply generalised the experiences of the workers in struggle and Bakunin and his followers were expressing a common position held by many in the International. Even Marx paid lip-service to this when he stated "*in contrast to old society . . . a new society is springing up*" and the "*Pioneer of that new society is the International Working Men's Association.*" [Selected Works, p. 263] Clearly, considering the International as the embryo of the future society is worthy only of scorn as the correct position is to consider it merely as a pioneer!

As such, libertarians "*lay no claims to originality in proposing this [kind of prefigurative organisation]. In every revolution, during most strikes and daily at the level of workshop organisation, the working class resorts to this type of direct democracy.*" [Maurice Brinton, For Workers' Power, p. 48] Given how Marxists pay lip-service to such forms of working class self-organisation, it seems amusing to hear them argue that this is correct for everyone else but not themselves and their own organisations! Apparently, the same workers who are expected to have the determination and consciousness necessary to overthrow capitalism and create a new world in the future are unable to organise themselves in a socialist manner today. Instead, we have to tolerate so-called "revolutionary" organisations which are just as hierarchical, top-down and centralised as the system which provoked our anger at its injustice in the first and which we are trying to end!

Related to this is the fact that Marxists (particularly Leninists) favour centralisation while anarchists favour decentralisation within a federal organisation. Anarchists do not think that decentralisation implies isolation or narrow localism. We have always stressed the importance of federalism to co-ordinate decisions. Power would be decentralised, but federalism ensures collective decisions and action. Under centralised systems, anarchists argue, power is placed into the hands of a few leaders. Rather than the real interests and needs of the people being co-ordinated, centralism simply means the imposition of the will of a handful of leaders, who claim to "represent" the masses. Co-ordination from below, in other words, is replaced by coercion from above in the centralised system and the needs and interests of all are replaced by those of a few leaders at the centre.

Such a centralised, inevitably top-down, system can only be counter-productive, both practically and in terms of generating socialist consciousness:

*"Bolsheviks argue that to fight the highly centralised forces of modern capitalism requires an equally centralised type of party. This ignores the fact that capitalist centralisation is based on coercion and force and the exclusion of the overwhelming majority of the population from participating in any of its decisions . . .*

*"The very structure of these organisations ensures that their personnel do not think for themselves, but unquestioningly carry out the instructions of their superiors . . .*

*"Advocates of 'democratic centralism' insist that it is the only type of organisations which can function effectively under conditions of illegality. This is nonsense. The 'democratic centralist' organisation particularly vulnerable to police persecution. When all power is concentrated in the hands of the leaders, their arrest immediately paralyses the whole organisation. Members trained to accept unquestioningly the instruction of an all-wise Central Committee will find it very difficult to think and act for themselves. The experiences of the German Communist Party [under the Nazis] confirm this. With their usual inconsistency, the Trotskyists even explain the demise of their Western European sections during World War II by telling people how their leaders were murdered by the Gestapo!"* [Maurice Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 43]

As we discuss in depth in [section H.5](#) the Leninist vanguard party does, ironically, create in embryo a new world simply because once in power it refashions society in **its** image. However, no anarchist would consider such a centralised, hierarchical top-down class system rooted in bureaucratic power as being remotely desirable or remotely socialist.

Therefore anarchists "*recognised neither the state nor pyramidal organisation*" Kropotkin argued, while Marxists "*recognised the state and pyramidal methods of organisation*" which "*stifled the revolutionary spirit of the rank-and-file workers.*" [**Conquest of Bread and Other Writings**, p. 212] The Marxist perspective inevitably places power into the hands of a few leaders, who then decree which movements to support and encourage based on what is best for the long term benefit of the party itself rather than the working class. Thus we find Engels arguing while Marxists were "*obliged to support every real popular movement*" they also had to ensure "*that the scarcely formed nucleus of our proletarian Party is not sacrificed in vain and that the proletariat is not decimated in futile local revolts,*" for example "*a blood-letting like that of 1871 in Paris.*" [Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 294 and p. 320] This produces a conservative approach to social struggle, with mass actions and revolutionary situations ignored or warned against because of the potential harm it could inflict on the party. Unsurprisingly, every popular revolution has occurred against the advice of the so-called "revolutionary" Marxist leadership including the Paris Commune and the 1917 February revolution in Russia (even the October seize of power was done in the face of resistance from the Bolshevik party machine).

It is for these reasons that anarchists "*[a]s much as is humanly possible . . . try to reflect the liberated society they seek to achieve*" and "*not slavishly duplicate the prevailing system of hierarchy, class and authority.*" Rather than being the abstract dreams of isolated thinkers, these "*conclusions . . . emerge from an exacting study of past revolutions, of the impact centralised parties have had on the revolutionary process*" and history has more than confirmed the anarchist warning that the "*revolutionary party, by duplicating these centralistic, hierarchical features would reproduce hierarchy and centralism in the post revolutionary society.*" [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 138, p. 139 and p. 137] Moreover, we base our arguments on how social movements should organise on the experiences of past struggles, of the forms of organisation spontaneously produced by those struggles and which, therefore, reflect the needs of those struggles and the desire for a better way of life which produced them. Ultimately, no one knows when a revolution turns the hopes and aspirations of today into tomorrow's reality and it would be wise to have some experience of managing our own affairs before hand.

By failing to understand the importance of applying a vision of a free society to the current class struggle, Marxists help ensure that society never is created. By copying bourgeois methods within their "revolutionary" organisations (parties and unions) they ensure bourgeois ends (inequality and oppression).

## H.1.7 Haven't you read Lenin's "*State and Revolution*"?

This question is often asked of people who critique Marxism, particularly its Leninist form. Lenin's **State and Revolution** is often considered his most democratic work and Leninists are quick to point to it as proof that Lenin and those who follow his ideas are not authoritarian. As such, it is an important question. So how do anarchists reply when people point them to Lenin's work as evidence of the democratic (even libertarian) nature of Marxism? Anarchists reply in two ways.

Firstly, we argue many of the essential features of Lenin's ideas are to be found in anarchist theory and, in fact, had been aspects of anarchism for decades **before** Lenin put pen to paper. Bakunin, for example, talked about mandated delegates from workplaces federating into workers' councils as the framework of a (libertarian) socialist society in the 1860s as well as popular militias to defend a revolution. Moreover, he was well aware that revolution was a **process** rather than an event and so would take time to develop and flourish. Hence Murray Bookchin:

*"Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta were not so naive as to believe that anarchism could be established over night. In imputing this notion to Bakunin, Marx and Engels wilfully distorted the Russian anarchist's views. Nor did the anarchists . . . believe that abolition of the state involved 'laying down of arms' immediately after the revolution, to use Marx's obscurantist choice of terms, thoughtlessly repeated by Lenin in **State and Revolution**. Indeed, much that passes for 'Marxism' in **State and Revolution** is pure anarchism - for example, the substitution of revolutionary militias for professional armed bodies and the substitution of organs of self-management for parliamentary bodies. What is authentically Marxist in Lenin's pamphlet is the demand for 'strict centralism,' the acceptance of a 'new' bureaucracy, and the identification of soviets with a state."* [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 137]

That this is the case is hidden in Lenin's work as he deliberately distorts anarchist ideas in it (see sections [H.1.3](#) and [H.1.4](#) for example). Therefore, when Marxists ask whether anarchist have read Lenin's **State and Revolution** we reply by arguing that most of Lenin's ideas were first expressed by anarchists and his work just strikes anarchists as little more than a re-hash of many of our own ideas but placed in a statist context which totally and utterly undermines them in favour of party rule.

Secondly, anarchists argue that regardless of what Lenin argued for in **State and Revolution**, he did not apply those ideas in practice (indeed, he did the exact opposite). Therefore, the question of whether we have read Lenin's work simply drives home how the ideological nature and theoretical bankruptcy of Leninism. This is because the person is asking you to evaluate their politics based on what they say rather than on what they do, like any politician.

To use an analogy, what would you say to a politician who has cut welfare spending by 50% and increased spending on the military and who argues that this act is irrelevant and that you

should look at their manifesto which states that they were going to do the opposite? You would dismiss this argument as laughable and them as liars as you would evaluate them by their actions, not by what they say. Leninists, by urging you to read Lenin's **State and Revolution** are asking you to evaluate them by what their manifesto says and ignore what they did. Anarchists, on the other hand, ask you to evaluate the Leninist manifesto by comparing it to what they actually did in power. Such an evaluation is the only means by which we can judge the validity of Leninist claims and politics.

As we discuss the role of Leninist ideology in the fate of the Russian Revolution in [section H.6](#) we will provide a summary of Lenin's claims in his famous work **State and Revolution** and what he did in practice here. Suffice to say the difference between reality and rhetoric was extremely large and, therefore, it is a damning indictment of Bolshevism. Post-October, the Bolsheviks not only failed to introduce the ideas of Lenin's book, they in fact introduced the exact opposite. As one historian puts it:

*"To consider 'State and Revolution' as the basic statement of Lenin's political philosophy - which non-Communists as well as Communists usually do - is a serious error. Its argument for a utopian anarchism never actually became official policy. The Leninism of 1917 . . . came to grief in a few short years; it was the revived Leninism of 1902 which prevailed as the basis for the political development of the USSR." [Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, pp. 51-2]*

Daniels is being far too lenient with the Bolsheviks. It was not, in fact, "a few short years" before the promises of 1917 were broken. In some cases, it was a few short hours. In others, a few short months. However, in a sense Daniels is right. It did take until 1921 before all hope for saving the Russian Revolution finally ended.

Simply put, if the **State and Revolution** is the manifesto of Bolshevism, then not a single promise in that work was kept by the Bolsheviks when they got into power. As such, Lenin's work cannot be used to evaluate Bolshevik ideology as Bolshevism paid no attention to it once it had taken state power. While Lenin and his followers chant rhapsodies about the Soviet State (this 'highest and most perfect system of democracy') they quickly turned its democratic ideas into a fairy-tale, and an ugly fairy-tale at that, by simply ignoring it in favour of party power (and party dictatorship). To state the obvious, to quote theory and not relate it to the practice of those who claim to follow it is a joke. If you look at the actions of the Bolsheviks after the October Russian Revolution you cannot help draw the conclusion that Lenin's **State and Revolution** has nothing to do with Bolshevik policy and presents a false image of what Leninists desire. As such, we must present a comparison between rhetoric and reality.

In order to show that this is the case, we need to summarise the main ideas contained in Lenin's work. Moreover, we need to indicate what the Bolsheviks did, in fact, do. Finally, we need to see if the various rationales justifying these actions hold water.

So what did Lenin argue for in **State and Revolution**? Writing in the mid-1930s, anarchist Camillo Berneri summarised the main ideas of that work as follows:

*"The Leninist programme of 1917 included these points: the discontinuance of the police and standing army, abolition of the professional bureaucracy, elections for all public positions and offices, revocability of all officials, equality of bureaucratic*

*wages with workers' wages, the maximum of democracy, peaceful competition among the parties within the soviets, abolition of the death penalty." [ "The Abolition and Extinction of the State," pp. 50-1, Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review, no. 4, p. 50]*

As he noted, "[n]ot a single one of the points of this programme has been achieved." This was, of course, under Stalinism and most Leninists will concur with Berneri. However what Leninists tend not to mention is that by the end of the 7 month period of Bolshevik rule before the start of the civil war (i.e., from November 1917 to May 1918) none of these points existed. So, as an example of what Bolshevism "really" stands for it seems strange to harp on about a work which was never really implemented when its author was in a position to do so (i.e. before the onslaught of a civil war Lenin thought was inevitable anyway!). Similarly, if **State and Revolution** indicates the features a "workers' state" must have then, by May 1918, Russia did not have such a state and so, logically, it can only be considered as such only if we assume that the good intentions of its rulers somehow overcome its political and economic structure (which, sadly, **is** the basic Trotskyist defence of Leninism against Stalinism!).

To see that Berneri's summary is correct, we need to quote Lenin directly. Obviously the work is a wide ranging defence of Lenin's interpretation of Marxist theory on the state. As it is an attempt to overturn decades of Marxist orthodoxy, much of the work is quotes from Marx and Engels and Lenin's attempts to enlist them for his case (we discuss this issue in [section H.3.10](#)). Equally, we need to ignore the numerous straw men arguments about anarchism Lenin inflicts on his reader. Here we simply list the key points as regards Lenin's arguments about his "workers' state" and how the workers would maintain control of it:

- 1) Using the Paris Commune as a prototype, Lenin argued for the abolition of "*parliamentarianism*" by turning "*representative institutions from mere 'talking shops' into working bodies.*" This would be done by removing "*the division of labour between the legislative and the executive.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 304 and p. 306]
- 2) "*All officials, without exception, to be elected and subject to recall at any time*" and so "*directly responsible to their constituents.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 302 and p. 306]
- 3) The "*immediate introduction of control and superintendence by all, so that all shall become 'bureaucrats' for a time and so that, therefore, no one can become a 'bureaucrat.'*" Proletarian democracy would "*take immediate steps to cut bureaucracy down to the roots . . . to the complete abolition of bureaucracy*" as the "*essence of bureaucracy*" is officials becoming transformed "*into privileged persons divorced from the masses and superior to the masses.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 355 and p. 360]
- 4) There should be no "*special bodies of armed men*" standing apart from the people "*since the majority of the people itself suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' is no longer necessary.*" Using the example of the Paris Commune, Lenin suggested this meant "*abolition of the standing army*" by the "*armed masses.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 275, p. 301 and p. 339]
- 5) The new (workers) state would be "*the organisation of violence for the suppression of . . . the exploiting class, i.e. the bourgeoisie. The toilers need a state only to overcome the resistance of the exploiters*" who are "*an insignificant minority,*" that is

*"the landlords and the capitalists."* This would see *"an immense expansion of democracy . . . for the poor, democracy for the people"* while, simultaneously, imposing *"a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists . . . their resistance must be broken by force: it is clear that where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy."* [Op. Cit., p. 287 and pp. 337-8]

This would be implemented after the current, bourgeois, state had been smashed. This would be the *"dictatorship of the proletariat"* and be *"the introduction of complete democracy for the people."* [Op. Cit., p. 355] However, the key practical ideas on what the new "semi-state" would be are contained in these five points. He generalised these points, considering them valid for all countries.

The first point was the creation of "working bodies", the combining of legislative and executive bodies. The first body to be created by the Bolshevik revolution was the "Council of People's Commissars" (CPC) This was a government separate from and above the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the soviets congress which, in turn, was separate from and above the national soviet congress. It was an executive body elected by the soviet congress, but the soviets themselves were not turned into "working bodies." The promises of Lenin's **State and Revolution** did not last the night.

The Bolsheviks, it must be stressed, clearly recognised that the Soviets had alienated their power to this body with the party's Central Committee arguing in November 1917 that *"it is impossible to refuse a purely Bolshevik government without treason to the slogan of the power of the Soviets, since a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . handed power over to this government."* [contained in Robert V. Daniels (ed.), A

**Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, pp. 128-9] However, it could be argued that Lenin's promises were kept as the new government simply gave itself legislative powers four days later. Sadly, this is not the case. In the Paris Commune the delegates of the people took executive power into their own hands. Lenin reversed this and his executive took legislative power from the hands of the people's delegates. As we discuss in [section H.6.1](#), this concentration of power into executive committees occurred at all levels of the soviet hierarchy.

What of the next principle, namely the election and recall of all officials? This lasted slightly longer, namely around 5 months. By March of 1918, the Bolsheviks started a systematic campaign against the elective principle in the workplace, in the military and even in the soviets. In the workplace, Lenin was arguing for appointed one-man managers *"vested with dictatorial powers"* by April 1918 (see [section H.3.14](#)). In the military, Trotsky simply decreed the end of elected officers in favour of appointed officers. As far as the soviets go, the Bolsheviks were refusing to hold elections because they *"feared that the opposition parties would show gains."* When elections were held, *"Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results"* in provincial towns. Moreover, the Bolsheviks *"pack[ed] local soviets"* with representatives of organisations they controlled *"once they could not longer count on an electoral majority."* [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22, p. 24 and p. 33] This kind of packing was even practised at the national level when the Bolsheviks gerrymandered a Bolshevik majority at the Fifth Congress of Soviets. So much for competition among the parties within the soviets! And as far as the right of recall went, the Bolsheviks only supported this when the workers were recalling the opponents of the Bolsheviks, not when the workers were recalling them.

Then there was the elimination of bureaucracy. The new state soon had a new bureaucratic and centralised system quickly emerge around it. Rather than immediately cutting the size and power of the bureaucracy, it "grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between 'people' and 'officials,' which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about 'bureaucratic excesses,' lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder." [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 242] So the rise of a state bureaucracy started immediately with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, particularly as the state's functions grew to include economic decisions as well as political ones. Instead of the state starting to "wither away" it grew:

*"The old state's political apparatus was 'smashed,' but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity. After the transfer of government to Moscow in March 1918 it continued to expand . . . As the functions of the state expanded so did the bureaucracy, and by August 1918 nearly a third of Moscow's working population were employed in offices. The great increase in the number of employees . . . took place in early to mid-1918 and, thereafter, despite many campaigns to reduce their number, they remained a steady proportion of the falling population"* [Richard Sakwa, "The Commune State in Moscow in 1918," pp. 429-449, **Slavic Review**, vol. 46, no. 3/4, pp. 437-8]

This, anarchists would stress, is an inherent feature of centralised system. As such, this rise of bureaucracy confirmed anarchist predictions that centralisation will recreate bureaucracy. After all, some means were required to gather, collate and provide information by which the central bodies made their decisions. Overtime, this permanent collection of bodies would become the real power in the state, with the party members nominally in charge really under the control of an unelected and uncontrolled officialdom. Thus a necessary side-effect of Bolshevik centralism was bureaucracy and it soon became the real power in the state (and, ultimately, in the 1920s became the social base for the rise of Stalin). This is to be expected as any state "*is already a privileged class and cut off from the people*" and would "*seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to special interests.*" Moreover, "*what an all-powerful, oppressive, all-absorbing oligarchy must be one which has at its services, that is at its disposal, all social wealth, all public services.*" [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 36 and p. 37]

Then there is the fourth point, namely the elimination of the standing army, the suppression of "*special bodies of armed men*" by the "*armed masses*." This promise did not last two months. On the 20th of December, 1917, the Council of People's Commissars decreed the formation of a political (secret) police force, the "*Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-Revolution.*" This was more commonly known by the Russian initials of the first two terms of its official name: The Cheka.

While it was initially a small organisation, as 1918 progressed it grew in size and activity. The Cheka soon became a key instrument of Bolshevik rule and it was most definitely a "*special body of armed men*" and not the same as the "*armed workers*." In other words, Lenin's claims in **State and Revolution** did not last two months and in under six months the Bolshevik state had a mighty group of "*armed men*" to impose its will. This is not all. The Bolsheviks also conducted a sweeping transformation of the military within the first six months of taking power. During 1917, the soldiers and sailors (encouraged by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries) had formed their own committees and elected officers. In March

1918, Trotsky simply abolished all this by decree and replaced it with appointed officers (usually ex-Tsarist ones). In this way, the Red Army was turned from a workers' militia (i.e. an armed people) into a "*special body*" separate from the general population.

So instead of eliminating a "*special force*" above the people, the Bolsheviks did the opposite by creating a political police force (the Cheka) and a standing army (in which elections were set aside by decree). These were special, professional, armed forces standing apart from the people and unaccountable to them. Indeed, they were used to repress strikes and working class unrest which refutes the idea that Lenin's "workers' state" would simply be an instrument of violence directed at the exploiters. As the Bolsheviks lost popular support, they turned the violence of the "worker's state" against the workers (and, of course, the peasants). When the Bolsheviks lost soviet elections, force was used to disband them. Faced with strikes and working class protest during this period, the Bolsheviks responded with state violence (see [section H.6.3](#)). So, as regards the claim that the new ("workers") state would repress only the exploiters, the truth was that it was used to repress whoever opposed Bolshevik power, including workers and peasants. If, as Lenin stressed, "*where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy*" then there cannot be working class freedom or democracy if the "workers' state" is suppressing that class.

As can be seen, after the first six months of Bolshevik rule not a single measure advocated by Lenin in **State and Revolution** existed in "revolutionary" Russia. Some of the promises were broken quite quickly (overnight, in one case). Most took longer. Yet Leninists may object by noting that many Bolshevik decrees did, in fact, reflect **State and Revolution**. For example, the democratisation of the armed forces was decreed in late December 1917. However, this was simply acknowledging the existing revolutionary gains of the military personnel. Similarly, the Bolsheviks passed a decree on workers' control which, again, simply acknowledged the actual gains by the grassroots (and, in fact, limited them for further development).

Yet this cannot be taken as evidence of the democratic nature of Bolshevism as most governments faced with a revolutionary movement will acknowledge and "legalise" the facts on the ground (until such time as they can neutralise or destroy them). For example, the Provisional Government created after the February Revolution also legalised the revolutionary gains of the workers (for example, legalising the soviets, factory committees, unions, strikes and so forth). The real question is whether Bolshevism continued to encourage these revolutionary gains once it had consolidated its power. It did not. Indeed, it can be argued that the Bolsheviks simply managed to do what the Provisional Government it replaced had failed to do, namely destroy the various organs of popular self-management created by the revolutionary masses. So the significant fact is not that the Bolsheviks recognised the gains of the masses but that their toleration of the application of what their followers say were their real principles did not last long and, significantly, the leading Bolsheviks did not consider the abolition of such principles as harming the "communist" nature of the regime.

We have stressed this period for a reason. This was the period **before** the out-break of major Civil War and thus the policies applied show the actual nature of Bolshevism, its essence if you like. This is a significant period as most Leninists blame the failure of Lenin to live up to his promises on this even. In reality, the civil war was **not** the reason for these betrayals - simply because it had not started yet. Each of the promises were broken in turn months before the civil war happened. "*All Power to the Soviets*" became, very quickly, "All Power to the

Bolsheviks." Unsurprisingly, as this was Lenin's aim all along and so we find him in 1917 continually repeating this basic idea (see [section H.3.3](#)).

Given this, the almost utter non-mention of the party and its role in **State and Revolution** is deeply significant. Given the emphasis that Lenin had always placed on the party, its absence is worrying. When the party is mentioned in that work, it is done so in an ambiguous manner. For example, Lenin noted that "*[b]y educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organising the new order.*" It is not clear whether it is the vanguard or the proletariat as a whole which assumes power. Later, he stated that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*" was "*the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of crushing the oppressors.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 288 and p. 337] Based on subsequent Bolshevik practice after the party seized power, it seems clear that it is the vanguard which assumes power rather than the whole class.

As such, given this clear and unambiguous position throughout 1917 by Lenin, it seems incredulous, to say the least, for Leninist Tony Cliff to assert that "*[t]o start with Lenin spoke of the proletariat, the class - not the Bolshevik Party - assuming state power.*" [**Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 161] Surely the title of one of Lenin's most famous pre-October essays, usually translated as "*Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*", should have given the game away? As would, surely, quoting numerous calls by Lenin for the Bolsheviks to seize power? Apparently not.

Where does that leave Lenin's **State and Revolution**? Well, modern-day Leninists still urge us to read it, considering it his greatest work and the best introduction to what Leninism really stands for. For example, we find Leninist Tony Cliff calling that book "*Lenin's real testament*" while, at the same time, acknowledging that its "*message . . . which was the guide for the first victorious proletarian revolution, was violated again and again during the civil war.*" Not a very good "*guide*" or that convincing a "*message*" if it was not applicable in the very circumstances it was designed to be applied in (a bit like saying you have an excellent umbrella but it only works when it is not raining). Moreover, Cliff is factually incorrect. As we discuss in [section H.6](#), the Bolsheviks "*violated*" that "*guide*" before the civil war started (i.e. when "*the victories of the Czechoslovak troops over the Red Army in June 1918, that threatened the greatest danger to the Soviet republic,*" to quote Cliff). [**Op. Cit.**, p. 161 and p. 18] Similarly, much of the economic policies implemented by the Bolsheviks had their roots in that book and the other writings by Lenin from 1917.

The conclusions of dissent Marxist Samuel Farber seem appropriate here. As he puts it, "*the very fact that a Sovnarkom had been created as a separate body from the CEC [Central Executive Committee] of the soviets clearly indicates that, Lenin's **State and Revolution** notwithstanding, the separation of at least the top bodies of the executive and the legislative wings of the government remained in effect in the new Soviet system.*" This suggests "*that **State and Revolution** did not play a decisive role as a source of policy guidelines for 'Leninism in power.'*" After all, "*immediately after the Revolution the Bolsheviks established an executive power . . . as a clearly separate body from the leading body of the legislature . . . Therefore, some sections of the contemporary Left appear to have greatly overestimated the importance that **State and Revolution** had for Lenin's government. I would suggest that this document . . . can be better understood as a distant, although doubtless sincere [!], socio-political vision . . . as opposed to its having been a programmatic political statement, let alone a guide to action, for the period immediately after the successful seizure of power.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 20-1 and p. 38]

That is **one** way of looking at it. Another would be to draw the conclusion that a "*distant . . . socio-political vision*" drawn up to sound like a "*guide to action*" which was then immediately ignored is, at worse, little more than a deception, or, at best, a theoretical justification for seizing power in the face of orthodox Marxist dogma. Whatever the rationale for Lenin writing his book, one thing is true - it was never implemented. Strange, then, that Leninists today urge us to read it to see what "Lenin really wanted." Particularly given that so few of its promises were actually implemented (those that were just recognised the facts on the ground) and **all** of them were no longer applied in less than six months after the seize of power.

It will be objected in defence of Leninism that it is unfair to hold Lenin responsible for the failure to apply his ideas in practice. The terrible Civil War, in which Soviet Russia was attacked by numerous armies, and the resulting economic chaos meant that the objective circumstances made it impossible to implement his democratic ideas. This argument contains flaws. Firstly, as we indicated above, the undemocratic policies of the Bolsheviks started **before** the start of the Civil War (so suggesting that the hardships of the Civil War were not to blame). Secondly, Lenin himself mocked those who argued that revolution was out of the question because of difficult circumstances and so to blame these for the failure of the Bolsheviks to apply the ideas in **State and Revolution** means to argue that those ideas are inappropriate for a revolution (which, we must stress, is what the leading Bolsheviks actually **did** end up arguing by their support for party dictatorship). You cannot have it both ways.

Lenin at no time indicated in **State and Revolution** that it was impossible or inapplicable to apply those ideas during a revolution in Russia (quite the reverse!). Given that Marxists, including Lenin, argue that a "dictatorship of the proletariat" is required to defend the revolution against capitalist resistance it seems incredulous to argue that Lenin's major theoretical work on that regime was impossible to apply in precisely the circumstances it was designed for.

All in all, discussing Lenin's **State and Revolution** without indicating that the Bolsheviks failed to implement its ideas (indeed, did the exact opposite) suggests a lack of honesty. It also suggests that the libertarian ideas Lenin appropriated in that work could not survive being grafted onto the statist ideas of mainstream Marxism. In the words of historian Marc Ferro:

*"In a way, **The State and Revolution** even laid the foundations and sketched out the essential features of an alternative to Bolshevik power, and only the pro-Leninist tradition has used it, almost to quieten its conscience, because Lenin, once in power, ignored its conclusions. The Bolsheviks, far from causing the state to wither away, found endless reasons for justifying its enforcement."* [October 1917, pp. 213-4]

Anarchists would suggest that this alternative was anarchism. The Russian Revolution shows that a workers state, as anarchists have long argued, means minority power, not working class self-management of society. As such, Lenin's work indicates the contradictory nature of Marxism - while claiming to support democratic/libertarian ideals they promote structures (such as centralised states) which undermine those values in favour of party rule. The lesson is clear, only libertarian means can ensure libertarian ends and they have to be applied consistently within libertarian structures to work. To apply them to statist ones will simply fail.

## H.2 What parts of anarchism do Marxists particularly misrepresent?

Many people involved in politics will soon discover that Marxist groups (particularly Leninist ones) organise "debates" about anarchism. These meetings are usually entitled "*Marxism and Anarchism*" and are usually organised after anarchists have been active in the area or have made the headlines somewhere.

These meetings, contrary to common sense, are usually not a debate as (almost always) no anarchists are invited to argue the anarchist viewpoint and, therefore, they present a one-sided account of "*Marxism and Anarchism*" in a manner which benefits the organisers. Usually, the format is a speaker distorting anarchist ideas and history for a long period of time (both absolutely in terms of the length of the meeting and relatively in terms of the boredom inflicted on the unfortunate attendees). It will soon become obvious to those attending that any such meeting is little more than an unprincipled attack on anarchism with little or no relationship to what anarchism is actually about. Those anarchists who attend such meetings usually spend most of their allotted (usually short) speaking time refuting the nonsense that is undoubtedly presented. Rather than a **real** discussion between the differences between anarchism and "Marxism" (i.e. Leninism), the meeting simply becomes one where anarchists correct the distortions and misrepresentations of the speaker in order to create the basis of a real debate. If the reader does not believe this summary we would encourage them to attend such a meeting and see for themselves.

Needless to say, we cannot hope to reproduce the many distortions produced in such meetings. However, when anarchists do hit the headlines (such as in the 1990 poll tax riot in London and the anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s), various Marxist papers will produce articles on "Anarchism" as well. Like the meetings, the articles are full of so many elementary errors that it takes a lot of effort to think they are the product of ignorance rather than a conscious desire to lie (the appendix [\*Anarchism and Marxism\*](#) contains a few replies to such articles). In addition, many of the founding fathers of Marxism (and Leninism) also decided to attack anarchism in similar ways, so this activity does have a long tradition in Marxist circles (particularly in Leninist and Trotskyist ones). Sadly, Max Nettlau's comments on Marx and Engels are applicable to many of their followers today. He argued that they *"acted with that shocking lack of honesty which was characteristic of all their polemics. They worked with inadequate documentation, which, according to their custom, they supplemented with arbitrary declarations and conclusions - accepted as truth by their followers although they were exposed as deplorable misrepresentations, errors and unscrupulous perversions of the truth."* [A Short History of Anarchism, p. 132] As the reader will discover, this summary has not lost its relevance today. If you read Marxist "critiques" of anarchism you will soon discover the same repetition of "accepted" truths, the same inadequate documentation, the same arbitrary declarations and conclusions as well as an apparent total lack of familiarity with the source material they claim to be analysing.

This section of the FAQ lists and refutes many of the most common distortions Marxists make with regards to anarchism. As will become clear, many of the most common Marxist attacks on anarchism have little or no basis in fact but have simply been repeated so often by Marxists that they have entered the ideology (the idea that anarchists think the capitalist class will just disappear being, probably, the most famous one).

Moreover, Marxists make many major and minor distortions of anarchist theory in passing. For example, Eric Hobsbawm wrote of the "*extremism of the anarchist rejection of state and organisation*" while being well aware, as a leading Marxist historian, of numerous anarchist organisations. [Revolutionaries, p. 113] This kind of nonsense has a long history, with Engels asserting in his infamous diatribe "*The Bakuninists at work*" that Bakunin "[a]s early as September 1870 (in his *Lettres à un français* [Letters to a Frenchman]) . . . had declared that the only way to drive the Prussians out of France by a revolutionary struggle was to do away with all forms of centralised leadership and leave each town, each village, each parish to wage war on its own." For Engels anarchist federalism "consisted precisely in the fact that each town acted on its own, declaring that the important thing was not co-operation with other towns but separation from them, this precluding any possibility of a combined attack." This meant "*the fragmentation and isolation of the revolutionary forces which enabled the government troops to smash one revolt after the other.*" According to Engels, the anarchists "proclaimed [this] a principle of supreme revolutionary wisdom." [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 592]

In fact, the truth is totally different. Bakunin did, of course, reject "*centralised leadership*" as it would be "*necessarily very circumscribed, very short-sighted, and its limited perception cannot, therefore, penetrate the depth and encompass the whole complex range of popular life.*" However, it is a falsehood to state that he denied the need for co-ordination of struggles and federal organisations from the bottom up. As he put it, the revolution must "*foster the self-organisation of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upwards.*" With regards to the peasants, he thought they will "*come to an understanding, and form some kind of organisation . . . to further their mutual interests . . . the necessity to defend their homes, their families, and their own lives against unforeseen attack . . . will undoubtedly soon compel them to contract new and mutually suitable arrangements.*" The peasants would be "*freely organised from the bottom up.*" Rather than deny the need for co-ordination, Bakunin stressed it: "*the peasants, like the industrial city workers, should unite by federating the fighting battalions, district by district, assuring a common co-ordinated defence against internal and external enemies.*" [*Letters to a Frenchman on the present crisis*, Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 196, p. 206, p. 207 and p. 190] In this he repeated his earlier arguments concerning social revolution - arguments that Engels was well aware of.

In other words, Engels deliberately misrepresented Bakunin's ideas while being an attack on federalism when, in fact, federalism was **not** actually implemented. It should also be mentioned that Engels opposed the Spanish workers rising in revolt in the first place. "*A few years of peaceful bourgeois republic,*" he argued, "*would prepare the ground in Spain for a proletarian revolution*" and "*instead of staging isolated, easily crushed rebellions,*" he hoped that the "*Spanish workers will make use of the republic*" with a "*view to an approaching revolution.*" He ended by asking them not to give the bourgeois government "*an excuse to suppress the revolutionary movement.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 420-1] In his post-revolt diatribe, Engels repeated this analysis and suggested that the "Bakuninists" should have simply stood for election:

*"At quiet times, when the proletariat knows beforehand that at best it can get only a few representatives to parliament and have no chance whatever of winning a parliamentary majority, the workers may sometimes be made to believe that it is a great revolutionary action to sit out the elections at home, and in general, not to attack the State in which they live and which oppresses them, but to attack the State as*

*such which exists nowhere and which accordingly cannot defend itself."* [Op. Cit., p. 583]

For some reason, few Leninist quote these recommendations to the Spanish workers nor do they dwell on the reformist and bureaucratic nature of the Socialist party inspired by this advice. As we discuss in [section H.3.10](#), the notion that voting in elections was to "*attack the State*" fits in well with the concept that universal suffrage equalled the "*political power*" of the proletariat and the democratic republic was the "*specific form*" of its dictatorship. Again, for some strange reason, few Leninists mention that either.

The distortions can be somewhat ironic, as can be seen when Trotsky asserted in 1937 that anarchists are "*willing to replace Bakunin's patriarchal 'federation of free communes' by the more modern federation of free soviets.*" [**Writings 1936-37**, p. 487] It is hard to know where to start in this incredulous rewriting of history. Firstly, Bakunin's federation of free communes was, in fact, based on workers' councils ("soviets") - see [section I.2.3](#). As for the charge of supporting "*patriarchal*" communes, nothing could be further from the truth. In his discussion of the Russian peasant commune (the mir) Bakunin argued that "*patriarchalism*" was one of its "*three dark features*," indeed "*the main historical evil . . . against which we are obliged to struggle with all our might.*" This "*evil*", he stressed, "*has distorted the whole of Russian life*" and the "*despotism of the father*" turned the family "*into a school of triumphant force and tyranny, of daily domestic baseness and depravity.*" The "*same patriarchal principle, the same vile despotism, and the same base obedience prevail within*" the peasant commune. Any revolt against "*the hated state power and bureaucratic arbitrariness . . . simultaneously becomes a revolt against the despotism of the commune.*" The "*war against patriarchalism is now being waged in virtually every village and every family.*" [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 206, pp. 209-10, p. 210 and p. 214]

As can be seen Trotsky's summary of Bakunin's ideas is totally wrong. Not only did his ideas on the organisation of the free commune as a federation of workers' associations predate the soviets by decades, he also argued against patriarchal relationships and urged their destruction in the Russian peasant commune (and elsewhere). Indeed, if any one fits Trotsky's invention it is Marx, not Bakunin. After all, Marx came round (eventually) to Bakunin's position that the peasant commune could be the basis for Russia to jump straight to socialism (and so by-passing capitalism) but without Bakunin's critical analysis of that institution and its patriarchal and other "*dark*" features. Similarly, Marx never argued that the future socialist society would be based on workers' associations and their federation (i.e. workers' councils). His vision of revolution was formulated in typically bourgeois structures such as the Paris Commune's municipal council.

We could go on, but space precludes discussing every example. Suffice to say, it is not wise to take any Marxist assertion of anarchist thought or history at face value. A common technique is to quote anarchist writers out of context or before they become anarchists. For example, Marxist Paul Thomas argues that Bakunin favoured "*blind destructiveness*" and yet quotes more from Bakunin's pre-anarchist works (as well as Russian nihilists) than Bakunin's anarchist works to prove his claim. Similarly, Thomas claims that Bakunin "*defended the federes of the Paris Commune of 1871 on the grounds that they were strong enough to dispense with theory altogether,*" yet his supporting quote clearly does not, in fact, say this. [**Karl Marx and the Anarchists**, pp. 288-90 and p. 285] What Bakunin was, in fact, arguing was simply that theory must progress from experience and that any attempt to impose a theory on society would be doomed to create a "*Procrustean bed*" as no government could

*"embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real aspirations, wishes and needs whose sum total constitutes the collective will of a people."* He explicitly contrasted the Marxist system of "want[ing] to impose science upon the people" with the anarchist desire "to diffuse science and knowledge among the people, so that the various groups of human society, when convinced by propaganda, may organise and spontaneously combine into federations, in accordance with their natural tendencies and their real interests, but never according to a plan traced in advance and imposed upon the ignorant masses by a few 'superior' minds." [The Political Theory of Bakunin, p. 300] A clear misreading of Bakunin's argument but one which fits nicely into Marxist preconceptions of Bakunin and anarchism in general.

This tendency to quote out of context or from periods when anarchists were not anarchists probably explains why so many of these Marxist accounts of anarchism are completely lacking in references. Take, for example, the British SWP's Pat Stack who, in the face of stiff competition, wrote one of the most inaccurate diatribes against anarchism the world has had the misfortune to see (namely *"Anarchy in the UK?"* [Socialist Review, no. 246]). There is not a single reference in the whole article, which is just as well, given the inaccuracies contained in it. Without references, the reader would not be able to discover for themselves the distortions and simple errors contained in it.

For example, Stack asserts that Bakunin *"claimed a purely 'instinctive socialism.'"* However, the truth is different and this quote from Bakunin is one by him comparing himself and Marx in the 1840s! In fact, the anarchist Bakunin argued that *"instinct as a weapon is not sufficient to safeguard the proletariat against the reactionary machinations of the privileged classes,"* as instinct *"left to itself, and inasmuch as it has not been transformed into consciously reflected, clearly determined thought, lends itself easily to falsification, distortion and deceit."* [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 215] Bakunin saw the process of class struggle as the means of transforming instinct into conscious thought. As he put it, the *"goal, then, is to make the worker fully aware of what he [or she] wants, to unjam within him [or her] a steam of thought corresponding to his [or her] instinct."* This is done by *"a single path, that of emancipation through practical action,"* by *"workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses,"* of *"collective struggle of the workers against the bosses."* This would be complemented by socialist organisations *"propagandis[ing] its principles."* [The Basic Bakunin, p. 102, p. 103 and p. 109] Clearly, Stack is totally distorting Bakunin's ideas on the subject.

This technique of quoting Bakunin when he spoke about (or when he wrote in) his pre-anarchist days in the 1840s, i.e. nearly 20 years **before** he became an anarchist, or from Proudhon's non-anarchist and posthumously published work on property (in which Proudhon saw small-scale property as a bulwark against state tyranny) to attack anarchism is commonplace. So it is always wise to check the source material and any references (assuming that they are provided). Only by doing this can it be discovered whether a quote reflects the opinions of individuals when they were anarchists or whether they are referring to periods when they were no longer, or had not yet become, anarchists.

Ultimately, though, these kinds of articles by Marxists simply show the ideological nature of their own politics and say far more about Marxism than anarchism. After all, if their politics were strong they would not need to distort anarchist ideas! In addition, these essays are usually marked by a lot of (usually inaccurate) attacks on the ideas (or personal failings) of individual anarchists (usually Proudhon and Bakunin and sometimes Kropotkin). No modern

anarchist theorist is usually mentioned, never mind discussed. Obviously, for most Marxists, anarchists must repeat parrot-like the ideas of these "great men." However, while Marxists may do this, anarchists have always rejected this approach. We deliberately call ourselves **anarchists** rather than Proudhonists, Bakuninists, Kropotkinists, or after any other person. As Malatesta argued in 1876 (the year of Bakunin's death) "*[w]e follow ideas and not men, and rebel against this habit of embodying a principle in a man.*" [**Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas**, p. 198]

Therefore, anarchists, unlike many (most?) Marxists do not believe that some prophet wrote down the scriptures in past centuries and if only we could reach a correct understanding of these writings today we would see the way forward. Chomsky put it extremely well:

*"The whole concept of Marxist or Freudian or anything like that is very odd. These concepts belong to the history of organised religion. Any living person, no matter how gifted, will make some contributions intermingled with error and partial understanding. We try to understand and improve on their contributions and eliminate the errors. But how can you identify yourself as a Marxist, or a Freudian, or an X-ist, whoever X may be? That would be to treat the person as a God to be revered, not a human being whose contributions are to be assimilated and transcended. It's a crazy idea, a kind of idolatry."* [**The Chomsky Reader**, pp. 29-30]

This means that anarchists recognise that any person, no matter how great or influential, are just human. They make mistakes, they fail to live up to all the ideals they express, they are shaped by the society they live in, and so on. Anarchists recognise this fact and extract the positive aspects of past anarchist thinkers, reject the rest and develop what we consider the living core of their ideas, learn from history and constantly try to bring anarchist ideas up-to-date (after all, a lot has changed since the days of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin and this has to be taken into account). As Max Nettlau put it with regards to Proudhon, *"we have to extract from his work useful teachings that would be of great service to our modern libertarians, who nevertheless have to find their own way from theory to practice and to the critique of our present-day conditions, as Proudhon did in his time. This does not call for a slavish imitation; it implies using his work to inspire us and enable us to profit by his experience."* [**A Short History of Anarchism**, pp. 46-7] Similarly for other anarchists - we see them as a source of inspiration upon which to build rather than a template which to copy. This means to attack anarchism by, say, attacking Bakunin's or Proudhon's personal failings is to totally miss the point. While anarchists may be inspired by the ideas of, say, Bakunin or Proudhon it does not mean we blindly follow all of their ideas. Far from it! We critically analyse their ideas and keep what is living and reject what is useless or dead. Sadly, such common sense is lacking in many who critique anarchism.

However, the typical Marxist approach does have its benefits from a political perspective. It is very difficult for Marxists and Leninists to make an objective criticism of Anarchism for, as Albert Meltzer pointed out, *"by its nature it undermines all the suppositions basic to Marxism. Marxism was held out to be the basic working class philosophy (a belief which has utterly ruined the working class movement everywhere). It holds that the industrial proletariat cannot owe its emancipation to anyone but themselves alone. It is hard to go back on that and say that the working class is not yet ready to dispense with authority placed over it . . . Marxism normally tries to refrain from criticising anarchism as such - unless driven to doing so, when it exposes its own authoritarianism . . . and concentrates its attacks not on Anarchism, but on Anarchists."* [**Anarchism: Arguments for and Against**, p. 62] Needless

to say, this technique is the one usually applied by Marxists (although, we must stress that usually their account of the ideas of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin are so distorted that they fail even to do this!).

So anarchist theory has developed since Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. At each period in history anarchism advanced in its understanding of the world, the anarchism of Bakunin was a development of that of Proudhon, these ideas were again developed by the anarcho-communists of the 1880s and by the syndicalists of the 1890's, by the Italian Malatesta, the Russian Kropotkin, the Mexican Flores Magon and many other individuals and movements. Today we stand on their shoulders, not at their feet.

As such, to concentrate on the ideas of a few "*leaders*" misses the point totally. While anarchism contains many of the core insights of, say, Bakunin, it has also developed them and added to them. It has, concretely, taken into account, say, the lessons of the Russian and Spanish revolutions and so on. As such, even assuming that Marxist accounts of certain aspects of the ideas of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin were correct, they would have to be shown to be relevant to modern anarchism to be of any but historical interest. Sadly, Marxists generally fail to do this and, instead, we are subject to a (usually inaccurate) history lesson.

In order to understand, learn from and transcend previous theorists we must honestly present their ideas. Unfortunately many Marxists do not do this and so this section of the FAQ involves correcting the many mistakes, distortions, errors and lies that Marxists have subjected anarchism to. Hopefully, with this done, a real dialogue can develop between Marxists and anarchists. Indeed, this has happened between libertarian Marxists (such as council communists and Situationists) and anarchists and both tendencies have benefited from it. Perhaps this dialogue between libertarian Marxists and anarchists is to be expected, as the mainstream Marxists have often misrepresented the ideas of libertarian Marxists as well - when not dismissing them as anarchists!

## H.2.1 Do anarchists reject defending a revolution?

According to many Marxists anarchists either reject the idea of defending a revolution or think that it is not necessary. The Trotskyists of **Workers' Power** present a typical Marxist account of what **they** consider as anarchist ideas on this subject:

*"the anarchist conclusion is not to build any sort of state in the first place - not even a democratic workers' state. But how could we stop the capitalists trying to get their property back, something they will definitely try and do?"*

*"Should the people organise to stop the capitalists raising private armies and resisting the will of the majority? If the answer is yes, then that organisation - whatever you prefer to call it - is a state: an apparatus designed to enable one class to rule over another."*

*"The anarchists are rejecting something which is necessary if we are to beat the capitalists and have a chance of developing a classless society." [ "What's wrong with anarchism?", pp. 12-13, **World Revolution: Prague S26 2000**, p. 13]*

It would be simple to quote Malatesta from 1891 on this issue and leave it at that. As he put some seem to suppose "*that anarchists, in the name of their principles, would wish to see that strange freedom respected which violates and destroys the freedom and life of others. They seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again, because of respect for the freedom of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas.*" [Anarchy, pp. 42-3] Pretty much common sense, so you would think! Sadly, this appears to not be the case. As such, we have to explain anarchist ideas on the defence of a revolution and why this necessity need not imply a state and, if it did, then it signifies the end of the revolution.

The argument by **Workers' Power** is very common with the Leninist left and contains three fallacies, which we expose in turn. Firstly, we have to show that anarchists have always seen the necessity of defending a revolution. This shows that the anarchist opposition to the "*democratic workers' state*" (or "*dictatorship of the proletariat*") has nothing to do with beating the ruling class and stopping them regaining their positions of power. Secondly, we have to discuss the anarchist and Marxist definitions of what constitutes a "*state*" and show what they have in common and how they differ. Thirdly, we must summarise why anarchists oppose the idea of a "*workers' state*" in order for the **real** reasons why anarchists oppose it to be understood. Each issue will be discussed in turn.

For revolutionary anarchists, it is a truism that a revolution will need to defend itself against counter-revolutionary threats. Bakunin, for example, while strenuously objecting to the idea of a "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" also thought a revolution would need to defend itself:

*"Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines . . . In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt . . . and to federate with them for common defence."* [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 142]

And:

*"the Alliance of all labour associations . . . will constitute the Commune . . . there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council . . . [made up of] delegates . . . invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times . . . all provinces, communes and associations . . . [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all . . . invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces . . . and to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction . . . it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution . . . will emerge triumphant."* [Op. Cit., pp. 155-6]

Malatesta agreed, explicitly pointing to "*corps of volunteers (anarchist formations)*" as a means of defending a revolution from "*attempts to reduce a free people to a state of slavery again.*" To defend a revolution required "*the necessary geographical and mechanical knowledge, and above all large masses of the population willing to go and fight.* A

*government can neither increase the abilities of the former nor the will and courage of the latter.*" [Anarchy, p. 42] Decades later, his position had not changed and he was still arguing for the "*creation of voluntary militia, without powers to interfere as militia in the life of the community, but only to deal with any armed attacks by the forces of reaction to re-establish themselves, or to resist outside intervention*" for only "*the people in arms, in possession of the land, the factories and all the natural wealth*" could "*defend . . . the revolution.*" [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 166 and p. 170]

Alexander Berkman concurred. In his classic introduction to anarchism, he devoted a whole chapter to the issue which he helpfully entitled "*Defense of the Revolution*". He noted that it was "*your duty, as an Anarchist, to protect your liberty, to resist coercion and compulsion . . . the social revolution . . . will defend itself against invasion from any quarter . . . The armed workers and peasants are the only effective defence of the revolution. By means of their unions and syndicates they must always be on guard against counter-revolutionary attack.*" [What is Anarchism?, pp. 231-2] Emma Goldman clearly and unambiguously stated that she had "*always insisted that an armed attack on the Revolution must be met with armed force*" and that "*an armed counter-revolutionary and fascist attack can be met in no way except by an armed defence.*" [Vision on Fire, p. 222 and p. 217] Kropotkin, likewise, took it as a given that "*a society in which the workers would have a dominant voice*" would require a revolution to create and "*each time that such a period of accelerated evolution and reconstruction on a grand scale begins, civil war is liable to break out on a small or large scale.*" The question was "*how to attain the greatest results with the most limited amount of civil war, the smallest number of victims, and a minimum of mutual embitterment.*" To achieve this there was "*only one means; namely, that the oppressed part of society should obtain the clearest possible conception of what they intend to achieve, and how, and that they should be imbued with the enthusiasm which is necessary for that achievement.*" Thus, "*there are periods in human development when a conflict is unavoidable, and civil war breaks out quite independently of the will of particular individuals.*" [Memiors of a Revolutionist, pp. 270-1]

So Durruti, while fighting at the front during the Spanish revolution, was not saying anything new or against anarchist theory when he stated that "*the bourgeois won't let us create a libertarian communist society simply because we want to. They'll fight back and defend their privileges. The only way we can establish libertarian communism is by destroying the bourgeoisie*" [quoted by Abel Paz, Durruti in the Spanish Revolution, p. 484] Clearly, anarchism has always recognised the necessity of defending a revolution and proposed ideas to ensure it (ideas applied with great success by, for example, the Makhnovists in the Ukrainian Revolution and the CNT militias during the Spanish). As such, any assertion that anarchism rejects the necessity of defending a revolution is simply false. Sadly, it is one Marxists make repeatedly (undoubtedly inspired by Engels similar distortions - see [section H.4.7](#)).

Which, of course, brings us to the second assertion, namely that any attempt to defend a revolution means that a state has been created (regardless of what it may be called). For anarchists, such an argument simply shows that Marxists do not really understand what a state is. While the Trotskyist definition of a "*state*" may be (to quote **Workers' Power**) "*an apparatus designed to enable one class to rule another,*" the anarchist definition is somewhat different. Anarchists, of course, do not deny that the modern state is (to use Malatesta's excellent expression) "*the bourgeoisie's servant and gendarme.*" [Anarchy, p. 23] However, as we discuss in [section H.3.7](#), the Marxist analysis is superficial and fundamentally

metaphysical rather than scientific. Anarchists take an evolutionary perspective on the state and, as a result, argue that every state that has ever existed has defended the power of a minority class and, unsurprisingly, has developed certain features to facilitate this. The key one is centralisation of power. This ensures that the working people are excluded from the decision making process and power remains a tool of the ruling class. As such, the centralisation of power (while it may take many forms) is the key means by which a class system is maintained and, therefore, a key aspect of a state.

As Kropotkin put, the State idea "*includes the existence of a power situated above society*" as well as "*a territorial concentration as well as the concentration of many functions of the life of societies in the hands of a few.*" It "*implies some new relationships between members of society . . . in order to subject some classes to the domination of others*" and this becomes obvious "*when one studies the origins of the State.*" [**The State: Its Historic Role**, p. 10] This was the case with representative democracy:

*"To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more."* [Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 143]

This meant, Kropotkin continued, that the "*representative system was organised by the bourgeoisie to ensure their domination, and it will disappear with them. For the new economic phase that is about to begin we must seek a new form of political organisation, based on a principle quite different from that of representation. The logic of events imposes it.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 125] This suggests that the Marxist notion that we can use a state (i.e., any centralised and hierarchical social structure) to organise and defend a social revolution is based on flawed reasoning in which it "*seems to be taken for granted that Capitalism and the workers' movement both have the same end in view. If this were so, they might perhaps use the same means; but as the capitalist is out to perfect his system of exploitation and government, whilst the worker is out for emancipation and liberty, naturally the same means cannot be employed for both purposes.*" [George Barrett, **Objections to Anarchism**, p. 343]

To reproduce in the new society social structures which share the same characteristics (such as centralisation and delegation of power) which mark the institutions of class society would be a false step, one which can only recreate a new form of class system in which a new ruling elite govern and exploit the many. So while we agree with Marxists that the main function of the state is to defend class society, we also stress the structure of the state has evolved to execute that role. In the words of Rudolf Rocker:

*"[S]ocial institutions . . . do not arise arbitrarily, but are called into being by special needs to serve definite purposes . . . The newly arisen possessing classes had need of a political instrument of power to maintain their economic and social privileges over the masses of their own people . . . Thus arose the appropriate social conditions for the evolution of the modern state, as the organ of political power of privileged castes and classes for the forcible subjugation and oppression of the non-possessing classes . . . Its external forms have altered in the course of its historical development, but its functions have always been the same . . . And just as the functions of the bodily organs of . . . animals cannot be arbitrarily altered, so that, for example, one cannot at will hear with his eyes and see with his ears, so also one cannot at pleasure transform an organ of social oppression into an instrument for the liberation of the oppressed. The*

*state can only be what it is: the defender of mass-exploitation and social privileges, and creator of privileged classes.*" [Anarcho-Syndicalism, pp. 14-5]

As such, a new form of society, one based on the participation of all in the affairs of society (and a classless society can be nothing else) means the end of the state. This is because it has been designed to **exclude** the participation a classless society needs in order to exist. In anarchist eyes, it is an abuse of the language to call the self-managed organisations by which the former working class manage (and defend) a free society a state.

However, as **Workers Power** indicate, it could be objected that the anarchist vision of a federation of communal and workplace assemblies and volunteer militias to defend it is simply a new form of state. In other words, that the anarchists advocate what most people (including most Marxists) would call a state as this federal system is based on social organisation, collective decision making and (ultimately) the armed people. This was the position of Marx and Engels, who asserted against Bakunin that "*to call this machine a 'revolutionary Commune organised from the bottom to top' makes little difference. The name changes nothing of the substance*" for to be able to do anything at all the communal councils "*must be vested with some power and supported by a public force.*" [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 469]

Anarchists reject this argument. To quote Daniel GuÃ©rin, initially Bakunin used the term state "*as synonyms for 'social collective.'* The anarchists soon saw, however, that it was rather dangerous for them to use the same word as the authoritarians while giving it a quite different meaning. They felt that a new concept called for a new word and that the use of the old term could be dangerously ambiguous; so they ceased to give the name 'State' to the social collective of the future." [Anarchism, pp. 60-1] This is more than mere labels or semantics as it gets to the heart of the difference between libertarian and authoritarian conceptions of society and social change. Anarchists argue that the state is structured to ensure minority rule and, consequently, a "workers' state" would be a new form of minority rule over the workers. For this reason we argue that working class self-management from the bottom-up cannot be confused with a "state." The Russian Revolution showed the validity of this, with the Bolsheviks calling their dictatorship a "workers' state" in spite of the workers having no power in it.

Anarchists have long pointed out that government is not the same as collective decision making and to call the bottom-up communal system anarchists aim for a "state" when its role is to promote and ensure mass participation in social life is nonsense. That Marxists are vaguely aware of this obvious fact explains why they often talk of a "semi-state", a "new kind of state", a state "unique in history," or use some other expression to describe their post-revolutionary system. This would be a state (to use Engels words) which is "*no longer a state in the proper sense of the word.*" [quoted by Lenin, Op. Cit., p. 319] If that is the case, then why call it state?

Somewhat ironically, Engels provided more than enough support for the anarchist position. It is perfectly possible to have social organisation and it **not** be a state. When discussing the Native American Iroquois Confederacy, Engels noted that "*organ of the Confederacy was a Federal Council*" which was "*elected . . . and could always be removed*" by popular assemblies. There was "*no chief executive*" but "*two supreme war chiefs*" and "*[w]hen war broke out it was carried on mainly by volunteers.*" Yet this was "*the organisation of a society which as yet knows no state.*" [Selected Works, p. 517, p. 518 and p. 516] In the anarchist

commune there is a federal council elected and mandated by popular assemblies. These, in turn, are federated in a similar bottom-up manner. The means of production have been expropriated and held by society as a whole and so classes have been abolished. Volunteer militias have been organised for self-defence against counter-revolutionary attempts to subject the free people to authority. Why is this **not** a society which "*knows no state*"? Is it because the anarchist commune is fighting against the capitalist class? If so, does this mean that the Iroquois Confederacy became a state when it waged war against those seeking to impose bourgeois rule on it? That is doubtful and so Marx's assertion is simply wrong and reflects both the confusion at the heart of the Marxist theory of the state and the illogical depths Marxists sink to when attacking anarchism.

This is not a matter of mere "labels" as Marxists assert, but rather gets to the key issue of who has the real power in a revolution - the people armed or a new minority (the "revolutionary" government). In other words, most Marxists cannot tell the difference between libertarian organisation (power to the base and decision making from the bottom-up) and the state (centralised power in a few hands and top-down decision making). Which helps explain why the Bolshevik revolution was such a failure. The confusion of working class power with party power is one of the root problems with Marxism. So why do most Marxists tend to call their post-revolutionary organisation a state? Simply because, at some level, they recognise that, in reality, the working class does not wield power in the so-called "workers' state": the party does. This was the case in Russia. The working class never wielded power under the Bolsheviks and here is the most obvious contradiction in the Marxist theory of the state - a contradiction which, as we discuss in [section H.3.8](#) the Leninists solved by arguing that the party had to assert its power **over** the working class for its own good.

Moreover, as we discuss in [section H.3.9](#), it is both simplistic and wrong to argue that the state is simply the tool of economic classes. The state is a source of social inequality in and of itself and, consequently, can oppress and exploit the working class just as much as, and independently of, any economically dominant class:

*"All political power inevitably creates a privileged situation for the men who exercise it. Thus it violates, from the beginning, the equalitarian principle and strikes at the heart of the Social Revolution . . . [It] inevitably becomes a source of other privileges, even if it does not depend on the bourgeoisie. Having taken over the Revolution, having mastered it, and bridled it, power is compelled to create a bureaucratic apparatus, indispensable to all authority which wants to maintain itself, to command, to order - in a word, 'to govern'. Rapidly, it attracts around itself all sorts of elements eager to dominate and exploit."*

*"Thus it forms a new privileged caste, at first politically and later economically . . . It sows everywhere the seed of inequality and soon infects the whole social organism."*  
[Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 249]

So if it **were** simply a question of consolidating a revolution and its self-defence then there would be no argument:

*"But perhaps the truth is simply this: . . . [some] take the expression 'dictatorship of the proletariat' to mean simply the revolutionary action of the workers in taking possession of the land and the instruments of labour, and trying to build a society and*

*organise a way of life in which there will be no place for a class that exploits and oppresses the producers.*

*"Thus constructed, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would be the effective power of all workers trying to bring down capitalist society and would thus turn into Anarchy as soon as resistance from reactionaries would have ceased and no one can any longer seek to compel the masses by violence to obey and work for him. In which case, the discrepancy between us would be nothing more than a question of semantics. Dictatorship of the proletariat would signify the dictatorship of everyone, which is to say, it would be a dictatorship no longer, just as government by everybody is no longer a government in the authoritarian, historical and practical sense of the word.*

*"But the real supporters of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' do not take that line, as they are making quite plain in Russia. Of course, the proletariat has a hand in this, just as the people has a part to play in democratic regimes, that is to say, to conceal the reality of things. In reality, what we have is the dictatorship of one party, or rather, of one party's leaders: a genuine dictatorship, with its decrees, its penal sanctions, its henchmen and above all its armed forces, which are at present [1919] also deployed in the defence of the revolution against its external enemies, but which will tomorrow be used to impose the dictator's will upon the workers, to apply a break on revolution, to consolidate the new interests in the process of emerging and protect a new privileged class against the masses." [Malatesta, **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, pp. 38-9]*

The question is, therefore, one of **who** "seizes power" - will it be the mass of the population or will it be a party claiming to represent it. The difference is vital and it confuses the issue to use the same word "state" to describe two such fundamentally different structures as a "bottom-up" self-managed communal federation and a "top-down" hierarchical centralised organisation (such as has been every state that has existed). This explains why anarchists reject the idea of a "*democratic workers' state*" as the means by which a revolution defends itself. Rather than signify working class power or management of society, it signifies the opposite - the seizure of power of a minority (in this case, the leaders of the vanguard party).

Anarchists argue that the state is designed to exclude the mass of the population from the decision making process. This, ironically for Trotskyism, was one of the reasons why leading Bolsheviks (including Lenin and Trotsky) argued for a workers state. The centralisation of power implied by the state was essential so that the vanguard party could ignore (to use **Worker's Power**'s phrase) "*the will of the majority.*" This particular perspective was clearly a lesson they learned from their experiences during the Russian Revolution - as we discussed in [section H.1.2](#) the notion that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" was, in fact, the "*dictatorship of the party*" was a commonplace ideological truism in Leninist circles. As anarchists had warned, it was a dictatorship **over** the proletariat and acknowledged as such by the likes of Lenin and Trotsky.

Needless to say, **Workers' Power** (like most Trotskyists) blame the degeneration of the Russian revolution on the Civil War and its isolation. However, the creation of a party dictatorship was not seen in these terms and, moreover, as we discuss in detail in [section H.6](#) the Bolshevik undermining of working class autonomy and democracy started well **before**

the outbreak of civil war, thus confirming anarchist theory. These conclusions of leading Leninists simply justified the actions undertaken by the Bolsheviks from the start.

This is why anarchists reject the idea of a "*democratic workers' state*." Simply put, as far as it is a state, it cannot be democratic and in as far as it is democratic, it cannot be a state. The Leninist idea of a "*workers' state*" means, in fact, the seizure of power by the party. This, we must stress, naturally follows from the reality of the state. It is designed for minority rule and excludes, by its very nature, mass participation and this aspect of the state was one which the leading lights of Bolshevism agreed with. Little wonder, then, that in practice the Bolshevik regime suppressed of any form of democracy which hindered the power of the party. Maurice Brinton summed up the issue well when he argued that "*'workers' power' cannot be identified or equated with the power of the Party - as it repeatedly was by the Bolsheviks . . . What 'taking power' really implies is that the vast majority of the working class at last realises its ability to manage both production and society - and organises to this end.*" [**The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. xiv]

In summary, therefore, anarchists reject the idea that the defence of a revolution can be conducted by a state. As Bakunin once put it, there is the "*Republic-State*" and there is "*the system of the Republic-Commune, the Republic-Federation, i.e. the system of Anarchism. This is the politics of the Social Revolution, which aims at the abolition of the State and establishment of the economic, entirely free organisation of the people - organisation from bottom to top by means of federation.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 314] Indeed, creating a new state will simply destroy the most important gain of any revolution - working class autonomy - and its replacement by another form of minority rule (by the party). Anarchists have always argued that the defence of a revolution must not be confused with the state and so argue for the abolition of the state **and** the defence of a revolution. Only when working class people actually run themselves society will a revolution be successful. For anarchists, this means that "*effective emancipation can be achieved only by the direct, widespread, and independent action . . . of the workers themselves, grouped . . . in their own class organisations . . . on the basis of concrete action and self-government, helped but not governed, by revolutionaries working in the very midst of, and not above the mass and the professional, technical, defence and other branches.*" [Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 197]

This means that anarchists argue that the state cannot be transformed or adjusted, but has to be smashed by a social revolution and replaced with organisations and structures created by working class people during their own struggles (see [section H.1.4](#) for details). Anarchist opposition to the so-called workers' state has absolutely **nothing** to do with the issue of defending a revolution, regardless of what Marxists assert.

## H.2.2 Do anarchists reject "*class conflict*" and "*collective struggle*"?

Of course not. Anarchists have always taken a keen interest in the class struggle, in the organisation, solidarity and actions of working class people. Anarchist Nicholas Walter summarised the obvious and is worth quoting at length:

*"Virtually all forms of revolutionary socialism during the nineteenth century, whether authoritarian or libertarian, were based on the concept of class struggle . . . The term anarchist was first adopted by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840, and although he*

*disliked the class struggle, he recognised it existed, and took sides in it when he had to . . . during the French Revolution of 1848, he insisted that he was on the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie . . . his last book was a positive study of the need for specially proletarian politics . . .*

*"The actual anarchist movement was founded later, by the anti-authoritarian sections of the First International . . . They accepted [its] founding Address . . . , drafted by Karl Marx, which assumed the primacy of the class struggle and insisted that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'; they accepted the Programme of the International Alliance of Social Democracy (1869), drafted by Michael Bakunin, which assumed the primacy of the class struggle . . . and they accepted the declaration of the St. Imier Congress which assumed the primacy of the class struggle and insisted that 'rejecting all compromise to arrive at the accomplishment of the social revolution, the proletarians of all countries must establish, outside all bourgeois politics, the solidarity of revolutionary action' . . . This was certainly the first anarchist movement, and this movement was certainly based on a libertarian version of the concept of the class struggle.*

*"Most of the leaders of this movement - first Michael Bakunin, James Guillaume, Errico Malatesta, Carlo Caliero, later Peter Kropotkin, Louise Michel, Emile Pouget, Jean Grave, and so on - took for granted that there was a struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and that the social revolution would be conducted by the former against the latter. They derived such ideas . . . from the traditional theory of revolutionary socialism and the traditional practice of working-class action . . .*

*"The great revolutions of the early twentieth century - in Mexico, Russia, Spain - all derived from the class struggle and all involved anarchist intervention on the side of the working class. The great martyrs of the anarchist movement - from Haymarket in 1887 through Francisco Ferrer in 1909 to Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 - were killed in the class struggle. The great partisans of anarchist warfare - from Emiliano Zapata through Nestor Makhno to Buenaventura Durruti - were all fighting in the class struggle.*

*"So . . . class struggle in anarchism . . . [and] its importance in the anarchist movement is incontrovertible." [The Anarchist Past and other essays, pp. 60-2]*

Anyone even remotely aware of anarchism and its history could not fail to notice that class struggle plays a key role in anarchist theory, particularly (but not exclusively) in its revolutionary form. To assert otherwise is simply to lie about anarchism. Sadly, Marxists have been known to make such an assertion.

For example, Pat Stack of the British SWP argued that anarchists "*dismiss . . . the importance of the collective nature of change*" and so "*downplays the centrality of the working class*" in the revolutionary process. This, he argues, means that for anarchism the working class "*is not the key to change*." He stresses that for Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin "*revolutions were not about . . . collective struggle or advance*" and that anarchism "*despises the collectivity*." Amazingly he argues that for Kropotkin, "*far from seeing class conflict as the dynamic for social change as Marx did, saw co-operation being at the root of the social process*." Therefore, "*[i]t follows that if class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means. Therefore everything from riot to bomb,*

*and all that might become between the two, was legitimate when ranged against the state, each with equal merit.*" ["Anarchy in the UK?", **Socialist Review**, no. 246] Needless to say, he makes the usual exception for anarcho-syndicalists, thereby showing his total ignorance of anarchism **and** syndicalism (see [section H.2.8](#)).

Assertions like these are simply incredible. It is hard to believe that anyone who is a leading member of a Leninist party could write such nonsense which suggests that Stack is aware of the truth and simply decides to ignore it. All in all, it is **very** easy to refute these assertions. All we have to do is, unlike Stack, to quote from the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin and other anarchists. Even the briefest familiarity with the writings of revolutionary anarchism would soon convince the reader that Stack really does not know what he is talking about.

Take, for example, Bakunin. Rather than reject class conflict, collective struggle or the key role of the working class, Bakunin based his political ideas on all three. As he put it, there was, "*between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life.*" He stressed that "*war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable*" and would only end with the "*abolition of the bourgeoisie as a distinct class.*" In order for the worker to "*become strong*" he "*must unite*" with other workers in "*the union of all local and national workers' associations into a worldwide association, the great International Working-Men's Association.*" It was only "*through practice and collective experience*" and "*the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle [that] will bring [the worker] more to recognise his [or her] true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.*" There was "*but a single path, that of emancipation through practical action*" which "*has only one meaning. It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds.*" Then, "*when the revolution - brought about by the force of circumstances - breaks out, the International will be a real force and know what it has to do*", namely to "*take the revolution into its own hands*" and become "*an earnest international organisation of workers' associations from all countries*" which will be "*capable of replacing this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, pp. 97-8, p. 103 and p. 110]

Hardly the words of a man who rejected class conflict, the working class and the collective nature of change! Nor is this an isolated argument from Bakunin, it recurs continuously throughout Bakunin's works. For Bakunin, the "*initiative in the new movement will belong to the people . . . in Western Europe, to the city and factory workers - in Russia, Poland, and most of the Slavic countries, to the peasants.*" However, "*in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in this revolutionary movement be taken up by the city workers . . . who combine in themselves the instincts, ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 375] Similarly, he argued that "*equality*" was the "*aim*" of the International Workers' Association and "*the organisation of the working class its strength, the unification of the proletariat the world over . . . its weapon, its only policy.*" He stressed that "*to create a people's force capable of crushing the military and civil force of the State, it is necessary to organise the proletariat.*" [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, p. 95 and p. 254]

Strikes played a very important role in Bakunin's ideas (as they do in all revolutionary anarchist thought). He saw the strike as "*the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie . . . Strikes are a valuable instrument from two points of view. Firstly,*

*they electrify the masses . . . awaken in them the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie . . . secondly they help immensely to provoke and establish between the workers of all trades, localities and countries the consciousness and very fact of solidarity: a twofold action, both negative and positive, which tends to constitute directly the new world of the proletariat, opposing it almost in an absolute way to the bourgeois world." [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886**, pp. 216-217]* For Bakunin, strikes train workers for social revolution as they "create, organise, and form a workers' army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world." [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, pp. 384-5]

The revolution would be "*an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.*" [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 179] As we argue in [section I.2.3](#), the very process of collective class struggle would, for Bakunin and other anarchists, create the basis of a free society. Thus, in Bakunin's eyes, the "*future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 206]

In other words, the basic structure created by the revolution would be based on the working classes own combat organisations, as created in their struggles against oppression and exploitation. The link between present and future would be labour unions (workers' associations), which played the key role of both the means to abolish capitalism and the state and as the framework of a socialist society. For Bakunin, the "*very essence of socialism*" lies in "*the irrepressible conflict between the workers and the exploiters of labour.*" A "*living, powerful, socialist movement*" can "*be made a reality only by the awakened revolutionary consciousness, the collective will, and the organisation of the working masses themselves.*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 191 and p. 212] Therefore, it was essential to "*[o]rganise always more and more the practical militant international solidarity of the toilers of all trades and of all countries, and remember . . . you will find an immense, an irresistible force in this universal collectivity.*" Hence Bakunin's support for self-discipline within self-managed organisations, which came directly from the his awareness of the **collective** nature of social change: "*Today, in revolutionary action as in labour itself, collectivism must replace individualism. Understand clearly that in organising yourselves you will be stronger than all the political leaders in the world.*" [quoted by Kenafick, **Op. Cit.**, p. 291 and p. 244]

All of which is quite impressive for someone who was a founding father of a theory which, according to Stack, downplayed the "*centrality of the working class,*" argued that the working class was "*not the key to change,*" dismissed "*the importance of the collective nature of change*" as well as "*collective struggle or advance*" and "*despises the collectivity!*"! Clearly, to argue that Bakunin held any of these views simply shows that the person making such statements does not have a clue what they are talking about.

The same, needless to say, applies to all revolutionary anarchists. Kropotkin built upon Bakunin's arguments and, like him, based his politics on collective working class struggle and organisation. He consistently stressed that "*the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers' organisations which carry on the direct struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector - the State.*" Such struggle, "*better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it,*

*and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State." [Evolution and Environment, pp. 82-3]* In his article on "Anarchism" for the **Encyclopaedia Britannica**, Kropotkin stressed that anarchists "have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation." [Anarchism, p. 287]

Far from denying the importance of collective class struggle, he actually stressed it again and again. As he once wrote, "*to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this.*" He argued that it was "*a question of organising societies of resistance for all trades in each town, of creating resistance funds against the exploiters, of giving more solidarity to the workers' organisations of each town and of putting them in contact with those of other towns, of federating them . . . Workers' solidarity must no longer be an empty word by practised each day between all trades and all nations.*" [quoted by Cahm, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 255-6]

As can be seen, Kropotkin was well aware of the importance of popular, mass, struggles. As he put it, anarchists "*know very well that any popular movement is a step towards the social revolution. It awakens the spirit of revolt, it makes men [and women] accustomed to seeing the established order (or rather the established disorder) as eminently unstable.*" [**Words of a Rebel**, p. 203] As regards the social revolution, he argues that "*a decisive blow will have to be administered to private property: from the beginning, the workers will have to proceed to take over all social wealth so as to put it into common ownership. This revolution can only be carried out by the workers themselves.*" In order to do this, the masses have to build their own organisation as the "*great mass of workers will not only have to constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie . . . it will have to take action of its own during the period which will precede the revolution . . . and this sort of action can only be carried out when a strong workers' organisation exists.*" This meant, of course, it was "*the mass of workers we have to seek to organise. We . . . have to submerge ourselves in the organisation of the people . . . When the mass of workers is organised and we are with it to strengthen its revolutionary idea, to make the spirit of revolt against capital germinate there . . . then it will be the social revolution.*" [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 153-4]

He saw the class struggle in terms of "*a multitude of acts of revolt in all countries, under all possible conditions: first, individual revolt against capital and State; then collective revolt - strikes and working-class insurrections - both preparing, in men's minds as in actions, a revolt of the masses, a revolution.*" Clearly, the mass, collective nature of social change was not lost on Kropotkin who pointed to a "*multitude of risings of working masses and peasants*" as a positive sign. Strikes, he argued, "*were once 'a war of folded arms'*" but now were "*easily turning to revolt, and sometimes taking the proportions of vast insurrections.*" [Anarchism, p. 144]

Kropotkin could not have been clearer. Somewhat ironically, given Stack's assertions, Kropotkin explicitly opposed the Marxism of his time (Social Democracy) precisely because it had "*moved away from a pure labour movement, in the sense of a direct struggle against capitalists by means of strikes, unions, and so forth.*" The Marxists, he stated, opposed strikes and unions because they "*diverted forces from electoral agitation*" while anarchists "*reject[ed] a narrowly political struggle [and] inevitably became a more revolutionary party, both in theory and in practice.*" [**The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings**, pp. 207-8, p. 208 and p. 209]

And Pat Stack argues that Kropotkin did not see "*class conflict as the dynamic for social change*," nor "*class conflict*" as "*the motor of change*" and the working class "*not the agent and collective struggle not the means*!" Truly incredible and a total and utter distortion of Kropotkin's ideas on the subject.

As for other anarchists, we discover the same concern over class conflict, collective struggle and organisation and the awareness of a mass social revolution by the working class. Emma Goldman, for example, argued that anarchism "*stands for direct action*" and that "*[t]rade unionism, the economic area of the modern gladiator, owes its existence to direct action . . . In France, in Spain, in Italy, in Russia, nay even in England (witness the growing rebellion of English labour unions), direct, revolutionary economic action has become so strong a force in the battle for industrial liberty as to make the world realise the tremendous importance of labour's power. The General Strike [is] the supreme expression of the economic consciousness of the workers . . . Today every great strike, in order to win, must realise the importance of the solidaric general protest.*" **[Anarchism and Other Essays, pp. 65-6]** She placed collective class struggle at the centre of her ideas and, crucially, she saw it as the way to create an anarchist society:

*"It is this war of classes that we must concentrate upon, and in that connection the war against false values, against evil institutions, against all social atrocities. Those who appreciate the urgent need of co-operating in great struggles . . . must organise the preparedness of the masses for the overthrow of both capitalism and the state. Industrial and economic preparedness is what the workers need. That alone leads to revolution at the bottom . . . That alone will give the people the means to take their children out of the slums, out of the sweat shops and the cotton mills . . . That alone leads to economic and social freedom, and does away with all wars, all crimes, and all injustice."* **[Red Emma Speaks, pp. 355-6]**

For Malatesta, "*the most powerful force for social transformation is the working class movement . . . Through the organisations established for the defence of their interests, workers acquire an awareness of the oppression under which they live and of the antagonisms which divide them from their employers, and so begin to aspire to a better life, get used to collective struggle and to solidarity.*" This meant that anarchists "*must recognise the usefulness and importance of the workers' movement, must favour its development, and make it one of the levers of their action, doing all they can so that it . . . will culminate in a social revolution.*" Anarchists must "*deepen the chasm between capitalists and wage-slaves, between rulers and ruled; preach expropriation of private property and the destruction of State.*" The new society would be organised "*by means of free association and federations of producers and consumers.*" **[Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 113, pp. 250-1 and p. 184]** Alexander Berkman, unsurprisingly, argued the same thing. As he put it, only "*the workers*" as "*the worst victims of present institutions,*" could abolish capitalism and the state as "*it is to their own interest to abolish them . . . labour's emancipation means at the same time the redemption of the whole of society.*" He stressed that "**only the right organisation of the workers** can accomplish what we are striving for . . . Organisation from the bottom up, beginning with the shop and factory, on the foundation of the joint interests of the workers everywhere . . . alone can solve the labour question and serve the true emancipation of man[kind]." **[What is Anarchism?, p. 187 and p. 207]**

As can be seen, the claim that Kropotkin or Bakunin, or anarchists in general, ignored the class struggle and collective working class struggle and organisation is either a lie or

indicates ignorance. Clearly, anarchists have placed working class struggle, organisation and collective direct action and solidarity at the core of their politics (and as the means of creating a libertarian socialist society) from the start. Moreover, this perspective is reflected in the anarchist flag itself as we discuss in our [appendix on the symbols of anarchism](#). According to Louise Michel the "*black flag is the flag of strikes.*" [**The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel**, p. 168] If anarchism does, as some Marxists assert, reject class conflict and collective struggle then using a flag associated with an action which expresses both seems somewhat paradoxical. However, for those with even a basic understanding of anarchism and its history there is no paradox as anarchism is obviously based on class conflict and collective struggle.

Also see [section H.2.8](#) for a discussion of the relationship of anarchism to syndicalism.

### H.2.3 Does anarchism yearn "*for what has gone before*"?

Leninist Pat Stack states that one of the "*key points of divergence*" between anarchism and Marxism is that the former, "*far from understanding the advances that capitalism represented, tended to take a wistful look back. Anarchism shares with Marxism an abhorrence of the horrors of capitalism, but yearns for what has gone before.*" ["*Anarchy in the UK?*", **Socialist Review**, no. 246]

Like his other "*key point*" (namely the rejection of class struggle - see [last section](#)), Stack is simply wrong. Even the quickest look at the works of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin would convince the reader that this is simply distortion. Rather than look backwards for our ideas of social life, anarchists have always been careful to base our ideas on the current state of society and what anarchist thinkers considered positive current trends within it.

The dual element of progress is important to remember. Capitalism is a class society, marked by exploitation, oppression and various social hierarchies. In such a society progress can hardly be neutral. It will reflect vested interests, the needs of those in power, the rationales of the economic system (e.g. the drive for profits) and those who benefit from it, the differences in power between states and companies and so on. Equally, it will be shaped by the class struggle, the resistance of the working classes to exploitation and oppression, the objective needs of production, etc. As such, trends in society will reflect the various class conflicts, social hierarchies, power relationships and so on which exist within it.

This is particularly true of the economy. The development of the industrial structure of a capitalist economy will be based on the fundamental need to maximise the profits and power of the capitalists. As such, it will develop (either by market forces or by state intervention) in order to ensure this. This means that various tendencies apparent in capitalist society exist specifically to aid the development of capital. It does not follow that because a society which places profits above people has found a specific way of organising production "efficient" it means that a socialist society will do. As such, anarchist opposition to specific tendencies within capitalism (such as the increased concentration and centralisation of companies) does not mean a "*yearning*" for the past. Rather, it shows an awareness that capitalist methods are precisely that and that they need not be suited for a society which replaces the profit system with human and ecological need as the criteria for decision making.

For anarchists, this means questioning the assumptions of capitalist progress and so the first task of a revolution after the expropriation of the capitalists and the destruction of the state will be to transform the industrial structure and how it operates, not keep it as it is. Anarchists have long argued that capitalist methods cannot be used for socialist ends. In our battle to democratise and socialise the workplace, in our awareness of the importance of collective initiatives by the direct producers in transforming their work situation, we show that factories are not merely sites of production, but also of reproduction - the reproduction of a certain structure of social relations based on the division between those who give orders and those who take them. Moreover, the structure of industry has developed to maximise profits. Why assume that this structure will be equally as efficient in producing useful products by meaningful work which does not harm the environment, society or those who do the actual tasks? A further aspect of this is that many of the struggles today, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas to those against Genetically Modified (GM) food and nuclear power are precisely based on the understanding that capitalist "progress" can not be uncritically accepted. To resist the expulsion of people from the land in the name of progress or the introduction of terminator seeds is not to look back to "*what had gone*", although this is also precisely what the proponents of capitalist globalisation often accuse us of. Rather, it is to put "***people before profit.***"

That so many Marxists fail to understand this suggests that their ideology subscribes to notions of "progress" which simply builds upon capitalist ones. As such, only a sophist would confuse a critical evaluation of trends within capitalism with a yearning for the past. It means to buy into the whole capitalist notion of "progress" which has always been part of justifying the inhumanities of the status quo. Simply put, just because a process is rewarded by the profit driven market it does not mean that it makes sense from a human or ecological perspective. For example, as we argue in [section J.5.11](#), the capitalist market hinders the spread of co-operatives and workers' self-management in spite of their well documented higher efficiency and productivity. From the perspective of the needs of the capitalists, this makes perfect sense. In terms of the workers and efficient allocation and use of resources, it does not. Would Marxists argue that because co-operatives and workers' self-management of production are marginal aspects of the capitalist economy it means that they will play no part in a sane society or that if a socialist expresses interest in them it means that they are "*yearning*" for a past mode of production? We hope not.

This common Marxist failure to understand anarchist investigations of the future is, ironically enough, joined with a total failure to understand the social conditions in which anarchists have put forward their ideas. For all his claims that anarchists ignore "*material conditions*," it is Pat Stack (and others like him) who does so in his claims against Proudhon. Stack calls the Frenchman "*the founder of modern anarchism*" and states that Marx dubbed Proudhon "*the socialist of the small peasant or master craftsman*." Typically, Stack gets even this wrong as it was Engels who used those words, although Marx would probably have not disagreed if he had been alive when they were penned. [**The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 626] From this, Stack implies that Proudhon was "*yearning for the past*" when he advanced his mutualist ideas.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. This is because the society in which the French anarchist lived was predominately artisan and peasant in nature. This was admitted by Marx and Engels in the **Communist Manifesto** ("[i]n countries like France" the peasants "*constitute far more than half of the population.*" [Op. Cit., p. 493]). As such, for Proudhon to incorporate the aspirations of the majority of the population is not to "*yearn for what has gone before*" but rather an extremely sensible position to take. This suggests that for Engels

to state that the French anarchist was "*the socialist of the small peasant or master craftsman*" was unsurprising, a simple statement of fact, as the French working classes were, at the time, predominately small peasants or master craftsmen (or artisans). It, in other words, reflected the society Proudhon lived in and, as such, did not reflect desires for the past but rather a wish to end exploitation and oppression **now** rather than some unspecified time in the future.

Moreover, Proudhon's ideas cannot be limited to just that as Marxists try to do. As K. Steven Vincent points out Proudhon's "*social theories may not be reduced to a socialism for only the peasant class, nor was it a socialism only for the petite bourgeois; it was a socialism of and for French workers. And in the mid-nineteenth century . . . most French workers were still artisans.*" Indeed, "[w]hile Marx was correct in predicting the eventual predominance of the industrial proletariat vis-À-vis skilled workers, such predominance was neither obvious nor a foregone conclusion in France during the nineteenth century. The absolute number of small industries even increased during most of the century." [**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 5 and p. 282] Proudhon himself noted in 1851 that of a population of 36 million, 24 million were peasants and 6 million were artisans. Of the remaining 6 million, these included wage-workers for whom "*workmen's associations*" would be essential as "*a protest against the wage system*," the "*denial of the rule of capitalists*" and for "*the management of large instruments of labour*." [**The General Idea of the Revolution**, pp. 97-8]

To summarise, if the society in which you live is predominately made-up of peasants and artisans then it is hardly an insult to be called "*the socialist of the small peasant or master craftsman*." Equally, it can hardly represent a desire for "*what has gone before*" to tailor your ideas to the actual conditions in the country in which you live! And Stack accuses **anarchists** of ignoring "*material conditions*"!

Neither can it be said that Proudhon ignored the development of industrialisation in France during his lifetime. Quite the reverse, in fact, as indicated above. Proudhon did **not** ignore the rise of large-scale industry and argued that such industry should be managed by the workers' themselves via workers associations. As he put it, "*certain industries*" required "*the combined employment of a large number of workers*" and so the producer is "*a collectivity*." In such industries "*we have no choice*" and so "*it is necessary to form an association among the workers*" because "*without that they would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 215-6] Even Engels had to grudgingly admit that Proudhon supported "*the association of workers*" for "*large-industry and large establishments, such as railways.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 626]

All in all, Stack is simply showing his ignorance of both Proudhon's ideas **and** the society (the "*material conditions*") in which they were shaped and were aimed for. As can be seen, Proudhon incorporated the development of large-scale industry within his mutualist ideas and so the need to abolish wage labour by workers' associations and workers' control of production. Perhaps Stack can fault Proudhon for seeking the end of capitalism too soon and for not waiting patiently will it developed further (if he does, he will also have to attack Marx, Lenin and Trotsky as well for the same failing!), but this has little to do with "*yearn[ing] for what has gone before*."

After distorting Proudhon's ideas on industry, Stack does the same with Bakunin. He asserts the following:

*"Similarly, the Russian anarchist leader Bakunin argued that it was the progress of capitalism that represented the fundamental problem. For him industrialisation was an evil. He believed it had created a decadent western Europe, and therefore had held up the more primitive, less industrialised Slav regions as the hope for change."*

Now, it would be extremely interesting to find out where, exactly, Stack discovered that Bakunin made these claims. After all, they are at such odds with Bakunin's anarchist ideas that it is tempting to conclude that Stack is simply making it up. This, we suggest, explains the total lack of references for such an outrageous claim. Looking at what appears to be his main source, we discover Paul Avrich writing that "[i]n 1848" (i.e. nearly 20 years **before** Bakunin became an anarchist!) Bakunin *"spoke of the decadence of Western Europe and saw hope in the primitive, less industrialised Slavs for the regeneration of the Continent."* [Anarchist Portraits, p. 8] The plagiarism is obvious, as are the distortions. Given that Bakunin became an anarchist in the mid-1860s, how his pre-anarchist ideas are relevant to an evaluation of anarchism escapes logic. It makes as much sense as quoting Marx to refute fascism as Mussolini was originally the leader of the left-wing of the Italian Socialist Party!

It is, of course, simple to refute Stack's claims. We need only do that which he does not, namely quote Bakunin. For someone who thought "*industrialisation was an evil*," a key aspect of Bakunin's ideas on social revolution was the seizing of industry and its placing under social ownership. As he put it, *"capital and all tools of labour belong to the city workers - to the workers associations. The whole organisation of the future should be nothing but a free federation of workers - agricultural workers as well as factory workers and associations of craftsmen."* [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 410] Bakunin argued that *"to destroy . . . all the instruments of labour . . . would be to condemn all humanity - which is infinity too numerous today to exist . . . on the simple gifts of nature . . . - to . . . death by starvation. Thus capital cannot and must not be destroyed. It must be preserved."* Only when workers "obtain not individual but **collective** property in capital" and when capital is no longer "*concentrated in the hands of a separate, exploiting class*" will they be able *"to smash the tyranny of capital."* [The Basic Bakunin, pp. 90-1] He stressed that only "*associated labour, this is labour organised upon the principles of reciprocity and co-operation, is adequate to the task of maintaining the existence of a large and somewhat civilised society.*" Moreover, the "*whole secret of the boundless productivity of human labour consists first of all in applying . . . scientifically developed reason . . . and then in the division of that labour.*" [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, pp. 341-2] Hardly the thoughts of someone opposed to industrialisation! Unsurprisingly, then, Eugene Pyziu noted that *"[i]n an article printed in 1868 [Bakunin] rejected outright the doctrine of the rottenness of the West and of the messianic destiny of Russia."* [The Doctrine of Anarchism of Michael A. Bakunin, p. 61]

Rather than oppose industrialisation and urge the destruction of industry, Bakunin considered one of the first acts of the revolution would be workers' associations taking over the means of production and turning them into collective property managed by the workers themselves. Hence Daniel GuÃ©rin's comment:

*"Proudhon and Bakunin were 'collectivists,' which is to say they declared themselves without equivocation in favour of the common exploitation, not by the State but by associated workers of the large-scale means of production and of the public services. Proudhon has been quite wrongly presented as an exclusive enthusiast of private*

*property.*" ["*From Proudhon to Bakunin*", pp. 23-33, **The Radical Papers**, Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos (ed.), p. 32]

Clearly, Stack does not have the faintest idea of what he is talking about! Nor is Kropotkin any safer than Proudhon or Bakunin from Stack's distortions:

*"Peter Kropotkin, another famous anarchist leader to emerge in Russia, also looked backwards for change. He believed the ideal society would be based on small autonomous communities, devoted to small scale production. He had witnessed such communities among Siberian peasants and watchmakers in the Swiss mountains."*

First, we must note the plagiarism. Stack is summarising Paul Avrich's summary of Kropotkin's ideas. [Op. Cit., p. 62] Rather than go to the source material, Stack provides an interpretation of someone else's interpretation of someone else's ideas! Clearly, the number of links in the chain means that something is going to get lost in the process and, of course, it does. The something which "gets lost" is, unfortunately, Kropotkin's ideas.

Ultimately, Stack is simply showing his total ignorance of Kropotkin's ideas by making such a statement. At least Avrich expanded upon his summary to mention that Kropotkin's positive evaluation of using modern technology and the need to apply it on an appropriate level to make work and the working environment as pleasant as possible. As Avrich summarises, "*[p]laced in small voluntary workshops, machinery would rescue human beings from the monotony and toil of large-scale capitalist enterprise, allow time for leisure and cultural pursuits, and remove forever the stamp of inferiority traditionally borne by manual labour.*" [Op. Cit., p. 63] Hardly "backward looking" to desire the application of science and technology to transform the industrial system into one based on the needs of people rather than profit!

Stack must be hoping that the reader has, like himself, not read Kropotkin's classic work **Fields, Factories and Workshops** for if they have then they would be aware of the distortion Stack subjects Kropotkin's ideas to. While Avrich does present, in general, a reasonable summary of Kropotkin's ideas, he does place it into a framework of his own making. Kropotkin while stressing the importance of decentralising industry within a free society did not look backward for his inspiration. Rather, he looked to trends within existing society, trends he thought pointed in an anti-capitalist direction. This can be seen from the fact he based his ideas on detailed analysis of current developments in the economy and came to the conclusion that industry would spread across the global (which has happened) and that small industries will continue to exist side by side with large ones (which also has been confirmed). From these facts he argued that a socialist society would aim to decentralise production, combining agriculture with industry and both using modern technology to the fullest. This was possible only after a social revolution which expropriated industry and the land and placed social wealth into the hands of the producers. Until then, the positive trends he saw in modern society would remain circumcised by the workings of the capitalist market and the state.

As we discuss the fallacy that Kropotkin (or anarchists in general) have argued for "*small autonomous communities, devoted to small scale production*" in [section I.3.8](#), we will not do so here. Suffice to say, he did not, as is often asserted, argue for "*small-scale production*" (he still saw the need for factories, for example) but rather for production geared to **appropriate** levels, based on the objective needs of production (without the distorting effects generated by

the needs of capitalist profits and power) and, of necessity, the needs of those who work in and live alongside industry (and today we would add, the needs of the environment). In other words, the transformation of capitalism into a society human beings could live full and meaningful lives in. Part of this would involve creating an industry based on human needs. *"Have the factory and the workshop at the gates of your fields and gardens and work in them,"* he argued. *"Not those large establishments, of course, in which huge masses of metals have to be dealt with and which are better placed at certain spots indicated by Nature, but the countless variety of workshops and factories which are required to satisfy the infinite diversity of tastes among civilised men [and women]."* The new factories and workplaces would be *"airy and hygienic, and consequently economical, . . . in which human life is of more account than machinery and the making of extra profits."* [**Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow**, p. 197] Under capitalism, he argued, the whole discourse of economics (like industrial development itself) was based on the logic and rationale of the profit motive:

*"Under the name of profits, rent and interest upon capital, surplus value, and the like, economists have eagerly discussed the benefits which the owners of land or capital, or some privileged nations, can derive, either from the under-paid work of the wage-labourer, or from the inferior position of one class of the community towards another class, or from the inferior economical development of one nation towards another nation. . . ."*

*"In the meantime the great question - 'What have we to produce, and how?' necessarily remained in the background . . . The main subject of social economy - that is, the **economy of energy required for the satisfaction of human needs** - is consequently the last subject which one expects to find treated in a concrete form in economical treatises."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 17]

Kropotkin's ideas were, therefore, an attempt to discuss how a post-capitalist society could develop, based on an extensive investigation of current trends within capitalism, and reflecting the needs which capitalism ignores. To fetishise big industry, as Leninists tend to do, means locking socialism itself into the logic of capitalism and, by implication, sees a socialist society which will basically be the same as capitalism, using the technology, industrial structure and industry developed under class society without change (see [section H.3.12](#)). Rather than condemn Kropotkin, Stack's comments (and those like them) simply show the poverty of the Leninist critique of capitalism and its vision of the socialist future.

All in all, anyone who claims that anarchism is *"backward looking"* or *"yearns for the past"* simply has no idea what they are talking about.

## H.2.4 Do anarchists think "*the state is the main enemy*"?

Pat Stack argues that *"the idea that dominates anarchist thought"* is *"that the state is the main enemy, rather than identifying the state as one aspect of a class society that has to be destroyed."* [*"Anarchy in the UK?"*, **Socialist Review**, no. 246] Marxist Paul Thomas states that *"Anarchists insist that the basis source of social injustice is the state."* [**Karl Marx and the Anarchists**, p. 2]

On the face of it, such assertions make little sense. After all, was not the first work by the first self-declared anarchist called **What is Property?** and contained the revolutionary maxim "**property is theft**"? Surely this fact alone would be enough to put to rest the notion that anarchists view the state as the main problem in the world? Obviously not. Flying in the face of this well known fact as well as anarchist theory, Marxists have constantly repeated the falsehood that anarchists consider the state as the main enemy. Indeed, Stack and Thomas are simply repeating an earlier assertion by Engels:

*"Bakunin has a peculiar theory of his own, a medley of Proudhonism and communism. The chief point concerning the former is that he does not regard capital, i.e. the class antagonism between capitalists and wage workers which has arisen through social development, but the state as the main enemy to be abolished . . . our view [is] that state power is nothing more than the organisation which the ruling classes - landowners and capitalists - have provided for themselves in order to protect their social privileges, Bakunin maintains that it is the state which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital **only be the grace of the state**. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself. We, on the contrary, say: Do away with capital, the concentration of all means of production in the hands of a few, and the state will fall of itself. The difference is an essential one . . . the abolition of capital is precisely the social revolution."* [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 71]

As will come as no surprise, Engels did not bother to indicate where he discovered Bakunin's ideas on these matters. Similarly, his followers raise this kind of assertion as a truism, apparently without the need for evidence to support the claim. This is hardly surprising as anarchists, including Bakunin, have expressed an idea distinctly at odds with Engels' claims, namely that the social revolution would be marked by the abolition of capitalism and the state at the same time. That this is the case can be seen from John Stuart Mill who, unlike Engels, saw that Bakunin's ideas meant "*not only the annihilation of all government, but getting all property of all kinds out of the hands of the possessors to be used for the general benefit.*" [*"Chapters on Socialism," Principles of Political Economy*, p. 376] If the great liberal thinker could discern this aspect of anarchism, why not Engels?

After all, this vision of a **social** revolution (i.e. one that combined political, social **and** economic goals) occurred continuously throughout Bakunin's writings when he was an anarchist. Indeed, to claim that he, or anarchists in general, just opposed the state suggests a total unfamiliarity with anarchist theory. For Bakunin, like all anarchists, the abolition of the state occurs at the same time as the abolition of capital. This joint abolition **is** precisely the social revolution. As one academic put it:

*"In Bakunin's view, the struggle against the main concentration of power in society, the state, was **no less necessary** than the struggle against capital. Engels, however, puts the matter somewhat differently, arguing that for Bakunin the state was the main enemy, as if Bakunin had not held that capital, too, was an enemy and that its expropriation was a necessary even if not sufficient condition for the social revolution . . . [Engels'] formulation . . . distorts Bakunin's argument, which also held capital to be an evil necessary to abolish"* [Alvin W. Gouldner, "Marx's Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International", pp. 853-884, **Theory and Society**, Vol. 11, No. 6, pp. 863-4]

In 1865, for example, we discover Bakunin arguing that anarchists "seek the destruction of all States" in his *"Program of the Brotherhood."* Yet he also argued that a member of this association "must be socialist" and see that "labour" was the "sole producer of social assets" and so "anyone enjoying these without working is an exploiter of another man's labour, a thief." They must also "understand that there is no liberty in the absence of equality" and so the "attainment of the widest liberty" is possible only "amid the most perfect (*de jure* and *de facto*) political, economic and social equality." The "sole and supreme objective" of the revolution "will be the effective political, economic and social emancipation of the people." This was because political liberty "is not feasible without political equality. And the latter is impossible without economic and social equality." This means that the "land belongs to everyone. But usufruct of it will belong only to those who till it with their own hands." As regards industry, "through the unaided efforts and economic powers of the workers' associations, capital and the instruments of labour will pass into the possession of those who will apply them . . . through their own labours." He opposed sexism, for women are "equal in all political and social rights." Ultimately, "[n]o revolution could succeed . . . unless it was simultaneously a political and a social revolution. Any exclusively political revolution . . . will, insofar as it consequently does not have the immediate, effective, political and economic emancipation of the people as its primary objective, prove to be . . . illusory, phoney." [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, pp. 134-41]

In 1868, Bakunin was arguing the same ideas. The "Association of the International Brethren seeks simultaneously universal, social, philosophical, economic and political revolution, so that the present order of things, rooted in property, exploitation, domination and the authority principle" will be destroyed. The "revolution as we understand it will . . . set about the . . . complete destruction of the State . . . The natural and necessary upshot of that destruction" will include the "[d]issolution of the army, magistracy, bureaucracy, police and clergy" and "[a]ll productive capital and instruments of labour . . . be[ing] confiscated for the benefit of toilers associations, which will have to put them to use in collective production" as well as the "[s]eizure of all Church and State properties." The "federated Alliance of all labour associations . . . will constitute the Commune." The people "must make the revolution everywhere, and . . . ultimate direction of it must at all times be vested in the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations . . . organised from the bottom up." [Op. Cit., pp. 152-6]

As these the words of a person who considered the state as the "chief evil" or "that the state is the main enemy"? Of course not, rather Bakunin clearly identified the state as one aspect of a class society that has to be destroyed. As he put it, the "State, which has never had any task other than to regularise, sanction and . . . protect the rule of the privileged classes and exploitation of the people's labour for the rich, must be abolished. Consequently, this requires that society be organised from the bottom up through the free formation and free federation of worker associations, industrial, agricultural, scientific and artisan alike, . . . founded upon collective ownership of the land, capital, raw materials and the instruments of labour, which is to say, all large-scale property . . . leaving to private and hereditary possession only those items that are actually for personal use." [Op. Cit., p. 182] Clearly, as Wayne Thorpe notes, for Bakunin "[o]nly the simultaneous destruction of the state and of the capitalist system, accompanied by the organisation from below of a federalist system of administration based upon labour's economic associations . . . could achieve true liberty." ["The Workers Themselves", p. 6]

Rather than seeing the state as the main evil to be abolished, Bakunin always stressed that a revolution must be economic **and** political in nature, that it must ensure political, economic and social liberty and equality. As such, he argued for **both** the destruction of the state and the expropriation of capital (both acts conducted, incidentally, by a federation of workers' associations or workers' councils). While the apparatus of the state was being destroyed ("Dissolution of the army, magistracy, bureaucracy, police and clergy"), capitalism was also being uprooted and destroyed ("All productive capital and instruments of labour . . . confiscated for the benefit of toilers associations"). To assert, as Engels did, that Bakunin ignored the necessity of abolishing capitalism and the other evils of the current system while focusing exclusively on the state, is simply distorting his ideas. As Mark Leier summarises in his excellent biography of Bakunin, Engels "was just flat-out wrong . . . What Bakunin did argue was that the social revolution had to be launched against the state and capitalism simultaneously, for the two reinforced each other." [Bakunin: The Creative Passion, p. 274]

Kropotkin, unsurprisingly, argued along identical lines as Bakunin. He stressed that "*the revolution will burn on until it has accomplished its mission: the abolition of property-owning and of the State.*" This revolution, he re-iterated, would be a "*mass rising up against property and the State.*" Indeed, Kropotkin always stressed that "*there is one point to which all socialists adhere: the expropriation of capital must result from the coming revolution.*" This mean that "*the area of struggle against capital, and against the sustainer of capital - government*" could be one in which "*various groups can act in agreement*" and so "*any struggle that prepares for that expropriation should be sustained in unanimity by all the socialist groups, to whatever shading they belong.*" [Words of a Rebel, p. 75 and p. 204] Little wonder Kropotkin wrote his famous article "*Expropriation*" on this subject! As he put it:

*"Expropriation - that is the guiding word of the coming revolution, without which it will fail in its historic mission: the complete expropriation of all those who have the means of exploiting human beings; the return to the community of the nation of everything that in the hands of anyone can be used to exploit others."* [Op. Cit., pp. 207-8]

This was because he was well aware of the oppressive nature of capitalism: "*For the worker who must sell his labour, it is impossible to remain free, and it is precisely because it is impossible that we are anarchists and communists.*" [Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution, p. 305] For Kropotkin, "*the task we impose ourselves*" is to acquire "*sufficient influence to induce the workmen to avail themselves of the first opportunity of taking possession of land and the mines, of railways and factories,*" to bring working class people "*to the conviction that they must rely on themselves to get rid of the oppression of Capital.*" [Act for Yourselves, p. 32] Strange words if Marxist assertions were true. As can be seen, Kropotkin is simply following Bakunin's ideas on the matter. He, like Bakunin, was well aware of the evils of capitalism and that the state protects these evils.

Unsurprisingly, he called anarchism "*the no-government system of socialism.*" [Anarchism, p. 46] For Kropotkin, the "*State is there to protect exploitation, speculation and private property; it is itself the by-product of the rapine of the people. The proletariat must rely on his own hands; he can expect nothing of the State. It is nothing more than an organisation devised to hinder emancipation at all costs.*" [Words of a Rebel, p. 27] Rather than see the

state as the main evil, he clearly saw it as the protector of capitalism - in other words, as one aspect of a class system which needed to be replaced by a better society:

*"The very words Anarchist-Communism show in what direction society, in our opinion, is already going, and one what lines it can get rid of the oppressive powers of Capital and Government . . . The first conviction to acquire is that nothing short of expropriation on a vast scale, carried out by the workmen themselves, can be the first step towards a reorganisation of our production on Socialist principles."* [Kropotkin, **Act for Yourselves**, pp. 32-3]

Similarly with all other anarchists. Emma Goldman, for example, summarised for all anarchists when she argued that anarchism "really stands for" the "*liberation of the human body from the domination of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government.*" Goldman was well aware that wealth "*means power; the power to subdue, to crush, to exploit, the power to enslave, to outrage, to degrade.*" She considered property "*not only a hindrance to human well-being, but an obstacle, a deadly barrier, to all progress.*" A key problem of modern society was that "*man must sell his labour*" and so "*his inclination and judgement are subordinated to the will of a master.*" Anarchism, she stressed, was the "*the only philosophy that can and will do away with this humiliating and degrading situation . . . There can be no freedom in the large sense of the word . . . so long as mercenary and commercial considerations play an important part in the determination of personal conduct.*" The state, ironically for Stack's claim, was "*necessary only to maintain or protect property and monopoly.*" [**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 73, p. 66, p. 50 and p. 51]

Errico Malatesta, likewise, stressed that, for "*all anarchists,*" it was definitely a case that the "*abolition of political power is not possible without the simultaneous destruction of economic privilege.*" The "*Anarchist Programme*" he drafted listed "*Abolition of private property*" before "*Abolition of government*" and argued that "*the present state of society*" was one in "*which some have inherited the land and all social wealth, while the mass of the people, disinherited in all respects, is exploited and oppressed by a small possessing class.*" It ends by arguing that anarchism wants "*the complete destruction of the domination and exploitation of man by man*" and for "*expropriation of landowners and capitalists for the benefit of all; and the abolition of government.*" [**Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas**, p. 158, p. 184, p. 183, p. 197 and p. 198] Nearly three decades previously, we find Malatesta arguing the same idea. As he put it in 1891, anarchists "*struggle for anarchy, and for socialism, because we believe that anarchy and socialism must be realised immediately, that is to say that in the revolutionary act we must drive government away, abolish property . . . human progress is measured by the extent government power and private property are reduced.*" [**Anarchy**, p. 54]

Little wonder Bertrand Russell stated that anarchism "*is associated with belief in the communal ownership of land and capital*" because, like Marxism, it has the "*perception that private capital is a source of tyranny by certain individuals over others.*" [**Roads to Freedom**, p. 40] Russell was, of course, simply pointing out the obvious. As Brian Morris correctly summarises:

*"Another criticism of anarchism is that it has a narrow view of politics: that it sees the state as the fount of all evil, ignoring other aspects of social and economic life. This is a misrepresentation of anarchism. It partly derives from the way anarchism has been defined, and partly because Marxist historians have tried to exclude*

*anarchism from the broader socialist movement. But when one examines the writings of classical anarchists. . . as well as the character of anarchist movements. . . it is clearly evident that it has never had this limited vision. It has always challenged all forms of authority and exploitation, and has been equally critical of capitalism and religion as it has been of the state." ["Anthropology and Anarchism," pp. 35-41, **Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed**, no. 45, p. p. 40]*

All in all, Marxist claims that anarchists view the state as the "*chief evil*" or see the destruction of the state as the "*main idea*" of anarchism are simply talking nonsense. In fact, rather than anarchists having a narrow view of social liberation, it is, in fact, Marxists who do so. By concentrating almost exclusively on the (economic) class source of exploitation, they blind themselves to other forms of exploitation and domination that can exist independently of (economic) class relationships. This can be seen from the amazing difficulty that many of them got themselves into when trying to analyse the Stalinist regime in Russia. Anarchists are well aware that the state is just one aspect of the current class system but unlike Marxists we recognise that "*class rule must be placed in the much larger context of hierarchy and domination as a whole.*" [Murray Bookchin, **The Ecology of Freedom**, p. 28] This has been the anarchist position from the nineteenth century onwards and one which is hard not to recognise if you are at all familiar with the anarchist movement and its theory. As one historian notes, we have never been purely anti-state, but also anti-capitalist and opposed to all forms of oppression:

*"Anarchism rejected capitalism . . . not only because it viewed it as inimical to social equality, but also because it saw it as a form of domination detrimental to individual freedom. Its basic tenet regarded hierarchical authority - be it the state, the church, the economic elite, or patriarchy - as unnecessary and deleterious to the maximisation of human potential." [Jose Moya, **Italians in Buenos Aires's Anarchist Movement**, p. 197]*

So we oppose the state because it is just one aspect of a class ridden and hierarchical system. We just recognise that all the evils of that system must be destroyed at the same time to ensure a **social** revolution rather than just a change in who the boss is.

## **H.2.5 Do anarchists think '*full blown*' socialism will be created overnight?**

Another area in which Marxists misrepresent anarchism is in the assertion that anarchists believe a completely socialist society (an ideal or "*utopian*" society, in other words) can be created "*overnight*." As Marxist Bertell Ollman puts it, "[u]nlike anarcho-communists, none of us [Marxists] believe that communism will emerge full blown from a socialist revolution. Some kind of transition and period of indeterminate length for it to occur are required." [Bertell Ollman (ed.), **Market Socialism: The Debate among Socialists**, p. 177] This assertion, while it is common, fails to understand the anarchist vision of revolution. We consider it a **process** and not an event: "*By revolution we do not mean just the insurrectionary act.*" [Malatesta, **Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas**, p. 156]

Once this is understood, the idea that anarchists think a "*full blown*" anarchist society will be created "*overnight*" is a fallacy. As Murray Bookchin pointed out, "*Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta were not so naive as to believe that anarchism could be established overnight. In*

*imputing this notion to Bakunin, Marx and Engels wilfully distorted the Russian anarchist's views.*" [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 137] Indeed, Kropotkin stressed that anarchists "do not believe that in any country the Revolution will be accomplished at a stroke, in the twinkling of a eye, as some socialists dream." Moreover, "[n]o fallacy more harmful has ever been spread than the fallacy of a 'One-day Revolution.'" [The Conquest of Bread, p. 81] Bakunin argued that a "more or less prolonged transitional period" would "naturally follow in the wake of the great social crisis" implied by social revolution. [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 412] The question, therefore, is not whether there will be a "transitional" society after a revolution but what kind of transition will it be.

So anarchists are aware that a "*full blown*" communist society will not come about immediately. Rather, the creation of such a society will be a **process** which the revolution will start off. As Alexander Berkman put it in his classic introduction to communist-anarchist ideas "*you must not confuse the social revolution with anarchy. Revolution, in some of its stages, is a violent upheaval; anarchy is a social condition of freedom and peace. The revolution is the means of bringing anarchy about but it is not anarchy itself. It is to pave the road for anarchy, to establish conditions which will make a life of liberty possible.*" However, the "*end shapes the means*" and so "*to achieve its purpose the revolution must be imbued with and directed by the anarchist spirit and ideas . . . the social revolution must be anarchist in method as in aim.*" [What is Anarchism?, p. 231]

Berkman also acknowledged that "*full blown*" communism was not likely after a successful revolution. "*Of course,*" he argued, "*when the social revolution has become thoroughly organised and production is functioning normally there will be enough for everybody. But in the first stages of the revolution, during the process of re-construction, we must take care to supply the people as best we can, and equally, which means rationing.*" Clearly, in such circumstances "*full blown*" communism would be impossible and, unsurprisingly, Berkman argued that would not exist. However, the principles that inspire communism and anarchism could be applied immediately. This meant that both the state and capitalism would be abolished. While arguing that "*[t]here is no other way of securing economic equality, which alone is liberty*" than communist anarchism, he also stated that it is "*likely . . . that a country in social revolution may try various economic experiments . . . different countries and regions will probably try out various methods, and by practical experience learn the best way. The revolution is at the same time the opportunity and justification for it.*" Rather than "*dictate to the future, to prescribe its mode of conduct*", Berkman argued that his "*purpose is to suggest, in broad outline the principles which must animate the revolution, the general lines of action it should follow if it is to accomplish its aim - the reconstruction of society on a foundation of freedom and equality.*" [Op. Cit., p. 215 and p. 230]

Malatesta argued along similar lines. While urging the "*complete destruction of the domination and exploitation of man by man*" by the "*expropriation of landlords and capitalists for the benefit of all*" and "*the abolition of government*," he recognised that in "*the post-revolutionary period, in the period of reorganisation and transition, there might be 'offices for the concentration and distribution of the capital of collective enterprises', that there might or might not be titles recording the work done and the quantity of goods to which one is entitled.*" However, he stressed that this "*is something we shall have to wait and see about, or rather, it is a problem which will have many and varied solutions according to the system of production and distribution which will prevail in the different localities and among the many . . . groupings that will exist.*" He argued that while, eventually, all groups of workers (particularly the peasants) will "*understand the advantages of communism or at least*

*of the direct exchange of goods for goods," this may not happen "in a day." If some kind of money was used, then people should "ensure that [it] truly represents the useful work performed by its possessors" rather than being that "powerful means of exploitation and oppression" is currently is.* [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, pp. 198-9 and pp. 100-1] Emma Goldman, also, saw "*a society based on voluntary co-operation of productive groups, communities and societies loosely federated together, eventually developing into a free communism, actuated by a solidarity of interests.*" [Red Emma Speaks, p. 50]

So rather than seeing a "*full blown*" communist society appearing instantly from a revolution, anarcho-communists see a period of transition in which the degree of communism in a given community or area is dependent on the objective conditions facing it. This period of transition would see different forms of social experimentation but the desire is to see libertarian communist principles as the basis of as much of this experimentation as possible. To claim that anarcho-communists ignore reality and see communism as being created overnight is simply a distortion of their ideas. Rather, they are aware that the development towards communism is dependent on local conditions, conditions which can only be overcome in time and by the liberated community re-organising production and extending it as required. Thus we find Malatesta arguing 1884 that communism could be brought about immediately only in a very limited number of areas and, "*for the rest,*" collectivism would have to be accepted "*for a transitional period.*" This was because, "*[f]or communism to be possible, a high stage of moral development is required of the members of society, a sense of solidarity both elevated and profound, which the upsurge of the revolution may not suffice to induce. This doubt is the more justified in that material conditions favourable to this development will not exist at the beginning.*" [quoted by Daniel Guerin, Anarchism, p. 51]

Clearly, our argument contradicts the widely held view that anarchists believed an utopian world would be created instantly after a revolution. Of course, by asserting that anarchists think "*full blown communism*" will occur without some form of transitional period, Marxists paint a picture of anarchism as simply utopian, a theory which ignores objective reality in favour of wishful thinking. However, as seen above, such is not the case. Anarchists are aware that "*full blown communism*" is dependent on objective conditions and, therefore, cannot be implemented until those conditions are meet. Until such time as the objective conditions are reached, various means of distributing goods, organising and managing production, and so on will be tried. Such schemes will be based as far as possible on communistic principles.

Such a period of transition would be based on libertarian and communist principles. The organisation of society would be anarchist - the state would be abolished and replaced by a free federation of workers and community associations. The economic structure would be socialist - production would be based on self-managed workplaces and the principles of distribution would be as communistic as possible under the given objective conditions.

It also seems strange for Marxists to claim that anarchists thought a "*full blown*" communist society was possible "*overnight*" given that anarchists had always noted the difficulties facing a social revolution. Kropotkin, for example, continually stressed that a revolution would face extensive economic disruption. In his words:

*"A political revolution can be accomplished without shaking the foundations of industry, but a revolution where the people lay hands upon property will inevitably paralyse exchange and production . . . This point cannot be too much insisted upon;*

*the reorganisation of industry on a new basis . . . cannot be accomplished in a few days; nor, on the other hand, will people submit to be half starved for years in order to oblige the theorists who uphold the wage system. To tide over the period of stress they will demand what they have always demanded in such cases - communisation of supplies - the giving of rations." [The Conquest of Bread, pp. 72-3]*

The basic principles of this "transition" period would, therefore, be based on the "*socialising of production, consumption and exchange.*" The state would be abolished and "*federated Communes*" would be created. The end of capitalism would be achieved by the "*expropriation*" of "*everything that enables any man - be he financier, mill-owner, or landlord - - to appropriate the product of others' toil.*" Distribution of goods would be based on "*no stint or limit to what the community possesses in abundance, but equal sharing and dividing of those commodities which are scarce or apt to run short.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 136, p. 61 and p. 76] Clearly, while not "*full blown*" communism by any means, such a regime does lay the ground for its eventual arrival. As Max Nettlau summarised, "*[n]othing but a superficial interpretation of some of Kropotkin's observations could lead one to conclude that anarchist communism could spring into life through an act of sweeping improvisation, with the waving of a magic wand.*" [**A Short History of Anarchism**, p. 80]

This was what happened in the Spanish Revolution, for example. Different collectives operated in different ways. Some tried to introduce free communism, some a combination of rationing and communism, others introduced equal pay, others equalised pay as much as possible and so on. Over time, as economic conditions changed and difficulties developed the collectives changed their mode of distribution to take them into account. These collectives indicate well the practical aspects of anarchist and its desire to accommodate and not ignore reality.

Lastly, and as an aside, it this anarchist awareness of the disruptive effects of a revolution on a country's economy which, in part, makes anarchists extremely sceptical of pro-Bolshevik rationales that blame the difficult economic conditions facing the Russian Revolution for Bolshevik authoritarianism (see [section H.6.1](#) for a fuller discussion of this). If, as Kropotkin argued, a social revolution inevitably results in massive economic disruption then, clearly, Bolshevism should be avoided if it cannot handle such inevitable events. In such circumstances, centralisation would only aid the disruption, not reduce it. This awareness of the problems facing a social revolution also led anarchists to stress the importance of local action and mass participation. As Kropotkin put it, the "*immense constructive work demanded by a social revolution cannot be accomplished by a central government . . . It has need of knowledge, of brains and of the voluntary collaboration of a host of local and specialised forces which alone can attack the diversity of economic problems in their local aspects.*" [**Anarchism**, pp. 255-6] Without this local action, co-ordinated joint activity would remain a dead letter.

In summary, anarchists acknowledge that **politically** there is no transitional period (i.e. the state must be abolished and replaced by a free federation of self-managed working class organisations). Economically anarchists recognise that different areas will develop in different ways and so there will be various economical transitional forms. Rather than seeing "*full blown communism*" being the instant result of a socialist revolution, anarchist-communists actually argue the opposite - "*full blown communism*" will develop only after a successful revolution and the inevitable period of social reconstruction which comes after it. A "*full blown*" communist economy will develop as society becomes ready for it. What we

**do** argue is that any transitional economic form must be based on the principles of the type of society it desires. In other words, any transitional period must be as communistic as possible if communism is your final aim and, equally, it must be libertarian if your final goal is freedom.

Also see [section I.2.2](#) for further discussion on this issue.

## H.2.6 How do Marxists misrepresent Anarchist ideas on mutual aid?

Anarchist ideas on mutual aid are often misrepresented by Marxists. Looking at Pat Stack's "Anarchy in the UK?" article, for example, we find a particularly terrible misrepresentation of Kropotkin's ideas. Indeed, it is so incorrect that it is either a product of ignorance or a desire to deceive (and as we shall indicate, it is probably the latter). Here is Stack's account of Kropotkin's ideas:

*"And the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, far from seeing class conflict as the dynamic for social change as Marx did, saw co-operation being at the root of the social process. He believed the co-operation of what he termed 'mutual aid' was the natural order, which was disrupted by centralised states. Indeed in everything from public walkways and libraries through to the Red Cross, Kropotkin felt he was witnessing confirmation that society was moving towards his mutual aid, prevented only from completing the journey by the state. It follows that if class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means." [ "Anarchy in the UK?", Socialist Review, no. 246]*

There are three issues with Stack's summary. Firstly, Kropotkin did not, in fact, reject class conflict as the "*dynamic of social change*" nor reject the working class as its "*agent*." Secondly, all of Stack's examples of "*Mutual Aid*" do not, in fact, appear in Kropotkin's classic book **Mutual Aid**. They do appear in other works by Kropotkin but **not** as examples of "*mutual aid*." Thirdly, in **Mutual Aid** Kropotkin discusses such aspects of working class "*collective struggle*" as strikes and unions. All in all, it is Stack's total and utter lack of understanding of Kropotkin's ideas which immediately stands out from his comments.

As we have discussed how collective, working class direct action, organisation and solidarity in the class struggle were at the core of Kropotkin's politics in [section H.2.2](#), we will not do so here. Rather, we will discuss how Stack lies about Kropotkin's ideas on mutual aid. As just noted, the examples Stack lists are not to be found in Kropotkin's classic work **Mutual Aid**. Now, if Kropotkin **had** considered them as examples of "*mutual aid*" then he would have listed them in that work. This does not mean, however, that Kropotkin did not mention these examples. He does, but in other works (notably his essay **Anarchist-Communism: Its Basis and Principles**) and he does **not** use them as examples of mutual aid. Here are Kropotkin's own words on these examples:

*"We maintain, moreover, not only that communism is a desirable state of society, but that the growing tendency of modern society is precisely towards communism - free communism - notwithstanding the seemingly contradictory growth of individualism. In the growth of individualism . . . we see merely the endeavours of the individual towards emancipating himself from the steadily growing powers of capital and the*

*State. But side by side with this growth we see also . . . the latent struggle of the producers of wealth to maintain the partial communism of old, as well as to reintroduce communist principles in a new shape, as soon as favourable conditions permit it. . . the communist tendency is continually reasserting itself and trying to make its way into public life. The penny bridge disappears before the public bridge; and the turnpike road before the free road. The same spirit pervades thousands of other institutions. Museums, free libraries, and free public schools; parks and pleasure grounds; paved and lighted streets, free for everybody's use; water supplied to private dwellings, with a growing tendency towards disregarding the exact amount of it used by the individual; tramways and railways which have already begun to introduce the season ticket or the uniform tax, and will surely go much further in this line when they are no longer private property: all these are tokens showing in what direction further progress is to be expected.*

*"It is in the direction of putting the wants of the individual **above** the valuation of the service he has rendered, or might render, to society; in considering society as a whole, so intimately connected together that a service rendered to any individual is a service rendered to the whole society."* [Anarchism, pp. 59-60]

As is clear, the examples Stack selects have nothing to do with mutual aid in Kropotkin's eyes. Rather, they are examples of communistic tendencies within capitalism, empirical evidence that can be used to not only show that communism can work but also that it is not a utopian social solution but an expression of tendencies within society. Simply put, he is using examples from existing society to show that communism is not impossible.

Similarly with Stack's other examples, which are **not** used as expressions of "*mutual aid*" but rather as evidence that social life can be organised without government. [Op. Cit., pp. 65-7] Just as with communism, he gave concrete examples of libertarian tendencies within society to prove the possibility of an anarchist society. And just like his examples of communistic activities within capitalism, his examples of co-operation without the state are not listed as examples of "*mutual aid*."

All this would suggest that Stack has either not read Kropotkin's works or that he has and consciously decided to misrepresent his ideas. In fact, its a combination of the two. Stack (as proven by his talk at Marxism 2001) gathered his examples of "*mutual aid*" from Paul Avrich's essay "*Kropotkin's Ethical Anarchism*" contained in his **Anarchist Portraits**. As such, he has not read the source material. Moreover, he simply distorted what Avrich wrote. In other words, not only has he not read Kropotkin's works, he consciously decided to misrepresent the secondary source he used. This indicates the quality of almost all Marxist critiques of anarchism.

For example, Avrich correctly noted that Kropotkin did not "*deny that the 'struggle for existence' played an important role in the evolution of species. In Mutual Aid he declares unequivocally that 'life is struggle; and in that struggle the fittest survive.'*" Kropotkin simply argued that co-operation played a key role in determining who was, in fact, the fittest. Similarly, Avrich listed many of the same examples Stack presents but not in his discussion of Kropotkin's ideas on mutual aid. Rather, he correctly did so in his discussion of how Kropotkin saw examples of anarchist communism "*manifesting itself 'in the thousands of developments of modern life.'*" This did not mean that Kropotkin did not see the need for a social revolution, quite the reverse. As Avrich noted, Kropotkin "*did not shrink from the*

*necessity of revolution*" as he "did not expect the propertied classes to give up their privileges and possession without a fight." This "was to be a **social** revolution, carried out by the masses themselves" achieved by means of "*expropriation*" of social wealth. [**Anarchist Portraits**, p. 58, p. 62 and p. 66]

So much for Stack's claims. As can be seen, they are not only a total misrepresentation of Kropotkin's work, they are also a distortion of his source!

A few more points need to be raised on this subject.

Firstly, Kropotkin never claimed that mutual aid "*was the natural order*." Rather, he stressed that Mutual Aid was (to use the subtitle of his book on the subject) "*a factor of evolution*." As he put it, mutual aid "*represents one of the factors of evolution*", another being "*the self-assertion of the individual, not only to attain personal or caste superiority, economical, political, and spiritual, but also in its much more important although less evident function of breaking through the bonds, always prone to become crystallised, which the tribe, the village community, the city, and the State impose upon the individual*." Thus Kropotkin recognised that there is class struggle within society as well as "*the self-assertion of the individual taken as a progressive element*" (i.e., struggle against forms of social association which now hinder individual freedom and development). Kropotkin did not deny the role of struggle, in fact the opposite as he stressed that the book's examples concentrated on mutual aid simply because mutual struggle (between individuals of the same species) had "*already been analysed, described, and glorified from time immemorial*" and, as such, he felt no need to illustrate it. He did note that it "*was necessary to show, first of all, the immense part which this factor plays in the evolution of both the animal world and human societies. Only after this has been fully recognised will it be possible to proceed to a comparison between the two factors.*" [**Mutual Aid**, p. 231 and pp. 231-2] So at no stage did Kropotkin deny either factor (unlike the bourgeois apologists he was refuting).

Secondly, Stack's argument that Kropotkin argued that co-operation was the natural order is in contradiction with his other claims that anarchism "*despises the collectivity*" and "*dismiss[es] the importance of the collective nature of change*" (see [section H.2.2](#)). How can you have co-operation without forming a collective? And, equally, surely support for co-operation clearly implies the recognition of the "*collective nature of change*"? Moreover, had Stack bothered to **read** Kropotkin's classic he would have been aware that both unions and strikes are listed as expressions of "*mutual aid*" (a fact, of course, which would undermine Stack's silly assertion that anarchists reject collective working class struggle and organisation). Thus we find Kropotkin stating that "*Unionism*" expressed the "*worker's need of mutual support*" as well as discussing how the state "*legislated against the workers' unions*" and that these were "*the conditions under which the mutual-aid tendency had to make its way*." "*To practise mutual support under such circumstances was anything but an easy task.*" This repression failed, as "*the workers' unions were continually reconstituted*" and spread, forming "*vigorous federal organisations . . . to support the branches during strikes and prosecutions*." In spite of the difficulties in organising unions and fighting strikes, he noted that "*every year there are thousands of strikes . . . the most severe and protracted contests being, as a rule, the so-called 'sympathy strikes,' which are entered upon to support locked-out comrades or to maintain the rights of the unions.*" Anyone (like Kropotkin) who had "*lived among strikers speak with admiration of the mutual aid and support which are constantly practised by them.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 210-3]

Kropotkin, as noted, recognised the importance of struggle or competition as a means of survival but also argued that co-operation within a species was the best means for it to survive in a hostile environment. This applied to life under capitalism. In the hostile environment of class society, then the only way in which working class people could survive would be to practice mutual aid (in other words, solidarity). Little wonder, then, that Kropotkin listed strikes and unions as expressions of mutual aid in capitalist society. Moreover, if we take Stack's arguments at face value, then he clearly is arguing that solidarity is not an important factor in the class struggle and that mutual aid and co-operation cannot change the world! Hardly what you would expect a socialist to argue. In other words, his inaccurate diatribe against Kropotkin backfires on his own ideas.

Thirdly, **Mutual Aid** is primarily a work of popular science and not a work on revolutionary anarchist theory like, say, **The Conquest of Bread** or **Words of a Rebel**. As such, it does not present a full example of Kropotkin's revolutionary ideas and how mutual aid fits into them. However, it does present some insights on the question of social progress which indicate that he did not think that "*co-operation*" was "*at the root of the social process*," as Stack claims. For example, Kropotkin noted that "*[w]hen Mutual Aid institutions . . . began . . . to lose their primitive character, to be invaded by parasitic growths, and thus to become hindrances to progress, the revolt of individuals against these institutions took always two different aspects. Part of those who rose up strove to purify the old institutions, or to work out a higher form of commonwealth.*" But at the same time, others "*endeavoured to break down the protective institutions of mutual support, with no other intention but to increase their own wealth and their own powers.*" In this conflict "*lies the real tragedy of history.*" He also noted that the mutual aid tendency "*continued to live in the villages and among the poorer classes in the towns.*" Indeed, "*in so far as*" as new "*economical and social institutions*" were "*a creation of the masses*" they "*have all originated from the same source*" of mutual aid. [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 18-9 and p. 180] Clearly, Kropotkin saw history marked by both co-operation and conflict as you would expect in a society divided by class and hierarchy.

Significantly, Kropotkin considered **Mutual Aid** as an attempt to write history from below, from the perspective of the oppressed. As he put it, history, "*such as it has hitherto been written, is almost entirely a description of the ways and means by which theocracy, military power, autocracy, and, later on, the richer classes' rule have been promoted, established, and maintained.*" The "*mutual aid factor has been hitherto totally lost sight of; it was simply denied, or even scoffed at.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 231] He was well aware that mutual aid (or solidarity) could not be applied between classes in a class society. Indeed, as noted, his chapters on mutual aid under capitalism contain the strike and union. As he put it in an earlier work:

*"What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits? Between the head of an army and the soldier? Between the governing and the governed?"*  
[**Words of a Rebel**, p. 30]

In summary, Stack's assertions about Kropotkin's theory of "*Mutual Aid*" are simply false. He simply distorts the source material and shows a total ignorance of Kropotkin's work (which he obviously has not bothered to read before criticising it). A truthful account of "*Mutual Aid*" would involve recognising that Kropotkin showed it being expressed in both strikes and labour unions and that he saw solidarity between working people as the means of not only surviving within the hostile environment of capitalism but also as the basis of a mass revolution which would end it.

## H.2.7 Who do anarchists see as their "*agents of social change*"?

It is often charged, usually without any evidence, that anarchists do not see the working class as the "*agent*" of the social revolution. Pat Stack, for example, states "*the failure of anarchism [is] to understand the centrality of the working class itself.*" He argues that for Marx, "*the working class would change the world and in the process change itself. It would become the agent for social advance and human liberty.*" For Bakunin, however, "*skilled artisans and organised factory workers, far from being the source of the destruction of capitalism, were 'tainted by pretensions and aspirations'. Instead Bakunin looked to those cast aside by capitalism, those most damaged, brutalised and marginalised. The lumpen proletariat, the outlaws, the 'uncivilised, disinherited, illiterate', as he put it, would be his agents for change.*" [*"Anarchy in the UK?", Socialist Review*, no. 246] He fails to provide any references for his accusations. This is unsurprising, as to do so would mean that the reader could check for themselves the validity of Stack's claims.

Take, for example, the quote "*uncivilised, disinherited, illiterate*" Stack uses as evidence. This expression is from an essay written by Bakunin in 1872 and which expressed what he considered the differences between his ideas and those of Marx. The quote can be found on page 294 of **Bakunin on Anarchism**. On the previous page, we discover Bakunin arguing that "*for the International to be a real power, it must be able to organise within its ranks the immense majority of the proletariat of Europe, of America, of all lands.*" [p. 293] Clearly Stack is quoting out of context, distorting Bakunin's position to present a radically false image of anarchism. Moreover, as we will indicate, Stack's also quotes them outside the historical context as well.

Let us begin with Bakunin's views on "*skilled artisans and organised factory workers.*" In **Statism and Anarchy**, for example, we discover Bakunin arguing that the "*proletariat . . . must enter the International [Workers' Association] en masse, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations*" for "*the sake of its own liberation.*" [p. 51] This perspective is the predominant one in Bakunin's ideas with the Russian continually arguing that anarchists saw "*the new social order*" being "*attained . . . through the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages.*" He argued that "*only the trade union sections can give their members . . . practical education and consequently only they can draw into the organisation of the International the masses of the proletariat, those masses without whose practical co-operation . . . the Social Revolution will never be able to triumph.*" The International, in Bakunin's words, "*organises the working masses . . . from the bottom up*" and that this was "*the proper aim of the organisation of trade union sections.*" He stressed that revolutionaries must "*[o]rganise the city proletariat in the name of revolutionary Socialism . . . [and] unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasantry.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 300, p. 310, p. 319 and p. 378]

This support for organised workers and artisans can also be seen from the rest of the essay. Stack distorts, in which Bakunin discusses the "*flower of the proletariat*" as well as the policy that the **International Workingmen's Association** should follow (i.e. the organised revolutionary workers). He argued that its "*sections and federations [must be] free to develop its own policies . . . [to] attain real unity, basically economic, which will necessarily lead to real political unity . . . The foundation for the unity of the International . . . has already been*

*laid by the common sufferings, interests, needs, and real aspirations of the workers of the whole world.*" He stressed that "*the International has been . . . the work of the proletariat itself . . . It was their keen and profound instinct as workers . . . which impelled them to find the principle and true purpose of the International. They took the common needs already in existence as the foundation and saw the international organisation of economic conflict against capitalism as the true objective of this association. In giving it exclusively this base and aim, the workers at once established the entire power of the International. They opened wide the gates to all the millions of the oppressed and exploited.*" The International, as well as "organising local, national and international strikes" and "establishing national and international trade unions," would discuss "political and philosophical questions." The workers "*join the International for one very practical purpose: solidarity in the struggle for full economic rights against the oppressive exploitation by the bourgeoisie.*" [Bakunin on Anarchism, pp. 297-8, pp. 298-9 and pp. 301-2]

All this, needless to say, makes a total mockery of Stack's claim that Bakunin did not see "*skilled artisans and organised factory workers*" as "*the source of the destruction of capitalism*" and "*agents for change*." Indeed, it is hard to find a greater distortion of Bakunin's ideas. Rather than dismiss "*skilled artisans*" and "*organised factory workers*" Bakunin desired to organise them along with agricultural workers into unions and get these unions to affiliate to the **International Workers' Association**. He argued again and again that the working class, organised in union, were the means of making a revolution (i.e. "*the source of the destruction of capitalism*," to use Stack's words).

Only in **this** context can we understand Bakunin's comments which Stack (selectively) quotes. Any apparent contradiction generated by Stack's quoting out of context is quickly solved by looking at Bakunin's work. This reference to the "*uncivilised, disinherited, illiterate*" comes from a polemic against Marx. From the context, it can quickly be seen that by these terms Bakunin meant the bulk of the working class. In his words:

*"To me the flower of the proletariat is not, as it is to the Marxists, the upper layer, the aristocracy of labour, those who are the most cultured, who earn more and live more comfortably than all the other workers. Precisely this semi-bourgeois layer of workers would, if the Marxists had their way, constitute their fourth governing class. This could indeed happen if the great mass of the proletariat does not guard against it. By virtue of its relative well-being and semi-bourgeois position, this upper layer of workers is unfortunately only too deeply saturated with all the political and social prejudices and all the narrow aspirations and pretensions of the bourgeoisie. Of all the proletariat, this upper layer is the least socialist, the most individualist.*

*"By the flower of the proletariat, I mean above all that great mass, those millions of the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates . . . I mean precisely that eternal 'meat' (on which governments thrive), that great rabble of the people (underdogs, 'dregs of society') ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels by the phrase . . . Lumpenproletariat" [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 294]*

Thus Bakunin contrasted a "*semi-bourgeois*" layer to the "*great mass of the proletariat*." In a later work, Bakunin makes the same point, namely that there was "*a special category of relatively affluent workers, earning higher wages, boasting of their literary capacities and . . . impregnated by a variety of bourgeois prejudices . . . in Italy . . . they are insignificant in number and influence . . . In Italy it is the extremely poor proletariat that predominates.* Marx

*speaks disdainfully, but quite unjustly, of this Lumpenproletariat. For in them, and only in them, and not in the bourgeois strata of workers, are there crystallised the entire intelligence and power of the coming Social Revolution.*" [Op. Cit., p. 334] Again it is clear that Bakunin is referring to a small minority within the working class and **not** dismissing the working class as a whole. He explicitly pointed to the "**bourgeois-influenced** minority of the urban proletariat" and contrasted this minority to "*the mass of the proletariat, both rural and urban.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 254]

Clearly, Stack is distorting Bakunin's ideas on this subject when he claims that Bakunin thought **all** workers were "*tainted by pretensions and aspirations.*" In fact, like Marx, Engels and Lenin, Bakunin differentiated between different types of workers. This did not mean he rejected organised workers or skilled artisans nor the organisation of working people into revolutionary unions, quite the reverse. As can be seen, Bakunin argued there was a group of workers who accepted bourgeois society and did relatively well under it. It was **these** workers who were '*frequently no less egoistic than bourgeois exploiters, no less pernicious to the International than bourgeois socialists, and no less vain and ridiculous than bourgeois nobles.*' [The Basic Bakunin, p. 108] It is comments like this that Marxists quote out of context and use for their claims that Bakunin did not see the working class as the agent of social change. However, rather than refer to the whole working class, Stack quotes Bakunin's thoughts in relation to a minority strata within it. Clearly, from the context, Bakunin **did not** mean **all** working class people.

Also, let us not forget the historical context. After all, when Bakunin was writing the vast majority of the working population across the world was, in fact, illiterate and disinherited. To get some sort of idea of the numbers of working people who would have been classed as "*the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates*" we have to provide some numbers. In Spain, for example, "*in 1870, something like 60 per cent of the population was illiterate.*" [Gerald Brenan, The Spanish Labyrinth, p. 50] In Russia, in 1897 (i.e. 21 years after Bakunin's death), "*only 21% of the total population of European Russia was literate. This was mainly because of the appallingly low rate of literacy in the countryside - 17% compared to 45% in the towns.*" [S.A. Smith, Red Petrograd, p. 34] Stack, in effect, is excluding the majority of the working masses from the working class movement **and** the revolution in the 1860-70s by his comments. Little wonder Bakunin said what he said. By ignoring the historical context (as he ignores the context of Bakunin's comments), Stack misleads the reader and presents a distinctly distorted picture of Bakunin's thought.

In other words, Bakunin's comments on the "*flower of the proletariat*" apply to the majority of the working class during his lifetime and for a number of decades afterwards and **not** to an underclass, not to what Marx termed the "lumpenproletariat". As proven above, Bakunin's "*lumpenproletariat*" is not what Marxists mean by the term. If Bakunin had meant the same as Marx by the "lumpenproletariat" then this would not make sense as the "lumpenproletariat" for Marx were not wage workers. This can best be seen when Bakunin argues that the International must organise this "*flower of the proletariat*" and conduct economic collective struggle against the capitalist class. In his other works (and in the specific essay these quotes are derived from) Bakunin stressed the need to organise all workers and peasants into unions to fight the state and bosses and his arguments that workers associations should not only be the means to fight capitalism but also the framework of an anarchist society. Clearly, Sam Dolgoff's summary of Bakunin's ideas on this subject is the correct one:

*"Bakunin's **Lumpenproletariat** . . . was broader than Marx's, since it included all the submerged classes: unskilled, unemployed, and poor workers, poor peasant proprietors, landless agricultural labourers, oppressed racial minorities, alienated and idealistic youth, declassé intellectuals, and 'bandits' (by whom Bakunin meant insurrectionary 'Robin Hoods' like Pugachev, Stenka Razin, and the Italian Carbonari)." ["Introduction", **Bakunin on Anarchism**, pp. 13-4]*

Moreover, the issue is clouded by translation issues as well. As Mark Leier notes Bakunin "rarely used the word '*lumpenproletariat*'. While he does use the French word *canaille*, this is better translated as 'mob' or 'rabble' . . . When Bakunin does talk about the *canaille* or rabble, he usually refers not to the *lumpenproletariat* as such but to the poorer sections of the working class . . . While we might translate '*destitute proletariat*' as '*lumpenproletariat*', Bakunin himself . . . is referring to a portion of the proletariat and the peasantry, not the *lumpenproletariat*." [ **Bakunin: The Creative Passion**, p. 221]

Nor is Stack the only Marxist to make such arguments as regards Bakunin. Paul Thomas quotes Bakunin arguing that the working class "*remains socialist without knowing it*" because of "*the very force of its position*" and "*all the conditions of its material existence*" and then, incredulously, adds that "*[i]t is for this reason that Bakunin turned away from the proletariat and its scientific socialism*" towards the peasantry. [ **Karl Marx and the Anarchists**, p. 291] A more distorted account of Bakunin's ideas would be hard to find (and there is a lot of competition for that particular honour). The quotes Thomas provides are from Bakunin's "*The Policy of the International*" in which he discussed his ideas on how the International Working-Men's Association should operate (namely "*the collective struggle of the workers against the bosses*"). At the time (and for some time after) Bakunin called himself a revolutionary socialist and argued that by class struggle, the worker would soon "*recognise himself [or herself] to be a revolutionary socialist, and he [or she] will act like one.*" [ **The Basic Bakunin**, p. 103] As such, the argument that the social position workers are placed makes them "*socialist without knowing*" does not, in fact, imply that Bakunin thought they would become Marxists ("*scientific socialism*") and, therefore, he turned against them. Rather, it meant that, for Bakunin, anarchist ideas were a product of working class life and it was a case of turning instinctive feelings into conscious thought by collective struggle. As noted above, Bakunin did not "*turn away*" from these ideas nor the proletariat. Indeed, Bakunin held to the importance of organising the proletariat (along with artisans and peasants) to the end of his life. Quite simply, Thomas is distorting Bakunin's ideas.

Lastly, we have to point out a certain irony (and hypocrisy) in Marxist attacks on Bakunin on this subject. This is because Marx, Engels and Lenin held similar views on the corrupted "*upper strata*" of the working class as Bakunin did. Indeed, Marxists have a specific term to describe this semi-bourgeois strata of workers, namely the "*labour aristocracy*." Marx, for example, talked about the trade unions in Britain being "*an aristocratic minority*" and the "*great mass of workers . . . has long been outside*" them (indeed, "*the most wretched mass has never belonged.*") [ **Collected Works**, vol. 22, p. 614] Engels also talked about "*a small, privileged, 'protected' minority*" within the working class, which he also called "*the working-class aristocracy*." [ **Op. Cit.**, vol. 27, p. 320 and p. 321] Lenin approvingly quotes Engels arguing that the "*English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming at the possession of . . . a bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie.*" [quoted by Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 22, p. 283] Like Lenin, Engels explained this by the dominant position of Britain within the world market. Indeed, Lenin argued that "*a section of the British proletariat becomes bourgeois.*"

For Lenin, imperialist "superprofits" make it "**possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy.**" This "stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook . . . are the real **agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class.**" [Op. Cit., p. 284 and p. 194]

As can be seen, this is similar to Bakunin's ideas and, ironically enough, nearly identical to Stack's distortion of those ideas (particularly in the case of Marx). However, only someone with a desire to lie would suggest that any of them dismissed the working class as their "*agent of change*" based on this (selective) quoting. Unfortunately, that is what Stack does with Bakunin. Ultimately, Stack's comments seem hypocritical in the extreme attacking Bakunin while remaining quiet on the near identical comments of his heroes.

It should be noted that this analysis is confirmed by non-anarchists who have actually studied Bakunin. Wayne Thorpe, an academic who specialises in syndicalism, presents an identical summary of Bakunin's ideas on this matter. ["**The Workers Themselves**", p. 280] Marxist selective quoting notwithstanding, for Bakunin (as another academic noted) "*it seemed self-evident that the revolution, even in Eastern Europe, required the unity of peasantry and city workers because of the latter's more advanced consciousness.*" The notion that Bakunin stressed the role of the lumpenproletariat is a "*popular stereotype*" but is one "*more distorted by its decisive omissions than in what it says.*" "Marx", he correctly summarised, "*accented the revolutionary role of the urban proletariat and tended to deprecate the peasantry, while Bakunin, although accepting the vanguard role of the proletariat in the revolution, felt that the peasantry, too, approached correctly, also had great potential for revolution.*" [Alvin W. Gouldner, "*Marx's Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International*", pp. 853-884, **Theory and Society**, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 871, p. 869 and p. 869] This flowed from Bakunin's materialist politics:

*"Not restricting the revolution to those societies in which an advanced industrialism had produced a massive urban proletariat, Bakunin observed sensibly that the class composition of the revolution was bound to differ in industrially advanced Western Europe and in Eastern European where the economy was still largely agricultural . . . This is a far cry, then, from the Marxist stereotype of Bakunin-the-anarchist who relied exclusively on the backward peasantry and ignored the proletariat."* [Op. Cit., p. 870]

All in all, once a historic and textual context is placed on Bakunin's words, it is clear which social class was considered as the social revolution's "*agents of change*": the working class (i.e. wage workers, artisans, peasants and so on). In this, other revolutionary anarchists follow him. Looking at Kropotkin we find a similar perspective to Bakunin's. In his first political work, Kropotkin explicitly raised the question of "*where our activity be directed*" and answered it "*categorically*" - "*unquestionably among the peasantry and urban workers.*" In fact, he "*consider[ed] this answer the fundamental position in our practical program.*" This was because "*the insurrection must proceed among the peasantry and urban workers themselves*" if it were to succeed. As such, revolutionaries "*must not stand outside the people but among them, must serve not as a champion of some alien opinions worked out in isolation, but only as a more distinct, more complete expression of the demands of the people themselves.*" [**Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution**, pp. 85-6]

That was in 1873. Nearly 30 years later, Kropotkin expressed identical opinions stating that he "did not need to overrate the qualities of the workers in order to espouse the cause of the social, predominantly workers' revolution." The need was to "forge solidarity" between workers and it was "precisely to awaken this solidarity - without which progress would be difficult - that we must work to insure that the syndicates and the trade unions not be pushed aside by the bourgeois." The social position of the working class people ensured their key role in the revolution: "Being exploited today at the bottom of the social ladder, it is to his advantage to demand equality. He has never ceased demanding it, he has fought for it and will fight for it again, whereas the bourgeois . . . thinks it is to his advantage to maintain inequality." Unsurprisingly, Kropotkin stressed that "I have always preached active participation in the workers' movement, in the revolutionary workers' movement" [Op. Cit., p. 299, pp. 299-300, p. 300 and p. 304]

Much the same can be said for the likes of Goldman, Berkman, Malatesta and so on - as even a basic familiarity with their writings and activism would confirm. Of all the major anarchist thinkers, it could be objected that Murray Bookchin fits Stack's distortions. After all, he did attack "*The Myth of the Proletariat*" as the agent of revolutionary change, arguing that "*the traditional class struggle ceases to have revolutionary implications; it reveals itself as the physiology of the prevailing society, not as the labour pains of birth.*" Yet, even here, Bookchin explicitly argued that he made "*no claims that a social revolution is possible without the participation of the industrial proletariat*" and noted that he "*tries to show how the proletariat can be won to the revolutionary movement by stressing issues that concern quality of life and work.*" Thus "*class struggle does not centre around material exploitation alone*" but has a wider understanding which cannot be reduced to "*a single class defined by its relationship to the means of production.*" Like other anarchists, he saw social change coming from the oppressed, as "*the alienated and oppressed sectors of society are now the majority of the people.*" In other words, for Bookchin (if not other anarchists) expressions like "*class struggle*" simply "*fail to encompass the cultural and spiritual revolt that is taking place along with the economic struggle.*" [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 117, p. 150, p. 151 and p. 152]

So Bookchin's apparent rejection of class struggle and the "proletariat" is not, on closer reading, any such thing. He urged a wider form of struggle, one which includes issues such as hierarchy, oppression, ecological matters and so on rather than the exclusive concern with economic exploitation and class which many radicals (usually Marxists) focus on. Somewhat ironically, it should be noted that this "rejection" in part flowed from Bookchin's own past in the Stalinist and Trotskyist movements, both of which tended to idealise the industrial worker and limit "proletarian" to that specific sub-section of the working class. Bookchin himself expressed this blinkered perspective when he "*dispose[d] of the notion that anyone is a 'proletarian' who has nothing to sell but his labour power*" as Marx and Engels considered that class as "*reaching its most advanced form in the industrial proletariat, which corresponded to the most advanced form of capital.*" [Op. Cit., p. 115fn] Sadly, Bookchin reinforced this debased notion of working class and our struggle in the very process of trying to overcome it. Yet he always argued for a wider concept of social struggle which included, but was not limited to, economic class and exploitation and, as a result, included all sections of the working class and not just workers in large-scale industry. In this he followed a long anarchist tradition.

To conclude, for anarchists, the social revolution will be made by the working class ("Anarchists, like Socialists, usually believe in the doctrine of class war." [Bertrand Russell,

**Roads to Freedom**, p. 38]). However, as British anarchist Benjamin Franks summarises, "[b]ecause anarchists hold to a broader view of the working class, which includes the lumpenproletariat, they have been accused of promoting this section above others. This standard marxist interpretation of anarchism is inaccurate; anarchists simply include the lumpenproletariat as part of the working class, rather than exclude or exalt it." [Rebel Alliances, p. 168] Ultimately, for anyone to claim that Bakunin, for any social anarchist, rejects the working class as an agent of social change simply shows their ignorance of the politics they are trying to attack.

## H.2.8 What is the relationship of anarchism to syndicalism?

One of the most common Marxist techniques when they discuss anarchism is to contrast the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin to the revolutionary syndicalists. The argument runs along the lines that "classical" anarchism is individualistic and rejects working class organisation and power while syndicalism is a step forward from it (i.e. a step closer to Marxism). Sadly, such arguments simply show the ignorance of the author rather than any form of factual basis. When the ideas of revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin are compared to revolutionary syndicalism, the similarities are soon discovered.

This kind of argument can be found in Pat Stack's essay "*Anarchy in the UK?*" After totally distorting the ideas of anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin, Stack argues that anarcho-syndicalists "*tended to look to the spontaneity and anti-statism of anarchism, the economic and materialist analysis of Marxism, and the organisational tools of trade unionism.* *Practically every serious anarchist organisation came from or leant on this tradition . . . The huge advantage they had over other anarchists was their understanding of the power of the working class, the centrality of the point of production (the workplace) and the need for collective action.*" [**Socialist Review**, no. 246]

Given that Stack's claims that anarchists reject the "*need for collective action,*" do not understand "*the power of the working class*" and the "*centrality*" of the workplace are simply inventions, it would suggest that Stack's "*huge advantage*" does not, in fact, exist and is pure nonsense. Bakunin, Kropotkin and all revolutionary anarchists, as proven in [section H.2.2](#), already understood all this and based their politics on the need for collective working class struggle at the point of production. As such, by contrasting anarcho-syndicalism with anarchism (as expressed by the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin) Stack simply shows his utter and total ignorance of his subject matter.

Moreover, if he bothered to read the works of the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin he would discover that many of their ideas were identical to those of revolutionary syndicalism. For example, Bakunin argued that the "*organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour, . . . [allow] the workers . . . [to] combin[e] theory and practice . . . [and] bear in themselves the living germs of the social order, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.*" [quoted by Rudolf Rocker, **Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 50] Like the syndicalists, he argued "*the natural organisation of the masses . . . is organisation based on the various ways that their various types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association*" and once "*every occupation . . . is represented within the International [Working-Men's Association], its organisation, the*

*organisation of the masses of the people will be complete.*" Moreover, Bakunin stressed that the working class had "but a single path, that of **emancipation through practical action** which meant "*workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses*" by "*trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 139 and p. 103]

Like the syndicalists, Bakunin stressed working class self-activity and control over the class struggle:

*"Toilers count no longer on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralise and paralyse your growing strength by being duped into alliances with bourgeois Radicalism . . . Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation are already completely given: they are the workshops and the federation of workshops, the creation of fighting funds, instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international.*

*"And when the hour of revolution sounds, you will proclaim the liquidation of the State and of bourgeois society, anarchy, that is to say the true, frank people's revolution . . . and the new organisation from below upwards and from the circumference to the centre."* [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 120-1]

Like the later syndicalists, Bakunin was in favour of a general strike as a means of bringing about a social revolution. As "*strikes spread from one place to another, they come close to turning into a general strike. And with the ideas of emancipation that now hold sway over the proletariat, a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin.*" He raised the possibility that this could "*arrive before the proletariat is sufficiently organised*" and dismissed it because the strikes expressed the self-organisation of the workers for the "*necessities of the struggle impel the workers to support one another*" and the "*more active the struggle becomes . . . the stronger and more extensive this federation of proletarians must become.*" Thus strikes "*indicate a certain collective strength already*" and "*each strike becomes the point of departure for the formation of new groups.*" He rejected the idea that a revolution could be "*arbitrarily*" made by "*the most powerful associations.*" Rather they were produced by "*the force of circumstances.*" As with the syndicalists, Bakunin argued that not all workers needed to be in unions before a general strike or revolution could take place. A minority (perhaps "*one worker in ten*") needed to be organised and they would influence the rest so ensuring "*at critical moments*" the majority would "*follow the International's lead.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, pp. 149-50, p. 109 and p. 139]

As with the syndicalists, the new society would be organised "*by free federation, from below upwards, of workers' associations, industrial as well as agricultural . . . in districts and municipalities at first; federation of these into regions, of the regions into nations, and the nations into a fraternal Internationalism.*" Moreover, "*capital, factories, all the means of production and raw material*" would be owned by "*the workers' organisations*" while the land would be given "*to those who work it with their own hands.*" [quoted by Kenafick, **Op. Cit.**, p. 241 and p. 240] Compare this to the syndicalist CGT's 1906 **Charter of Amiens** which declared "*the trade union today is an organisation of resistance*" but "*in the future [it will] be the organisation of production and distribution, the basis of social reorganisation.*" [quoted by Wayne Thorpe, "**The Workers Themselves**", p. 201]

The similarities with revolutionary syndicalism could not be clearer. Little wonder that all serious historians see the obvious similarities between anarcho-syndicalism and Bakunin's anarchism. For example, George R. Esenwein's (in his study of early Spanish anarchism) comments that syndicalism "had deep roots in the Spanish libertarian tradition. It can be traced to Bakunin's revolutionary collectivism." He also notes that the class struggle was "central to Bakunin's theory." [Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain, 1868-1898, p. 209 and p. 20] Caroline Cahm, likewise, points to "the basic syndicalist ideas of Bakunin" and that he "argued that trade union organisation and activity in the International [Working Men's Association] were important in the building of working-class power in the struggle against capital . . . He also declared that trade union based organisation of the International would not only guide the revolution but also provide the basis for the organisation of the society of the future." Indeed, he "believed that trade unions had an essential part to play in the developing of revolutionary capacities of the workers as well as building up the organisation of the masses for revolution." [Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, p. 219, p. 215 and p. 216] Paul Avrich, in his essay "The Legacy of Bakunin," agreed. "Bakunin," he stated, "perhaps even more than Proudhon, was a prophet of revolutionary syndicalism, who believed that a free federation of trade unions would be the 'living germs of a new social order which is to replace the bourgeois world.'" [Anarchist Portraits, pp. 14-15] Bertrand Russell noted that "[h]ardly any of these ideas [associated with syndicalism] are new: almost all are derived from the Bakunist [sic!] section of the old International" and that this was "often recognised by Syndicalists themselves." [Roads to Freedom, p. 52] The syndicalists, notes Wayne Thorpe, "identified the First International with its federalist wing . . . [r]epresented . . . initially by the Proudhonists and later and more influentially by the Bakuninists." [Op. Cit., p. 2]

Needless to say, anarchists agree with this perspective. Arthur Lehning, for example, summarises the anarchist perspective when he commented that "Bakunin's collectivist anarchism . . . ultimately formed the ideological and theoretical basis of anarcho-syndicalism." ["Introduction", Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 29] Anarchist academic David Berry also notes that "anarchist syndicalist were keen to establish a lineage with Bakunin . . . the anarchist syndicalism of the turn of the century was a revival of a tactic" associated with "the Bakunist International." [A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917-1945, p. 17] Another, Mark Leier, points out that "the Wobblies drew heavily on anarchist ideas pioneered by Bakunin." [Bakunin: The Creative Passion, p. 298] Kropotkin argued that syndicalism "is nothing other than the rebirth of the International - federalist, worker, Latin." [quoted by Martin A. Miller, Kropotkin, p. 176] Malatesta stated in 1907 that he had "never ceased to urge the comrades into that direction which the syndicalists, forgetting the past, call new, even though it was already glimpsed and followed, in the International, by the first of the anarchists." [The Anarchist Reader, p. 221] Little wonder that Rudolf Rocker stated in his classic introduction to the subject that anarcho-syndicalism was "a direct continuation of those social aspirations which took shape in the bosom of the First International and which were best understood and most strongly held by the libertarian wing of the great workers' alliance." [Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 54] Murray Bookchin just stated the obvious:

"Long before syndicalism became a popular term in the French labour movement of the late [eighteen]nineties, it already existed in the Spanish labour movement of the early seventies. The anarchist-influenced Spanish Federation of the old IWMA was . . . distinctly syndicalist." ["Looking Back at Spain," pp. 53-96, Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos (ed.), The Radical Papers, p. 67]

Perhaps, in the face of such evidence (and the writings of Bakunin himself), Marxists could claim that the sources we quote are either anarchists or "sympathetic" to anarchism. To counter this is very easy, we need only quote Marx and Engels. Marx attacked Bakunin for thinking that the "*working class . . . must only organise themselves by trades-unions*" and "*not occupy itself with politics.*" Engels argued along the same lines, having a go at the anarchists because in the "*Bakuninist programme a general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started*" and that they admitted "*this required a well-formed organisation of the working class*" (i.e. a trade union federation). Indeed, he summarised Bakunin's strategy as being to "*organise, and when all the workers, hence the majority, are won over, dispose all the authorities, abolish the state and replace it with the organisation of the International.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 48, p. 132, p. 133 and p. 72] Ignoring the misrepresentations of Marx and Engels about the ideas of their enemies, we can state that they got the basic point of Bakunin's ideas - the centrality of trade union organisation and struggle as well as the use of strikes and the general strike. Therefore, you do not have to read Bakunin to find out the similarities between his ideas and syndicalism, you can read Marx and Engels. Clearly, most Marxist critiques of anarchism have not even done that!

Latter anarchists, needless to say, supported the syndicalist movement and, moreover, drew attention to its anarchist roots. Emma Goldman noted that in the First International "*Bakunin and the Latin workers*" forged ahead "*along industrial and Syndicalist lines*" and stated that syndicalism "*is, in essence, the economic expression of Anarchism*" and that "*accounts for the presence of so many Anarchists in the Syndicalist movement. Like Anarchism, Syndicalism prepares the workers along direct economic lines, as conscious factors in the great struggles of to-day, as well as conscious factors in the task of reconstructing society.*" After seeing syndicalist ideas in action in France in 1900, she "*immediately began to propagate Syndicalist ideas.*" The "*most powerful weapon*" for liberation was "*the conscious, intelligent, organised, economic protest of the masses through direct action and the general strike.*" [**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 89, p. 91, p. 90 and p. 60]

Kropotkin argued anarchist communism "*wins more and more ground among those working-men who try to get a clear conception as to the forthcoming revolutionary action. The syndicalist and trade union movements, which permit the workingmen to realise their solidarity and to feel the community of their interests better than any election, prepare the way for these conceptions.*" [**Anarchism**, p. 174] His support for anarchist participation in the labour movement was strong, considering it a key method of preparing for a revolution and spreading anarchist ideas amongst the working classes: "*The syndicat is absolutely necessary. It is the sole force of the workers which continues the direct struggle against capital without turning to parliamentarism.*" [quoted by Miller, **Op. Cit.**, p. 177]

"*Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions,*" Kropotkin stressed, "*had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakuninist' section of the International Working Men's Association. In Spain and in Italy it had been especially successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France and Freedom [the British Anarchist paper he helped create in 1886] eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda.*" [**Act For Yourselves**, pp. 119-20] Caroline Cahm notes in her excellent account of Kropotkin's ideas between 1872 and 1886, he "*was anxious to revive the International as an organisation for aggressive strike action to counteract the influence of parliamentary socialists on the labour movement.*" This resulted in Kropotkin advocating a "*remarkable fusion of anarchist communist ideas with both the bakuninist [sic!] internationalist views adopted by the Spanish*

*Federation and the syndicalist ideas developed in the Jura Federation in the 1870s.*" This included seeing the importance of revolutionary labour unions, the value of the strikes as a mode of direct action and syndicalist action developing solidarity. "For Kropotkin," she summarises, "*revolutionary syndicalism represented a revival of the great movement of the Anti-authoritarian International . . . It seems likely that he saw in it the [strikers International] which he had advocated earlier.*" [Op. Cit., p. 257 and p. 268]

Clearly, any one claiming that there is a fundamental difference between anarchism and syndicalism is talking nonsense. Syndicalist ideas were being argued by the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin before syndicalism emerged in the French CGT in the 1890s as a clearly labelled revolutionary theory. Rather than being in conflict, the ideas of syndicalism find their roots in the ideas of Bakunin and "classical" anarchism. This would be quickly seen if the actual writings of Bakunin and Kropotkin were consulted. There **are**, of course, differences between anarchism and syndicalism, but they are **not** those usually listed by Marxists ([section J.3.9](#) discusses these differences and, as will quickly be discovered, they are **not** based on a rejection of working class organisation, direct action, solidarity and collective struggle!).

Ultimately, claims like Pat Stack's simply show how unfamiliar the author is with the ideas they are pathetically attempting to critique. Anarchists from Bakunin onwards shared most of the same ideas as syndicalism (which is unsurprising as most of the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism have direct roots in the ideas of Bakunin). In other words, for Stack, the "*huge advantage*" anarcho-syndicalists have "*over other anarchists*" is that they, in fact, share the same "*understanding of the power of the working class, the centrality of the point of production (the workplace) and the need for collective action!*"! This, in itself, shows the bankruptcy of Stack's claims and those like it.

## H.2.9 Do anarchists have "*liberal*" politics?

Another assertion by Marxists is that anarchists have "*liberal*" politics or ideas. For example, one Marxist argues that the "*programme with which Bakunin armed his super-revolutionary vanguard called for the 'political, economic and social equalisation of classes and individuals of both sexes, beginning with the abolition of the right of inheritance.'* This is **liberal** politics, implying nothing about the abolition of capitalism." [Derek Howl, "*The Legacy of Hal Draper*," pp. 137-49, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 148]

That Howl is totally distorting Bakunin's ideas can quickly be seen by looking at the whole of the programme. The passage quoted is from item 2 of the "*Programme of the Alliance*." Strangely Howle fails to quote the end of that item, namely when it states this "*equalisation*" was "*in pursuance of the decision reached by the last working men's Congress in Brussels, the land, the instruments of work and all other capital may become the collective property of the whole of society and be utilised only by the workers, in other words by the agricultural and industrial associations.*" If this was not enough to indicate the abolition of capitalism, item 4 states that the Alliance "*repudiates all political action whose target is anything except the triumph of the workers' cause over Capital.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 174]

Howl's dishonesty is clear. Bakunin **explicitly** argued for the abolition of capitalism in the same item Howl (selectively) quotes from. If the socialisation of land and capital under the control of workers' associations is not the abolition of capitalism, we wonder what is!

Equally as dishonest as this quoting out of context is Howl's non-mention of the history of the expression "*political, economic and social equalisation of classes and individuals of both sexes.*" After Bakunin sent the Alliance programme to the General Council of the **International Workingmen's Association**, he received a letter date March 9, 1869 from Marx which stated that the term "*the equalisation of classes*" "*literally interpreted*" would mean "*harmony of capital and labour*" as "*persistent preached by the bourgeois socialists.*" The letter argued that it was "*not the logically impossible 'equalisation of classes', but the historically necessary, superseding 'abolition of classes'*" which was the "*true secret of the proletarian movement*" and which "*forms the great aim of the International Working Men's Association.*" Significantly, the letter adds the following:

*"Considering, however, the context in which that phrase 'equalisation of classes' occurs, it seems to be a mere slip of the pen, and the General Council feels confident that you will be anxious to remove from your program an expression which offers such a dangerous misunderstanding."* [Collected Works, vol. 21, p. 46]

And, given the context, Marx was right. The phrase "*equalisation of classes*" placed in the context of the political, economic and social equalisation of individuals obviously implies the abolition of classes. The logic is simple. If both worker and capitalist shared the same economic and social position then wage labour would not exist (in fact, it would be impossible as it is based on social and economic **inequality**) and so class society would not exist. Similarly, if the tenant and the landlord were socially equal then the landlord would have no power over the tenant, which would be impossible. Bakunin agreed with Marx on the ambiguity of the term and the Alliance changed its Programme to call for "*the final and total abolition of classes and the political, economic and social equalisation of individuals of either sex.*" [Bakunin, **Op. Cit.** p. 174] This change ensured the admittance of the Alliance sections into the International Workingmen's Association (although this did not stop Marx, like his followers, bringing up this "*mere slip of the pen*" years later). However, Howl repeating the changed phrase "*equalisation of classes*" out of context helps discredit anarchism and so it is done.

Simply put, anarchists are **not** liberals. We are well aware of the fact that without equality, liberty is impossible except for the rich. As Nicolas Walter put it, "[*l*]ike liberals, anarchists want freedom; like socialists, anarchists want equality. But we are not satisfied by liberalism alone or by socialism alone. Freedom without equality means that the poor and weak are less free than the rich and strong, and equality without freedom means that we are all slaves together. Freedom and equality are not contradictory, but complementary; in place of the old polarisation of freedom versus equality - according to which we are told that more freedom equals less equality, and more equality equals less freedom - anarchists point out that in practice you cannot have one without the other. Freedom is not genuine if some people are too poor or too weak to enjoy it, and equality is not genuine if some people are ruled by others." [**About Anarchism**, p. 29] Clearly, anarchists do **not** have liberal politics. Quite the reverse, as we subject it to extensive critique from a working class perspective.

To the claim that anarchism "*combines a socialist critique of capitalism with a liberal critique of socialism,*" anarchists reply that it is mistaken. [Paul Thomas, **Karl Marx and the**

**Anarchists**, p. 7] Rather, anarchism is simply a socialist critique of both capitalism and the state. Freedom under capitalism is fatally undermined by inequality - it simply becomes the freedom to pick a master. This violates liberty and equality, as does the state. "Any State at all," argued Bakunin, "*no matter what kind, is a domination and exploitation. It is a negation of Socialism, which wants an equitable human society delivered from all tutelage, from all authority and political domination as well as economic exploitation.*" [quoted by Kenafick, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 95-6] As such, state structures violate not only liberty but also equality. There is no real equality in power between, say, the head of the government and one of the millions who may, or may not, have voted for them. As the Russian Revolution proved, there can be no meaningful equality between a striking worker and the "socialist" political police sent to impose the will of the state, i.e., the "socialist" ruling elite.

This means that if anarchists are concerned about freedom (both individual **and** collective) it is not because we are influenced by liberalism. Quite the reverse, as liberalism happily tolerates hierarchy and the restrictions of liberty implied by private property, wage labour and the state. As Bakunin argued, capitalism turns "*the worker into a subordinate, a passive and obedient servant.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 188] So anarchism rejects liberalism (although, as Bakunin put it, "*[i]f socialism disputes radicalism, this is hardly to reverse it but rather to advance it.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 87]). Therefore, anarchism rejects liberalism, not because it supports the idea of freedom, but precisely because it does not go far enough and fails to understand that without equality, freedom is little more than freedom for the master. In fact, as we argue in [section H.4](#), it is Marxism itself which has a distinctly liberal perspective of freedom, seeing it restricted by association rather than association being an expression of it.

Lastly, a few words on the mentality that could suggest that anarchist concern for liberty means that it is a form of liberalism. Rather than suggest the bankruptcy of anarchism it, in fact, suggests the bankruptcy of the politics of the person making the accusation. After all, the clear implication is that a concern with individual, collective and social freedom is alien to socialist ideas. It also strikes at the heart of socialism - its concern for equality - as it clearly implies that some have more power (namely the right to suppress the liberty of others) than the rest. As such, it suggests a superficial understanding of **real** socialism (see also our discussion of Marxist claims about anarchist "elitism" in [section H.2.11](#)).

To argue that a concern for freedom means "*liberalism*" (or, equally, "*individualism*") indicates that the person is not a socialist. After all, a concern that every individual controls their daily lives (i.e. to be free) means a wholehearted support for collective self-management of group affairs. It means a vision of a revolution (and post-revolutionary society) based on direct working class participation and management of society from below upwards. To dismiss this vision by dismissing the principles which inspire it as "*liberalism*" means to support rule from above by the "enlightened" elite (i.e. the party) and the hierarchical state structures. It means arguing for **party** power, not **class** power, as liberty is seen as a **danger** to the revolution and so the people must be protected against the "petty-bourgeois"/"reactionary" narrowness of the people (to quote Bakunin, "*every state, even the pseudo-People's State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 338]). Rather than seeing free debate of ideas and mass participation as a source of strength, it sees it as a source of "bad influences" which the masses must be protected from.

Moreover, it suggests a total lack of understanding of the difficulties that a social revolution will face. Unless it is based on the active participation of the majority of a population, any revolution will fail. The construction of socialism, of a new society, will face thousands of unexpected problems and seek to meet the needs of millions of individuals, thousands of communities and hundreds of cultures. Without the individuals and groups within that society being in a position to freely contribute to that constructive task, it will simply wither under the bureaucratic and authoritarian rule of a few party leaders. As such, individual liberties are an essential aspect of **genuine** social reconstruction - without freedom of association, assembly, organisation, speech and so on, the active participation of the masses will be replaced by an isolated and atomised collective of individuals subjected to autocratic rule from above.

As ex-anarchist turned Bolshevik Victor Serge concluded in the late 1930s (when it was far too late) the *"fear of liberty, which is the fear of the masses, marks almost the entire course of the Russian Revolution. If it is possible to discover a major lesson, capable of revitalising Marxism . . . one might formulate it in these terms: Socialism is essentially democratic -- the word, 'democratic', being used here in its libertarian sense."* [The Serge-Trotsky Papers, p. 181]

Ultimately, as Rudolf Rocker suggested, the *"urge for social justice can only develop properly and be effective, when it grows out of man's sense of personal freedom and it based on that. In other words Socialism will be free, or it will not be at all. In its recognition of this lies the genuine and profound justification for the existence of Anarchism."* [Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 14]

## H.2.10 Are anarchists against leadership?

It is a common assertion by Marxists that anarchists reject the idea of "*leadership*" and so think in terms of a totally spontaneous revolution. This is also generally understood to imply that anarchists do not see the need for revolutionaries to organise together to influence the class struggle in the here and now. Hence the British SWP's Duncan Hallas:

*"That an organisation of socialist militants is necessary is common ground on the left, a few anarchist purists apart. But what kind of organisation? One view, widespread amongst newly radicalised students and young workers, is that of the libertarians . . . [They have] hostility to centralised, co-ordinated activity and profound suspicion of anything smacking of 'leadership.' On this view nothing more than a loose federation of working groups is necessary or desirable. The underlying assumptions are that centralised organisations inevitably undergo bureaucratic degeneration and that the spontaneous activities of working people are the sole and sufficient basis for the achievement of socialism . . . some libertarians draw the conclusion that a revolutionary socialist party is a contradiction in terms. This, of course, is the traditional anarcho-syndicalist position."* [Towards a revolutionary socialist party, p. 39]

Ignoring the usual patronising references to the age and experience of non-Leninists, this argument can be faulted on many levels. Firstly, while libertarians do reject centralised structures, it does **not** mean we reject co-ordinated activity. This may be a common Marxist argument, but it is a straw man one. Secondly, anarchists do **not** reject the idea of

"leadership." We simply reject the idea of hierarchical leadership. Thirdly, while all anarchists do think that a "*revolutionary socialist party*" is a contradiction in terms, it does not mean that we reject the need for revolutionary organisations (i.e. organisations of anarchists). While opposing centralised and hierarchical political parties, anarchists have long saw the need for anarchist groups and federations to discuss and spread our ideas and influence. We will discuss each issue in turn.

The first argument is the least important. For Marxists, co-ordination equals centralism and to reject centralisation means to reject co-ordination of joint activity. For anarchists, co-ordination does not equal centralism or centralisation. This is why anarchism stresses federation and federalism as the means of co-ordinating joint activity. Under a centralised system, the affairs of all are handed over to a handful of people at the centre. Their decisions are then binding on the mass of the members of the organisation whose position is simply that of executing the orders of those whom the majority elect. This means that power rests at the top and decisions flow from the top downwards. As such, the "revolutionary" party simply mimics the very society it claims to oppose (see [section H.5.6](#)) as well as being extremely ineffective (see [section H.5.8](#))

In a federal structure, in contrast, decisions flow from the bottom up by means of councils of elected, mandated and recallable **delegates**. In fact, we discover anarchists like Bakunin and Proudhon arguing for elected, mandated and recallable delegates rather than for representatives in their ideas of how a free society worked years before the Paris Commune applied them in practice. The federal structure exists to ensure that any co-ordinated activity accurately reflects the decisions of the membership. As such, anarchists "*do not deny the need for co-ordination between groups, for discipline, for meticulous planning, and for unity in action. But they believe that co-ordination, discipline, planning, and unity in action must be achieved voluntarily, by means of a self-discipline nourished by conviction and understanding, not by coercion and a mindless, unquestioning obedience to orders from above.*" This means we "*vigorously oppose the establishment of an organisational structure that becomes an end in itself, of committees that linger on after their practical tasks have been completed, of a 'leadership' that reduces the 'revolutionary' to a mindless robot.*" [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 139] In other words, co-ordination comes **from below** rather than being imposed from above by a few leaders. To use an analogy, federalist co-ordination is the co-ordination created in a strike by workers resisting their bosses. It is created by debate amongst equals and flows from below upwards. Centralised co-ordination is the co-ordination imposed from the top-down by the boss.

Secondly, anarchists are not against all forms of "*leadership*." We are against hierarchical and institutionalised forms of leadership. In other words, of giving **power** to leaders. This is the key difference, as Albert Meltzer explained. "*In any grouping some people,*" he argued, "*do naturally 'give a lead.' But this should not mean they are a class apart. What they always reject is institutionalised leadership. That means their supporters become blind followers and the leadership not one of example or originality but of unthinking acceptance.*" Any revolutionary in a factory where the majority have no revolutionary experience, will at times, "*give a lead.*" However, "*no real Anarchist . . . would agree to be part of an institutionalised leadership. Neither would an Anarchist wait for a lead, but give one.*" [**Anarchism: Arguments for and against**, p. 58 and p. 59]

This means, as we argue in [section J.3.6](#), that anarchists seek to influence the class struggle as **equals**. Rather than aim for positions of power, anarchists want to influence people by the

power of their ideas as expressed in the debates that occur in the organisations created in the social struggle itself. This is because anarchists recognise that there is an unevenness in the level of ideas within the working class. This fact is obvious. Some workers accept the logic of the current system, others are critical of certain aspects, others (usually a minority) are consciously seeking a better society (and are anarchists, ecologists, Marxists, etc.) and so on. Only constant discussion, the clash of ideas, combined with collective struggle can develop political awareness and narrow the unevenness of ideas within the oppressed. As Malatesta argued, "*[o]nly freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom.*" [**Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas**, p. 59]

From this perspective, it follows that any attempt to create an institutionalised leadership structure means the end of the revolutionary process. Such "leadership" automatically means a hierarchical structure, one in which the leaders have power and make the decisions for the rest. This just reproduces the old class division of labour between those who think and those who act (i.e. between order givers and order takers). Rather than the revolutionary masses taking power in such a system, it is the "leaders" (i.e. a specific party hierarchy) who do so and the masses role becomes, yet again, simply that of selecting which boss tells them what to do.

So the anarchist federation does not reject the need of "leadership" in the sense of giving a lead, of arguing its ideas and trying to win people to them. It does reject the idea that "leadership" should become separated from the mass of the people. Simply put, no party, no group of leaders have all the answers and so the active participation of all is required for a successful revolution. It is not a question of organisation versus non-organisation, or "leadership" versus non-"leadership" but rather what *kind* of organisation and the *kind* of leadership.

Clearly, then, anarchists do not reject or dismiss the importance of politically aware minorities organising and spreading their ideas within social struggles. As Caroline Cahm summarised in her excellent study of Kropotkin's thought, "*Kropotkin stressed the role of heroic minorities in the preparation for revolution.*" [**Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-86**, p. 276] Yet, as John Crump correctly argued, the "*key words here are in the preparation for revolution. By their courage and daring in opposing capitalism and the state, anarchist minorities could teach by example and thereby draw increasing numbers into the struggle. But Kropotkin was not advocating substitutionism; the idea that a minority might carry out the revolution in place of the people was as alien to him as the notion that a minority would exercise rule after the revolution. In fact, Kropotkin recognised that the former would be a prescription for the latter.*" [**Hatta Shuzo and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan**, p. 9] In Kropotkin's own words:

*"The idea of anarchist communism, today represented by feeble minorities, but increasingly finding popular expression, will make its way among the mass of the people. Spreading everywhere, the anarchist groups . . . will take strength from the support they find among the people, and will raise the red flag of the revolution . . . On that day, what is now the minority will become the People, the great mass, and that mass rising against property and the State, will march forward towards anarchist communism."* [**Words of a Rebel**, p. 75]

This influence would be gained simply by the correctness of our ideas and the validity of our suggestions. This means that anarchists seek influence "*through advice and example, leaving*

*the people . . . to adopt our methods and solutions if these are, or seem to be, better than those suggested and carried out by others.*" As such, any anarchist organisation would "strive acquire overwhelming influence in order to draw the [revolutionary] movement towards the realisation of our ideas. But such influence must be won by doing more and better than others, and will be useful if won in that way." This means rejecting "taking over command, that is by becoming a government and imposing one's own ideas and interests through police methods." [Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, pp. 108-9]

Moreover, unlike leading Marxists like Lenin and Karl Kautsky, anarchists think that socialist ideas are developed **within** the class struggle rather than outside it by the radical intelligentsia (see [section H.5](#)). Kropotkin argued that "*modern socialism has emerged out of the depths of the people's consciousness. If a few thinkers emerging from the bourgeoisie have given it the approval of science and the support of philosophy, the basis of the idea which they have given their own expression has nonetheless been the product of the collective spirit of the working people. The rational socialism of the International is still today our greatest strength, and it was elaborated in working class organisation, under the first influence of the masses. The few writers who offered their help in the work of elaborating socialist ideas have merely been giving form to the aspirations that first saw their light among the workers.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 59] In other words, anarchists are a part of the working class (either by birth or by rejecting their previous class background and becoming part of it), the part which has generalised its own experiences, ideas and needs into a theory called "*anarchism*" and seeks to convince the rest of the validity of its ideas and tactics. This would be a dialogue, based on both learning **and** teaching.

As such, this means that the relationship between the specifically anarchist groups and oppressed peoples in struggle is a two way one. As well as trying to influence the social struggle, anarchists also try and learn from the class struggle and try to generalise from the experiences of their own struggles and the struggles of other working class people. Rather than seeing the anarchist group as some sort of teacher, anarchists see it as simply part of the social struggle and its ideas can and must develop from active participation within that struggle. As anarchists agree with Bakunin and reject the idea that their organisations should take power on behalf of the masses, it is clear that such groups are not imposing alien ideas upon people but rather try to clarify the ideas generated by working class people in struggle. It is an objective fact that there is a great difference in the political awareness within the masses of oppressed people. This uneven development means that they do not accept, all at once or in their totality, revolutionary ideas. There are layers. Groups of people, by ones and twos and then in larger numbers, become interested, read literature, talk with others, and create new ideas. The first groups that explicitly call their ideas "*anarchism*" have the right and duty to try to persuade others to join them. This is not opposed to the self-organisation of the working class, rather it is how working class people self-organise.

Lastly, most anarchists recognise the need to create specifically anarchist organisations to spread anarchist ideas and influence the class struggle. Suffice to say, the idea that anarchists reject this need to organise politically in order to achieve a revolution is not to be found in the theory and practice of all the major anarchist thinkers nor in the history and current practice of the anarchist movement itself. As Leninists themselves, at times, admit. Ultimately, if spontaneity was enough to create (and ensure the success of) a social revolution then we would be living in a libertarian socialist society. The fact that we are not suggests that spontaneity, however important, is not enough in itself. This simple fact of history is understood by anarchists and we organise ourselves appropriately.

See [section J.3](#) for more details on what organisations anarchists create and their role in anarchist revolutionary theory ([Section J.3.6](#), for example, has a fuller discussion of the role of anarchist groups in the class struggle). For a discussion of the role of anarchists in a revolution, see [section J.7.5](#).

## H.2.11 Are anarchists "*anti-democratic*"?

One of the common arguments against anarchism is that it is "*anti-democratic*" (or "*elitist*"). For example, a member of the British **Socialist Workers Party** denounces anarchism for being "*necessarily deeply anti-democratic*" due to its "*thesis of the absolute sovereignty of the individual ego as against the imposition of any 'authority' over it,*" which, it is claimed, is the "*distinctly anarchist concept.*" This position is an "*idealist conception*" in which "*any authority is seen as despotic; 'freedom' and 'authority' (and therefore 'freedom' and 'democracy') are opposites. This presumption of opposition to 'authority' was fostered by liberalism.*" This is contrasted with the Marxist "*materialist understanding of society*" in which it "*was clear that 'authority' is necessary in any society where labour is collaborative.*" [Derek Howl, "*The Legacy of Hal Draper*," pp. 137-49, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 145] Hal Draper is quoted arguing that:

*By the 'principle of authority' the consistent anarchist means principled opposition to any exercise of authority, including opposition to authority derived from the most complete democracy and exercised in completely democratic fashion . . . Of all ideologies, anarchism is the one most fundamentally anti-democratic in principle, since it is not only unalterably hostile to democracy in general but particularly to any socialist democracy of the most ideal kind that could be imagined."*

Such an argument is, of course, just ridiculous. Indeed, it is flawed on so many levels its hard to know where to start. The obvious place is the claim that anarchism is the most "*fundamentally anti-democratic in principle.*" Now, given that there are fascists, monarchists, supporters (like Trotsky) of "*party dictatorship*" and a host of others who advocate minority rule (even by one person) over everyone else, can it be argued with a straight face that anarchism is the most "*anti-democratic*" because it argues for the liberty of all? Is the idea and practice of absolute monarchy and fascism **really** more democratic than anarchism? Clearly not, although this does indicate the quality of this kind of argument. Equally, the notion that liberalism rests on a "*presumption of opposition to 'authority'*" cannot be supported by even a casual understanding of the subject. That ideology has always sought ways to justify the authority structures of the liberal state not to mention the hierarchies produced by capitalist private property. So the notion that liberalism is against "*authority*" is hard to square with both its theory and reality.

Another obvious point is that anarchists do not see **any** authority as "*despotic.*" As we discuss in [section H.4](#), this common Marxist assertion is simply not true. Anarchists have always been very clear on the fact they reject specific kinds of authority and not "*authority*" as such. In fact, by the term "*principal of authority,*" Bakunin meant **hierarchical** authority, and not all forms of "*authority*". This explains why Kropotkin argued that "*the origin of the anarchist conception of society*" lies in "*the criticism*" of the "*hierarchical organisations and the authoritarian conceptions of society*" and stressed that anarchism "*refuses all hierarchical organisation.*" [**Anarchism**, p. 158 and p. 137]

This means, just to state the obvious, that making and sticking by collective decisions are **not** acts of authority. Rather they simply expressions of individual autonomy. Clearly in most activities there is a need to co-operate with other people. Indeed, **living** involves the "*absolute sovereignty of the individual ego*" (as if anarchists like Bakunin used such terms!) being "*restricted*" by exercising that "*sovereignty*." Take, for example, playing football. This involves finding others who seek to play the game, organising into teams, agreeing on rules and so on. All terrible violations of the "*absolute sovereignty of the individual ego*," yet it was precisely the "*sovereignty*" of the "*individual*" which produced the desire to play the game in the first place. What sort of "*sovereignty*" is it that negates itself when it is exercised? Clearly, then, the Marxist "summary" of anarchist ideas on this matter, like of many others, is poverty stricken.

And, unsurprisingly enough, we find anarchist thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin attacking this idea of "*the absolute sovereignty of the individual ego*" in the most severe terms. Indeed, they thought was a bourgeois theory which simply existed to justify the continued domination and exploitation of working class people by the ruling class. Kropotkin quite clearly recognised its anti-individual and unfree nature by labelling it "*the authoritarian individualism which stifles us*" and stressing its "*narrow-minded, and therefore foolish*" nature. [**Conquest of Bread**, p. 130] Similarly, it would do the Marxist argument little good if they quoted Bakunin arguing that the "*freedom of individuals is by no means an individual matter. It is a collective matter, a collective product. No individual can be free outside of human society or without its co-operation*" or that he considered "*individualism*" as a "*bourgeois principle*." [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 46 and p. 57] He had nothing but contempt for, as he put it, "*that individualistic, egotistical, malicious and illusory freedom*" which was "*extolled*" by all the "*schools of bourgeois liberalism*." [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 196]

Perhaps, of course, these two famous anarchists were not, in fact, "*consistent*" anarchists, but that claim is doubtful.

The notion that anarchism is inherently an extreme form of "*individualism*" seems to be the great assumption of Marxism. Hence the continual repetition of this "*fact*" and the continual attempt to link revolutionary anarchism with Stirner's ideas (the only anarchist to stress the importance of the "*ego*"). Thus we find Engels talking about "*Stirner, the great prophet of contemporary anarchism - Bakunin has taken a great deal from him . . . Bakunin blended [Stirner] with Proudhon and labelled the blend 'anarchism'*" For Marx, "*Bakunin has merely translated Proudhon's and Stirner's anarchy into the crude language of the Tartars.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 175 and p. 153] In reality, of course, Stirner was essentially unknown to the anarchist movement until his book was rediscovered in the late nineteenth century and even then his impact was limited. In terms of Bakunin, while his debt to Proudhon is well known and obvious, the link with Stirner seems to have existed only in the heads of Marx and Engels. As Mark Leier notes, "*there is no evidence of this . . . Bakunin mentions Stirner precisely once in his collected works, and then only in passing . . . as far as can be determined, Bakunin had no interest, even a negative one, in Stirner's ideas.*" [**Bakunin: The Creative Passion**, p. 97] Nor was Proudhon influenced by Stirner (it is doubtful he even knew of him) while Stirner criticised the French anarchist. Does that mean Stirner is the only "*consistent*" anarchist? Moreover, even in terms of Stirner, Marxist diatribes about the "*absolute sovereignty of the individual ego*" fail to note that the egoist himself advocated organisation ("*the union of egos*") and was well aware that it required agreements between individuals which, in the abstract, reduced "*liberty*" (the

union "offer[s] a greater measure of liberty" while containing a lesser amount of "unfreedom" [The Ego and Its Own, p. 308]).

Anarchism does, of course, derive from the Greek for "*without authority*" or "*without rulers*" and this, unsurprisingly, informs anarchist theory and visions of a better world. This means that anarchism is against the "*domination of man by man*" (and woman by woman, woman by man, and so on). However, "[a]s knowledge has penetrated the governed masses . . . the people have revolted against the form of authority then felt most intolerable. This spirit of revolt in the individual and the masses, is the natural and necessary fruit of the spirit of domination; the vindication of human dignity, and the saviour of social life." Thus "*freedom is the necessary preliminary to any true and equal human association.*" [Charlotte Wilson, Anarchist Essays, p. 54 and p. 40] In other words, anarchism comes from the struggle of the oppressed against their rulers and is an expression of individual and social freedom. Anarchism was born from the class struggle.

Taking individual liberty as a good thing, the next question is how do free individuals co-operate together in such a way as to ensure their continued liberty ("*The belief in freedom assumes that human beings can co-operate.*" [Emma Goldman, Red Emma Speaks, p. 442]). This suggests that any association must be one of equality between the associating individuals. This can only be done when everyone involved takes a meaningful role in the decision making process and because of this anarchists stress the need for **self-government** (usually called **self-management**) of both individuals and groups. Self-management within free associations and decision making from the bottom-up is the only way domination can be eliminated. This is because, by making our own decisions ourselves, we automatically end the division of society into governors and governed (i.e. end hierarchy). As Anarchism clearly means support for freedom and equality, it automatically implies opposition to all forms of hierarchical organisation and authoritarian social relationship. This means that anarchist support for individual liberty does not end, as many Marxists assert, in the denial of organisation or collective decision making but rather in support for **self-managed** groups. Only this form of organisation can end the division of society into rulers and ruled, oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited and create an environment in which individuals can associate without denying their freedom and equality.

Therefore, the **positive** side of anarchism (which naturally flows from its opposition to authority) results in a political theory which argues that people must control their own struggles, organisations and affairs directly. This means we support mass assemblies and their federation via councils of mandated delegates subject to recall if they break their mandates (i.e. they act as they see fit, i.e. as politicians or bureaucrats, and not as the people who elected them desire). This way people directly govern themselves and control their own lives, allowing those affected by a decision to have a say in it and so they manage their own affairs directly and without hierarchy. Rather than imply an "individualism" which denies the importance of association and the freedom it can generate, anarchism implies an opposition to hierarchy in all its forms and the support free association of equals. In other words, anarchism can generally be taken to mean support for self-government or self-management, both by individuals and by groups.

In summary, anarchist support for individual liberty incurs a similar support for self-managed groups. In such groups, individuals co-operate as equals to maximise their liberty. This means, for anarchists, Marxists are just confusing co-operation with coercion, agreement with authority, association with subordination. Thus the Marxist "*materialist*" concept of authority

distorts the anarchist position and, secondly, is supra-historical in the extreme. Different forms of decision making are lumped together, independent of the various forms it may assume. To equate hierarchical and self-managed decision making, antagonistic and harmonious forms of organisation, alienated authority or authority retained in the hands of those directly affected by it, can only be a source of confusion. Rather than being a "*materialistic*" approach, the Marxist one is pure philosophical idealism - the postulating of a-historic concepts independently of the individuals and societies that generate specific social relationships and ways of working together.

Similarly, it would be churlish to note that Marxists themselves have habitually rejected democratic authority when it suited them. Even that "*higher type of democracy*" of the soviets was ignored by the Bolshevik party once it was in power. As we discuss in [section H.6.1](#), faced with the election of non-Bolshevik majorities to the soviets, Bolshevik armed force was used to overthrow the results. In addition, they also gerrymandered soviets once they could no longer count on an electoral majority. In the workplace, the Bolsheviks replaced workers' economic democracy with "*one-man management*" appointed from above, by the state, armed with "*dictatorial power*" (see [section H.3.14](#)). As discussed in [section H.3.8](#), the Bolsheviks generalised their experiences exercising power into explicit support for party dictatorship. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, Trotsky repeated this conclusion and repeatedly advocated party dictatorship, urging the party to use its power to crush opposition in the working class to its rule. For the Bolshevik tradition, the power of the party to ignore the wishes of the class it claims to represent is a fundamental ideological position.

So, remember when Lenin or Trotsky argue for "*party dictatorship*", the over-riding of the democratic decisions of the masses by the party, the elimination of workers factory committees in favour of appointed managers armed with "*dictatorial*" power or when the Bolshevik disbanded soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities, it is **anarchism** which is fundamentally "*anti-democratic*"! All in all, that anyone can claim that anarchism is more "*anti-democratic*" than Leninism is a joke.

However, all these anti-democratic acts do fit in nicely with Howl's "*materialist*" Marxist concept that "*'authority' is necessary in any society where labour is collaborative.*" Since "*'authority'*" is essential and all forms of collective decision making are necessarily "*authoritarian*" and involve "*subordination*," then it clearly does not really matter how collectives are organised and how decisions are reached. Hence the lack of concern for the liberty of the working people subjected to the (peculiarly bourgeois-like) forms of authority preferred by Lenin and Trotsky. It was precisely for this reason, to differentiate between egalitarian (and so libertarian) forms of organisation and decision making and authoritarian ones, that anarchists called themselves "*anti-authoritarians*."

Even if we ignore all the anti-democratic acts of Bolshevism (or justify them in terms of the problems facing the Russian Revolution, as most Leninists do), the anti-democratic nature of Leninist ideas still come to the fore. The Leninist support for centralised state power brings their attack on anarchism as being "*anti-democratic*" into clear perspective and, ultimately, results in the affairs of millions being decided upon by a handful of people in the Central Committee of the vanguard party. As an example, we will discuss Trotsky's arguments against the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine.

For Trotsky, the Makhnovists were against "*Soviet power*." This, he argued, was simply "*the authority of all the local soviets in the Ukraine*" as they all "*recognise the central power*

*which they themselves have elected.*" Consequently, the Makhnovists rejected not only central authority but also the local soviets as well. Trotsky also suggested that there were no "appointed" persons in Russia as "*there is no authority in Russia but that which is elected by the whole working class and working peasantry. It follows [!] that commanders appointed by the central Soviet Government are installed in their positions by the will of the working millions.*" He stressed that one can speak of "appointed" persons "*only under the bourgeois order, when Tsarist officials or bourgeois ministers appointed at their own discretion commanders who kept the soldier masses subject to the bourgeois classes.*" When the Makhnovists tried to call the fourth regional conference of peasants, workers and partisans to discuss the progress of the Civil War in early 1919, Trotsky, unsurprisingly enough, "*categorically banned*" it. With typical elitism, he noted that the Makhnovist movement had "*its roots in the ignorant masses!*"! [**How the Revolution Armed**, vol. II, p. 277, p. 280, p. 295 and p. 302]

In other words, because the Bolshevik government had been given power by a national Soviet Congress in the past (and only remained there by gerrymandering and disbanding soviets), he (as its representative) had the right to ban a conference which would have expressed the wishes of millions of workers, peasants and partisans fighting for the revolution! The fallacious nature of his arguments is easily seen. Rather than executing the will of millions of toilers, Trotsky was simply executing his own will. He did not consult those millions nor the local soviets which had, in Bolshevik ideology, surrendered their power to the handful of people in the central committee of the Bolshevik Party. By banning the conference he was very effectively undermining the practical, functional democracy of millions and replacing it with a purely formal "democracy" based on empowering a few leaders at the centre. Yes, indeed, truly democracy in action when one person can deny a revolutionary people its right to decide its own fate!

Unsurprisingly, the anarchist Nestor Makhno replied by arguing that he considered it "*an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call congresses on their own account, to discuss their affairs. That is why the prohibition by the central authorities on the calling of such congresses . . . represent a direct and insolent violation of the rights of the workers.*" [quoted by Peter Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 129] We will leave it to the readers to decide which of the two, Trotsky or Makhno, showed the fundamentally "*anti-democratic*" perspective.

Moreover, there are a few theoretical issues that need to be raised on this matter. Notice, for example, that no attempt is made to answer the simple question of why having 51% of a group automatically makes you right! It is taken for granted that the minority should subject themselves to the will of the majority before that will is even decided upon. Does that mean, for example, that Marxists refuse minorities the right of civil disobedience if the majority acts in a way which harms their liberties and equality? If, for example, the majority in community decides to implement race laws, does that mean that Marxists would **oppose** the discriminated minority taking direct action to undermine and abolish them? Or, to take an example closer to Marxism, in 1914 the leaders of the Social Democratic Party in the German Parliament voted for war credits. The anti-war minority of that group went along with the majority in the name of "democracy," "unity" and "discipline". Would Howl and Draper argue that they were right to do so? If they were not right to betray the ideas of Marxism and international working class solidarity, then why not? They did, after all, subject themselves to the "*most perfect socialist democracy*" and so, presumably, made the correct decision.

Simply put, the arguments that anarchists are "*anti-democratic*" are question-begging in the extreme, when not simply hypocritical.

As a general rule-of-thumb, anarchists have little problem with the minority accepting the decisions of the majority after a process of free debate and discussion. As we argue in [section A.2.11](#), such collective decision making is compatible with anarchist principles - indeed, is based on them. By governing ourselves directly, we exclude others governing us. However, we do not make a fetish of this, recognising that, in certain circumstances, the minority must and should ignore majority decisions. For example, if the majority of an organisation decide on a policy which the minority thinks is disastrous then why should they follow the majority? Equally, if the majority make a decision which harms the liberty and equality of a non-oppressive and non-exploitative minority, then that minority has the right to reject the "authority" of the majority. Hence Carole Pateman:

*"The essence of liberal social contract theory is that individuals ought to promise to, or enter an agreement to, obey representatives, to whom they have alienated their right to make political decisions . . . Promising . . . is an expression of individual freedom and equality, yet commits individuals for the future. Promising also implies that individuals are capable of independent judgement and rational deliberation, and of evaluating and changing their own actions and relationships; promises may sometimes justifiably be broken. However, to promise to obey is to deny or limit, to a greater or lesser degree, individuals' freedom and equality and their ability to exercise these capacities. To promise to obey is to state that, in certain areas, the person making the promise is no longer free to exercise her capacities and decide upon her own actions, and is no longer equal, but subordinate."* [The Problem of Political Obligation, p. 19]

Thus, for anarchists, a democracy which does not involve individual rights to dissent, to disagree and to practice civil disobedience would violate freedom and equality, the very values Marxists usually claim to be at the heart of their politics. The claim that anarchism is "*anti-democratic*" basically hides the argument that the minority must become the slave of the majority - with no right of dissent when the majority is wrong (in practice, of course, it is usually meant the orders and laws of the minority who are elected to power). In effect, it wishes the minority to be subordinate, not equal, to the majority. Anarchists, in contrast, because we support self-management also recognise the importance of dissent and individuality - in essence, because we are in favour of self-management ("democracy" does not do the concept justice) we also favour the individual freedom that is its rationale. We support the liberty of individuals because we believe in self-management ("democracy") so passionately.

So Howl and Draper fail to understand the rationale for democratic decision making - it is not based on the idea that the majority is always right but that individual freedom requires democracy to express and defend itself. By placing the collective above the individual, they undermine democratic values and replace them with little more than tyranny by the majority (or, more likely, a tiny minority who claim to represent the majority).

Moreover, progress is determined by those who dissent and rebel against the status quo and the decisions of the majority. That is why anarchists support the right of dissent in self-managed groups - in fact, dissent, refusal, revolt by individuals and minorities is a key aspect of self-management. Given that Leninists do not support self-management (rather they, at

best, support the Lockean notion of electing a government as being "democracy") it is hardly surprising they, like Locke, view dissent as a danger and something to denounce. Anarchists, on the other hand, recognising that self-management's (i.e. direct democracy's) rationale and base is in individual freedom, recognise and support the rights of individuals to rebel against what they consider as unjust impositions. As history shows, the anarchist position is the correct one - without rebellion, numerous minorities would never have improved their position and society would stagnate. Indeed, Howl's and Draper's comments are just a reflection of the standard capitalist diatribe against strikers and protestors - they do not need to protest, for they live in a "democracy."

This Marxist notion that anarchists are "anti-democratic" gets them into massive contradictions. Lance Selfa's highly inaccurate and misleading article "*Emma Goldman: A life of controversy*" is an example of this [International Socialist Review, no. 34, March-April 2004] Ignoring the far more substantial evidence for Leninist elitism, Selfa asserted that "*Goldman never turned away from the idea that heroic individuals, not masses, make history*" and quotes from her 1910 essay "*Minorities Versus Majorities*" to prove this. Significantly, he does not actually refute the arguments Goldman expounded. He does, needless to say, misrepresent them.

The aim of Goldman's essay was to state the obvious - that the mass is not the source for new ideas. Rather, new, progressive, ideas are the product of minorities and which then spread to the majority by the actions of those minorities. Even social movements and revolutions start when a minority takes action. Trade unionism, for example, was (and still is) a minority movement in most countries. Support for racial and sexual equality was long despised (or, at best, ignored) by the majority and it took a resolute minority to advance that cause and spread the idea in the majority. The Russian Revolution did not start with the majority. It started when a minority of women workers (ignoring the advice of the local Bolsheviks) took to the streets and from these hundreds grew into a movement of hundreds of thousands.

The facts are clearly on the side of Goldman, not Selfa. Given that Goldman was expounding such an obvious law of social evolution, it seems incredulous that Selfa has a problem with it. This is particularly the case as Marxism (particularly its Leninist version) implicitly recognises this. As Marx argued, the ruling ideas of any epoch are those of the ruling class. Likewise for Goldman: "*Human thought has always been falsified by tradition and custom, and perverted false education in the interests of those who held power . . . by the State and the ruling class.*" Hence the "*continuous struggle*" against "*the State and even against 'society,' that is, against the majority subdued and hypnotised by the State and State worship.*" If this were not the case, as Goldman noted, no state could save itself or private property from the masses. Hence the need for people to break from their conditioning, to act for themselves. As she argued, such direct action is "*the salvation of man*" as it "*necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage.*" [Red Emma Speaks, p. 111 and p. 76]

Thus Goldman, like other anarchists, was not dismissing the masses, just stressing the obvious: namely that socialism is a process of self-liberation and the task of the conscious minority is to encourage this process by encouraging the direct action of the masses. Hence Goldman's support for syndicalism and direct action, a support Selfa (significantly) fails to inform his readers of.

So was Goldman's rejection of "majorities" the elitism Selfa claims it was? No, far from it. This is clear from looking at that work in context. For example, in a debate between her and a

socialist she used the Lawrence strike "*as an example of direct action.*" [Living My Life, vol. 1., p. 491] The workers in one of the mills started the strike by walking out. The next day five thousand at another mill struck and marched to another mill and soon doubled their number. The strikers soon had to supply food and fuel for 50,000. [Howard Zinn, **A People's History of the United States**, pp. 327-8] Rather than the strike being the act of the majority, it was the direct action of a minority which started it and it then spread to the majority (a strike, incidentally, Goldman supported and fund raised for). It should also be noted that the Lawrence strike reflected her ideas of how a general strike could be started by "*one industry or by a small, conscious minority among the workers*" which "*is soon taken up by many other industries, spreading like wildfire.*" [Red Emma Speaks, p. 95]

Do Marxists really argue that this was "elitist"? If so, then every spontaneous revolt is "elitist". Every attempt by oppressed minorities to resist their oppression is "elitist." Indeed, every attempt to change society is "elitist" as if it involves a minority not limiting themselves to simply advancing new ideas but, instead, taking direct action to raise awareness or to resist hierarchy in the here and now. Revolutions occur when the ideas of the majority catch up with the minority who inspire others with their ideas and activity. So in his keenness to label the anarchist movement "elitist", Selfa has also, logically, so-labelled the labour, feminist, peace and civil rights movements (among many others).

Equally embarrassing for Selfa, Trotsky (a person whom he contrasts favourably with Goldman despite the fact he was a practitioner and advocate of party dictatorship) agreed with the anarchists on the importance of minorities. As he put it during the debate on Kronstadt in the late 1930s, "*revolution is 'made' directly by a minority. The success of a revolution is possible, however, only where this minority finds more or less support, or at least friendly neutrality, on the part of the majority. The shift in different stages of the revolution . . . is directly determined by changing political relations between the minority and the majority, between the vanguard and the class.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 85] Not that this makes Trotsky an elitist for Selfa, of course. The key difference is that Goldman did not argue that this minority should seize power and rule the masses, regardless of the wishes of that majority, as Trotsky did (see [section H.1.2](#)). As Goldman noted, the "*Socialist demagogues know that [her argument is true] as well as I, but they maintain the myth of the virtues of the majority, because their very scheme means the perpetuation of power*" and "*authority, coercion and dependence rest on the mass, but never freedom.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 85]

So, yes, anarchists do support individual freedom to resist even democratically made decisions simply because democracy **has to be** based on individual liberty. Without the right of dissent, democracy becomes a joke and little more than a numerical justification for tyranny. This does not mean we are "*anti-democratic,*" indeed the reverse as we hold true to the fundamental rationale for democratic decision-making - it allows individuals to combine as equals and not as subordinates and masters. Moreover, diversity is essential for any viable eco-system and it is essential in any viable society (and, of course, any society worth living in). This means that a healthy society is one which encourages diversity, individuality, dissent and, equally, self-managed associations to ensure the freedom of all. As Malatesta argued:

*"There are matters over which it is worth accepting the will of the majority because the damage caused by a split would be greater than that caused by error; there are circumstances in which discipline becomes a duty because to fail in it would be to fail in the solidarity between the oppressed and would mean betrayal in face of the enemy. But when one is convinced that the organisation is pursuing a course which threatens*

*the future and makes it difficult to remedy the harm done, then it is a duty to rebel and to resist even at the risk of providing a split . . . What is essential is that individuals should develop a sense of organisation and solidarity, and the conviction that fraternal co-operation is necessary to fight oppression and to achieve a society in which everyone will be able to enjoy his [or her] own life." [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, pp. 132-3]*

This means that anarchists are not against majority decision making as such. We simply recognise it has limitations. In practice, the need for majority and minority to come to an agreement is one most anarchists would recognise:

*"But such an adaptation [of the minority to the decisions of the majority] on the one hand by one group must be reciprocal, voluntary and must stem from an awareness of need and of goodwill to prevent the running of social affairs from being paralysed by obstinacy. It cannot be imposed as a principle and statutory norm. . .*

*"So . . . anarchists deny the right of the majority to govern in human society in general . . . how is it possible . . . to declare that anarchists should submit to the decisions of the majority before they have even heard what those might be?"*  
[Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, pp. 100-1]

Therefore, while accepting majority decision making as a key aspect of a revolutionary movement and a free society, anarchists do not make a fetish of it. We recognise that we must use our own judgement in evaluating each decision reached simply because the majority is not always right. We must balance the need for solidarity in the common struggle and needs of common life with critical analysis and judgement. As Malatesta argued:

*"In any case it is not a question of being right or wrong; it is a question of freedom, freedom for all, freedom for each individual so long as he [or she] does not violate the equal freedom of others. No one can judge with certainty who is right and who is wrong, who is closer to the truth and which is the best road for the greatest good for each and everyone. Experience through freedom is the only means to arrive at the truth and the best solutions; and there is no freedom if there is not the freedom to be wrong.*

*"In our opinion, therefore, it is necessary that majority and minority should succeed in living together peacefully and profitably by mutual agreement and compromise, by the intelligent recognition of the practical necessities of communal life and of the usefulness of concessions which circumstances make necessary."* [Errico Malatesta: **His Life and Ideas**, p. 72]

Needless to say, our arguments apply with even more force to the decisions of the **representatives** of the majority, who are in practice a very small minority. Leninists usually try and confuse these two distinct forms of decision making. When Leninists discuss majority decision making they almost always mean the decisions of those elected by the majority - the central committee or the government - rather than the majority of the masses or an organisation. Ultimately, the Leninist support for democracy (as the Russian Revolution showed) is conditional on whether the majority supports them or not. Anarchists are not as hypocritical or as elitist as this, arguing that everyone should have the same rights the Leninists usurp for their leaders.

This counterpoising of socialism to "individualism" is significant. The aim of socialism is, after all, to increase individual liberty (to quote the **Communist Manifesto**, to create "*an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.*" [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 491]). As such, authentic socialism is "individualist" in its aspirations and denounces capitalism for being a partial and flawed individualism which benefits the few at the expense of the many (in terms of their development and individuality). This can be seen when Goldman, for example, argued that anarchism "*alone stresses the importance of the individual, his [or her] possibilities and needs in a free society.*" It "*insists that the centre of gravity in society is the individual - that he must think for himself, act freely, and live fully. The aim of Anarchism is that every individual in the world shall be able to do so.*" Needless to say, she differentiated her position from bourgeois ideology: "*Of course, this has nothing in common with a much boasted 'rugged individualism.'* Such predatory individualism is really flabby, not rugged . . . Their 'rugged individualism' is simply one of the many pretences the ruling class makes to unbridled business and political extortion." [Op. Cit., p. 442 and p. 443] This support for individuality did not preclude solidarity, organising unions, practising direct action, supporting syndicalism, desiring communism and so on, but rather required it (as Goldman's own life showed). It flows automatically from a love of freedom for all. Given this, the typical Leninist attacks against anarchism for being "individualism" simply exposes the state capitalist nature of Bolshevism:

*"capitalism promotes egotism, not individuality or 'individualism.' . . . the ego it created . . . [is] shrivelled . . . The term 'bourgeois individualism,' an epithet widely used by the left today against libertarian elements, reflects the extent to which bourgeois ideology permeates the socialist project; indeed, the extent to which the 'socialist' project (as distinguished from the libertarian communist project) is a mode of state capitalism."* [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 194fn]

Therefore the Marxist attack on anarchism as "*anti-democratic*" is not only false, it is ironic and hypocritical. Firstly, anarchists do **not** argue for "*the absolute sovereignty of the individual ego.*" Rather, we argue for individual freedom. This, in turn, implies a commitment to self-managed forms of social organisation. This means that anarchists do not confuse agreement with (hierarchical) authority. Secondly, Marxists do not explain why the majority is always right or why their opinions are automatically the truth. Thirdly, the logical conclusions of their arguments would result in the absolute enslavement of the individual to the representatives of the majority. Fourthly, rather than being supporters of democracy, Marxists like Lenin and Trotsky explicitly argued for minority rule and the ignoring of majority decisions when they clashed with the decisions of the ruling party. Fifthly, their support for "*democratic*" centralised power means, in practice, the elimination of democracy in the grassroots. As can be seen from Trotsky's arguments against the Makhnovists, the democratic organisation and decisions of millions can be banned by a single individual.

All in all, Marxists claims that anarchists are "*anti-democratic*" just backfire on Marxism.

## H.2.12 Does anarchism survive only in the absence of a strong workers' movement?

Derek Howl argues that anarchism "*survives only in the absence of a strong workers movement*" and is the politics of "*non-proletarians.*" As he puts it, there "*is a class basis to this. Just as Proudhon's 'anarchism' reflected the petty bourgeoisie under pressure, so too*

*Bakuninism as a movement rested upon non-proletarians . . . In Italy Bakuninism was based upon the large 'lumpen bourgeoisie', doomed petty bourgeois layers. In Switzerland the Jura Federation . . . was composed of a world of cottage industry stranded between the old world and the new, as were pockets of newly proletarianised peasants that characterised anarchism in Spain."* He approvingly quotes Hal Draper assertion that anarchism "was an ideology alien to the life of modern working people." ["The Legacy of Hal Draper," pp. 137-49, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 148]

Ignoring the obvious contradiction of "*newly proletarianised peasants*" being "*non-proletarians*," we have the standard Marxist "*class analysis*" of anarchism. This is to assert that anarchism is "*non-proletarian*" while Marxism is "*proletarian*." On the face of it, such an assertion seems to fly in the face of historical facts. After all, when Marx and Engels were writing the **Communist Manifesto**, the proletariat was a tiny minority of the population of a mostly rural, barely industrialised Germany. Perhaps it was Engels' experiences as a capitalist in England that allowed him an insight into "*the life of modern working people?*" It should also be noted that neither Howel or Draper is being original, they are simply repeating Marx's assertion that anarchism "*continues to exist only where there is as yet no proper workers' movement. This is a fact.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 24, p. 247]

Beyond this there are a few problems with this type of argument. Firstly, there are the factual problems. Simply put, anarchism appealed to "*modern*" working people and Marxism has appealed to the "*non-proletarian*" groups and individuals (and vice versa, of course). This can be seen from the examples Howl lists as well as the rise of syndicalist ideas after the reformism of the first Marxist movement (social democracy) became apparent. In fact, the rise of Marxism within the labour movement is associated with its descent into reformism, **not** revolution. Secondly, there is the slight ideological problem that Lenin himself argued that the working class, by its own efforts, did not produce socialist ideas which were generated far from "*the life of modern working people*" by the intelligentsia. Lastly, there is the assumption that two long dead Germans, living in an environment where "*modern working people*" (proletarians) were a small minority of the working population, could really determine for all time what is (and is not) "*proletarian*" politics.

Taking the countries Howl lists, we can see that any claim that anarchism is "*alien*" to the working class is simply false. Looking at each one, it is clearly the case that, for Marxists, the **politics** of the people involved signify their working class credentials, **not** their actual economic or social class. Thus we have the sociological absurdity that makes anarchist workers "*petty bourgeois*" while actual members of the bourgeoisie (like Engels) or professional revolutionaries (and the sons of middle class families like Marx, Lenin and Trotsky) are considered as representatives of "*proletarian*" politics. Indeed, when these radical members of the middle-class repress working class people (as did Lenin and Trotsky were in power) they **remain** figures to be followed and their acts justified in terms of the "objective" needs of the working people they are oppressing! Ultimately, for most Marxists, whether someone is "*non-proletariat*" depends on their ideological viewpoint and not, in fact, their actual class.

Hence we discover Marx and Engels (like their followers) blaming Bakunin's success in the International, as one historian notes, "*on the middle-class leadership of Italy's socialist movement and the backwardness of the country. But if middle-class leaders were the catalysts of proletarian revolutionary efforts in Italy, this was also true of every other country in Europe, not excluding the General Council in London.*" [T.R. Ravindranathan, **Bakunin and**

**the Italians**, p. 168] And by interpreting the difficulties for Marxism in this way, Marx and Engels (like their followers) need not question their own ideas and assumptions. As Nunzio Pernicone notes, "[f]rom the outset, Engels had consistently underestimated Bakunin as a political adversary and refused to believe that Italian workers might embrace anarchist doctrines." However, "even a casual perusal of the internationalist and dissident democratic press would have revealed to Engels that Bakuninism was rapidly developing a following among Italian artisans and workers. But this reality flew in the face of his unshakeable belief that Italian internationalists were all a 'gang of declasses, the refuse of the bourgeoisie.'" Even after the rise of the Italian Marxism in the 1890s, "the anarchist movement was proportionately more working-class than the PSI" and the "the number of bourgeois intellectuals and professionals that supported the PSI [Italian Socialist Party] was vastly greater" than those supporting anarchism. Indeed, "the percentage of party membership derived from the bourgeoisie was significantly higher in the PSI than among the anarchists." [**Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892**, p. 82 and p. 282] Ironically, given Engels diatribes against the Italian anarchists stopping workers following "proletarian" (i.e. Marxist) politics and standing for elections, "as the PSI grew more working-class, just before the outbreak of war [in 1914], its Directorate [elected by the party congress] grew more anti-parliamentary." [Gwyn A. Williams, **Proletarian Order**, p. 29]

As we noted in [section A.5.5](#), the role of the anarchists and syndicalists compared to the Marxists during the 1920 near revolution suggested that the real "proletarian" revolutionaries were, in fact, the former and **not** the latter. All in all, the history of the Italian labour movement clearly show that, for most Marxists, whether a group represents the "proletariat" is simply dependent on their ideological commitment, **not** their actual class.

As regards the Jura Federation, we discover that its support was wider than suggested. As Marxist Paul Thomas noted, "*Bakunin's initial support in Switzerland - like Marx's in England - came from resident aliens, political refugees . . . but he also gathered support among Gastarbeiter for whom Geneva was already a centre, where builders, carpenters and workers in heavy industry tended to be French or Italian . . . Bakunin . . . also marshalled considerable support among French speaking domestic workers and watchmakers in the Jura.*" [**Karl Marx and the Anarchists**, p. 390] It would be interesting to hear a Marxist claim that "heavy industry" represented the past or "non-proletarian" elements! Similarly, E. H. Carr in his (hostile) biography of Bakunin, noted that the "*sections of the International at Geneva fell into two groups.*" Skilled craftsmen formed the "*Right wing*" while "*the builders, carpenters, and workers in the heavier trades, the majority of whom were immigrants from France and Italy, represented the Left.*" Unsurprisingly, these different groups of workers had different politics. The craftsmen "*concentrated on . . . reform*" while the others "*nourished hopes of a complete social upheaval.*" Bakunin, as would be expected, "*fanned the spirit of revolt*" among these, the proletarian workers and soon had a "*commanding position in the Geneva International.*" [**Michael Bakunin**, p. 361] It should be noted that Marx and the General Council of the International consistently supported the reformist wing of the International in Geneva which organised political alliances with the middle-class liberals during elections. Given these facts, it is little wonder that Howl concentrates on the support Bakunin received from domestic workers producing watches. To mention the support for Bakunin by organised, obviously proletarian, workers would undermine his case and so it is ignored.

Lastly, there is Spain. It seems funny that a Marxist would use Spain as an example **against** the class roots of anarchism. After all, that is one of the countries where anarchism dominated

the working class movement. As one historian points out, "*it was not until the 1860s - when anarchism was introduced - that a substantive working class movement began to emerge*" and "*throughout the history of Spanish anarchism, its survival depended in large measure on the anarchists' ability to maintain direct links with the workers.*" [George R. Esenwein, **Anarchist Ideology and the Working-Class Movement in Spain, 1868-1898**, p. 6 and p. 207] As well as organising "*newly proletarianised peasants*," the "Bakuninists" also organised industrial workers - indeed, far more successfully than the Socialists. Ironically, the UGT only started to approach the size of the CNT once it had started to organise "*newly proletarianised peasants*" in the 1930s (i.e., anarchist unions organised more of the industrial working class than the Socialist ones). From such a fact, we wonder if Marxists would argue that socialism rested on "*non-proletarian*" elements?

Moreover, the logic of dismissing anarchism as "*non-proletarian*" because it organised "*newly proletarianised peasants*" is simply laughable. After all, capitalism needed landless labours in order to start. This meant that the first proletarians lived in rural areas and were made up of ex-peasants. When these ex-peasants arrived in the towns and cities, they were still "*newly proletarianised peasants*." To ignore these groups of workers would mean potentially harming the labour movement. And, of course, a large section of Bolshevik support in 1917 was to be found in "*newly proletarianised peasants*" whether in the army or working in the factories. Ironically enough, the Mensheviks argued that the Bolsheviks gained their influence from worker-peasant industrial "*raw recruits*" and not from the genuine working class. [Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 830] As such, to dismiss anarchism because it gained converts from similar social strata as the Bolsheviks seems, on the face of it, a joke.

As can be seen Howl's attempts to subject anarchism to a "*class analysis*" simply fails. He selects the evidence which fits his theory and ignores that which does not. However, looking at the very examples he bases his case on shows how nonsensical it is. Simply put, anarchist ideas appealed to many types of workers, including typically "*proletarian*" ones who worked in large-scale industries. What they seem to have in common is a desire for radical social change, organised by themselves in their own combative class organs (such as unions). Moreover, like the early British workers movement, they considered these unions, as well as being organs of class struggle, could also be the framework of a free socialist society. Such a perspective is hardly backward (indeed, since 1917 most Marxists pay lip-service to this vision!).

Which brings us to the next major problem with Howl's argument, namely the fate of Marxism and the "*strong*" labour movement it allegedly is suited for. Looking at the only nation which did have a "*modern*" working class during the most of Marx's life, Britain, the "*strong*" labour movement it produced was (and has) not been anarchist, it is true, but neither was it (nor did it become) Marxist. Rather, it has been a mishmash of conflicting ideas, predominately reformist state socialist ones which owe little, if anything, to Marx. Indeed, the closest Britain came to developing a wide scale revolutionary working class movement was during the "*syndicalist revolt*" of the 1910s. Ironically, some Marxists joined this movement simply because the existing Marxist parties were so reformist or irrelevant to the "*life of modern working people*."

Looking at other countries, we find the same process. The rise of social democracy (Marxism) in the international labour movement simply signified the rise of reformism. Instead of producing a **revolutionary** labour movement, Marxism helped produce the

opposite (although, initially, hiding reformist activity behind revolutionary rhetoric). So when Howl asserts that anarchism "*survives in the absence of a strong workers' movement*," we have to wonder what planet he is on.

Thus, to state matters more correctly, anarchism flourishes during those periods when the labour movement and its members are radical, taking direct action and creating new forms of organisation which are still based on workers' self-management. This is to be expected as anarchism is both based upon and is the result of workers' self-liberation through struggle. In less militant times, the effects of bourgeois society and the role of unions within the capitalist economy can de-radicalise the labour movement and lead to the rise of bureaucracy within it. It is then, during periods when the class struggle is low, that reformist ideas spread. Sadly, Marxism aided that spread by its tactics - the role of electioneering focused struggle away from direct action and into the ballot-box and so onto leaders rather than working class self-activity.

Moreover, if we look at the current state of the labour movement, then we would have to conclude that Marxism is "*an ideology alien to the life of modern working people*." Where are the large Marxist working class unions and parties? There are a few large reformist socialist and Stalinist parties in continental Europe, but these are not Marxist in any meaningful sense of the word. Most of the socialist ones used to be Marxist, although they relatively quickly stopped being revolutionary in any meaningful sense of the word a very long time ago (some, like the German Social Democrats, organised counter-revolutionary forces to crush working class revolt after the First World War). As for the Stalinist parties, it would be better to consider it a sign of shame that they get any support in the working class at all. In terms of revolutionary Marxists, there are various Trotskyist sects arguing amongst themselves on who is the **real** vanguard of the proletariat, but **no** Marxist labour movement.

Which, of course, brings us to the next point, namely the ideological problems for Leninists themselves by such an assertion. After all, Lenin himself argued that "*the life of modern working people*" could only produce "*trade-union consciousness*." According to him, socialist ideas were developed independently of working people by the socialist (middle-class) "*intelligentsia*." As we discuss in [section H.5.1](#), for Lenin, socialism was an ideology which was alien to the life of modern working class people.

Lastly, there is the question of whether Marx and Engels can seriously be thought of as being able to decree once and for all what is and is not "*proletarian*" politics. Given that neither of these men were working class (one was a capitalist!) it makes the claim that they would know "*proletarian*" politics suspect. Moreover, they formulated their ideas of what constitute "*proletarian*" politics before a modern working class actually developed in any country bar Britain. This means, that from the experience of **one** section of the proletariat in **one** country in the 1840s, Marx and Engels have decreed for all time what is and is not a "*proletarian*" set of politics! On the face of it, it is hardly a convincing argument, particularly as we have over 150 years of experience of these tactics with which to evaluate them!

Based on this perspective, Marx and Engels opposed all other socialist groups as "*sects*" if they did not subscribe to their ideas. Ironically, while arguing that all other socialists were fostering their sectarian politics onto the workers movement, they themselves fostered their own perspective onto it. Originally, because the various sections of the International worked under different circumstances and had attained different degrees of development, the theoretical ideals which reflected the real movement also diverged. The International,

therefore, was open to all socialist and working class tendencies and its general policies would be, by necessity, based on conference decisions that reflected this divergence. These decisions would be determined by free discussion within and between sections of all economic, social and political ideas. Marx, however, replaced this policy with a common program of "*political action*" (i.e. electioneering) by mass political parties via the fixed Hague conference of 1872. Rather than having this position agreed by the normal exchange of ideas and theoretical discussion in the sections guided by the needs of the practical struggle, Marx imposed what **he** considered as the future of the workers movement onto the International - and denounced those who disagreed with him as sectarians. The notion that what Marx considered as necessary might be another sectarian position imposed on the workers' movement did not enter his head nor those of his followers:

*"Marx had indeed insisted, in the earlier years of the First International, on the need for building on actual movements rather than constructing a dogma which movements were then required to fit. But when the actual movements took forms which he disliked, as they largely did in Spain and Italy, in Germany under Lassalle's influence, and in Great Britain as soon as the Trade Unions' most immediate demands had been met, he was apt to forget his own precepts and to become the grand inquisitor into heretical misdeeds."* [G.D.H. Cole, **A History of Socialist Thought**, vol. 2, p. 256]

That support for "*political action*" was just as "sectarian" as support for non-participation in elections can be seen from Engels 1895 comment that "*[t]here had long been universal suffrage in France, but it had fallen into disrepute through the misuse to which the Bonapartist government had put it . . . It also existed in Spain since the republic, but in Spain boycott of elections was ever the rule of all serious opposition parties . . . The revolutionary workers of the Latin countries had been wont to regard the suffrage as a snare, as an instrument of government trickery.*" [**Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 565] Needless to say, he had failed to mention those little facts when he was attacking anarchists for expressing the opinions of the "*revolutionary workers of the Latin countries*" and "*all serious opposition parties*" in the 1870s! Similarly, the Haymarket Martyrs had moved from a Marxist position on elections to an anarchist one after their own experiences using the ballot box, as did the many British socialists who became syndicalists in the early years of the 20th century. It seems strange to conclude that these positions are not expressions of working class struggle while that of Marx and Engels are, particularly given the terrible results of that strategy!

Thus the Marxist claim that true working class movements are based on mass political parties based on hierarchical, centralised, leadership and those who reject this model and political action (electioneering) are sects and sectarians is simply their option and little more. Once we look at the workers' movement without the blinkers created by Marxism, we see that Anarchism was a movement of working class people using what they considered valid tactics to meet their own social, economic and political goals - tactics and goals which evolved to meet changing circumstances. Seeing the rise of anarchism and syndicalism as the political expression of the class struggle, guided by the needs of the practical struggle they faced naturally follows when we recognise the Marxist model for what it is - just one possible interpretation of the future of the workers' movement rather than **the** future of that movement (and as the history of Social Democracy indicates, the predictions of Bakunin and the anarchists within the First International were proved correct).

This tendency to squeeze the revolutionary workers' movement into the forms decreed by two people in the mid-nineteenth century has proved to be disastrous for it. Even after the total

failure of social democracy, the idea of "*revolutionary*" parliamentarianism was fostered onto the Third International by the Bolsheviks in spite of the fact that more and more revolutionary workers in advanced capitalist nations were rejecting it in favour of direct action and autonomous working class self-organisation. Anarchists and libertarian Marxists based themselves on this actual movement of working people, influenced by the failure of "*political action*," while the Bolsheviks based themselves on the works of Marx and Engels and their own experiences in a backward, semi-feudal society whose workers had already created factory committees and soviets by direct action. It was for this reason that the anarcho-syndicalist Augustin Souchy said he referred "*to the tendencies that exist in the modern workers' movement*" when he argued at the Second Congress of the Communist International:

*"It must be granted that among revolutionary workers the tendency toward parliamentarism is disappearing more and more. On the contrary, a strong anti-parliamentary tendency is becoming apparent in the ranks of the most advanced part of the proletariat. Look at the Shop Stewards' movement [in Britain] or Spanish syndicalism . . . The IWW is absolutely antiparliamentary . . . I want to point out that the idea of antiparliamentarism is asserting itself more strongly in Germany . . . as a result of the revolution itself . . . We must view the question in this light."*

[**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, pp. 176-7]

Of course, this perspective of basing yourself on the ideas and tactics generated by the class struggle was rejected in favour of a return to the principles of Marx and Engels and their vision of what constituted a genuine "*proletarian*" movement. If these tactics were the correct ones, then why did they not lead to a less dismal set of results? After all, the degeneration of social democracy into reformism would suggest their failure and sticking "*revolutionary*" before their tactics (as in "*revolutionary parliamentarianism*") changes little. Marxists, like anarchists, are meant to be materialists, not idealists. What was the actual outcome of the Leninist strategies? Did they result in successful proletarian revolutions. No, they did not. The revolutionary wave peaked and fell and the Leninist parties themselves very easily and quickly became Stalinised. Significantly, those areas with a large anarchist, syndicalist or quasi-syndicalist (e.g. the council communists) workers movements (Italy, Spain and certain parts of Germany) came closest to revolution and by the mid-1930s, only Spain with its strong anarchist movement had a revolutionary labour movement. Therefore, rather than representing "*non-proletarian*" or "*sectarian*" politics forced upon the working class, anarchism reflected the politics required to built a **revolutionary** workers' movement rather than a reformist mass party.

As such, perhaps we can finally lay to rest the idea that Marx predicted the whole future of the labour movement and the path it must take like some kind of socialist Nostradamus. Equally, we can dismiss Marxist claims of the "*non-proletarian*" nature of anarchism as uninformed and little more than an attempt to squeeze history into an ideological prison. As noted above, in order to present such an analysis, the actual class compositions of significant events and social movements have to be manipulated. This is the case of the Paris Commune, for example, which was predominantly a product of artisans (i.e. the "*petit bourgeoisie*"), **not** the industrial working class and yet claimed by Marxists as an example of the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*." Ironically, many of the elements of the Commune praised by Marx can be found in the works of Proudhon and Bakunin which pre-date the uprising. Similarly, the idea that workers' fighting organisations ("soviets") would be the means to abolish the state and the framework of a socialist society can be found in Bakunin's works, decades before Lenin

paid lip-service to this idea in 1917. For a theory allegedly resting on "*non-proletarian*" elements anarchism has successfully predicted many of the ideas Marxists claim to have learnt from proletarian class struggle!

So, in summary, the claims that anarchism is "*alien*" to working class life, that it is "*non-proletarian*" or "*survives in the absence of a strong workers' movement*" are simply false. Looking objectively at the facts of the matter quickly shows that this is the case.

## H.2.13 Do anarchists reject '*political*' struggles and action?

A common Marxist claim is that anarchists and syndicalists ignore or dismiss the importance of "*political*" struggles or action. This is not true. Rather, as we discuss in [section J.2.10](#), we think that "*political*" struggles should be conducted by the same means as social and economic struggles, namely by direct action, solidarity and working class self-organisation.

As this is a common assertion, it is useful to provide a quick summary of why anarchists do not, in fact, reject "*political*" struggles and action as such. Rather, to quote Bakunin, anarchism "*does not reject politics generally. It will certainly be forced to involve itself insofar as it will be forced to struggle against the bourgeois class. It only rejects bourgeois politics*" as it "*establishes the predatory domination of the bourgeoisie.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 313] For Kropotkin, it was a truism that it was "*absolutely impossible . . . to confine the ideas of the working mass within the narrow circle of reductions in working hours and wage increases . . . The social question compels attention.*" This fact implied two responses: "*the workers' organisation propels itself either into the sterile path of parliamentary politics as in Germany, or into the path of revolution.*" [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886**, p. 241]

So while Marxists often argue that anarchists are exclusively interested in economic struggle and reject "*politics*" or "*political action*," the truth of the matter is different. We are well aware of the importance of political issues, although anarchists reject using bourgeois methods in favour of direct action. Moreover, we are aware that any social or economic struggle has its political aspects and that such struggles bring the role of the state as defender of capitalism and the need to struggle against it into focus:

*"There is no serious strike that occurs today without the appearance of troops, the exchange of blows and some acts of revolt. Here they fight with the troops; there they march on the factories; . . . in Pittsburgh in the United States, the strikers found themselves masters of a territory as large as France, and the strike became the signal for a general revolt against the State; in Ireland the peasants on strike found themselves in open revolt against the State. Thanks to government intervention the rebel against the factory becomes the rebel against the State."* [Kropotkin, quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Op. Cit.**, p. 256]

As Malatesta argued, from "*the economic struggle one must pass to the political struggle, that is to struggle against government; and instead of opposing the capitalist millions with the workers' few pennies scraped together with difficulty, one must oppose the rifles and guns which defend property with the more effective means that the people will be able to defeat force by force.*" [**Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas**, pp. 193-4]

This means that the question of whether to conduct political struggles is **not** the one which divides anarchists from Marxists. Rather, it is a question of **how** this struggle is fought. For anarchists, this struggle is best fought using **direct action** (see [section J.2](#)) and fighting working class organisations based in our workplaces and communities. For Marxists, the political struggle is seen as being based on standing candidates in bourgeois elections. This can be seen from the resolution passed by the socialist ("Second") International in 1893. This resolution was designed to exclude anarchists and stated that only "*those Socialist Parties and Organisations which recognise the organisation of workers and of political action*" could join the International. By "*political action*" it meant "*that the working-class organisations seek, in as far as possible, to use or conquer political rights and the machinery of legislation for the furthering of the interests of the proletariat and the conquest of political power.*" [quoted by Susan Milner, **The Dilemmas of Internationalism**, p. 49] Significantly, while this International and its member parties (particular the German Social Democrats) were happy to expel anarchists, they never expelled the leading reformists from their ranks.

So, in general, anarchists use the word "*political action*" to refer exclusively to the taking part of revolutionaries in bourgeois elections (i.e. electioneering or parliamentarianism). It does not mean a rejection of fighting for political reforms or a lack of interest in political issues, quite the reverse in fact. The reason **why** anarchists reject this tactic is discussed in [section J.2.6](#).

For Kropotkin, the idea that you could somehow "prepare" for a revolution by electioneering was simply a joke. "*As if the bourgeoisie,*" he argued, "*still holding on to its capital, could allow them [the socialists] to experiment with socialism even if they succeeded in gaining control of power! As if the conquest of the municipalities were possible without the conquest of the factories.*" He saw that "*those who yesterday were considered socialists are today letting go of socialism, by renouncing its mother idea ["the need to replace the wage system and to abolish individual ownership of . . . social capital"] and passing over into the camp of the bourgeoisie, while retaining, so as to hide their turnabout, the label of socialism.*"

[**Words of a Rebel**, p. 181 and p. 180] The differences in results between direct action and electioneering were obvious:

*"However moderate the war cry - provided it is in the domain of relations between capital and labour - as soon as it proceeds to put it into practice by revolutionary methods, it ends by increasing it and will be led to demand the overthrow of the regime of property. On the other hand a party which confines itself to parliamentary politics ends up abandoning its programme, however advanced it may have been at the beginning."* [Kropotkin, quoted by Cahm, **Op. Cit.**, p. 252]

Ultimately, the bourgeois tactics used ended up with bourgeois results. As Emma Goldman argued, socialism "*was led astray by the evil spirit of politics*" and "*landed in the [political] trap and has now but one desire - to adjust itself to the narrow confines of its cage, to become part of the authority, part of the very power that has slain the beautiful child Socialism and left behind a hideous monster.*" [**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 103] The net effect of "*political action*" was the corruption of the socialist movement into a reformist party which betrayed the promise of socialism in favour of making existing society better (so it can last longer). This process confirmed Bakunin's predictions. As Kropotkin put it:

*"The middle class will not give up its power without a struggle. It will resist. And in proportion as Socialists will become part of the Government and share power with*

*the middle class, their Socialism will grow paler and paler. This is, indeed, what Socialism is rapidly doing. Were this no so, the middle classes . . . would not share their power with the Socialists.*" [Evolution and Environment, p. 102]

In addition, as we argue in [section J.2.5](#), direct action is either based on (or creates) forms of self-managed working class organisations. The process of collective struggle, in other words, necessitates collective forms of organisation and decision making. These combative organisations, as well as conducting the class struggle under capitalism, can also be the framework of a free society (see [section H.1.4](#)). However, standing in elections does **not** produce such alternative social structures and, indeed, hinders them as the focus for social changes becomes a few leaders working in existing (i.e. bourgeois) structures and bodies (see [section H.1.5](#)).

As can be seen, anarchists reject "*political*" struggle (i.e. electioneering) for good (and historically vindicated) reasons. This makes a mockery of Marxists assertions (beginning with Marx) that anarchists like Bakunin "*opposed all political action by the working class since this would imply 'recognition' of the existing state.*" [Derek Howl, "The Legacy of Hal Draper," pp. 13-49, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 147] This, in fact, is a common Marxist claim, namely that anarchists reject "*political struggle*" on principle (i.e. for idealistic purposes). In the words of Engels, Bakunin was "*opposed to all political action by the working class, since this would in fact involve recognition of the existing state.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 49] Sadly, like all Marxists, he failed to indicate where, in fact, Bakunin actually said that. As can be seen, this was **not** the case. Bakunin, like all revolutionary anarchists, rejected "*political action*" (in the sense of electioneering) simply because they feared that such tactics would be counterproductive and undermine the revolutionary nature of the labour movement. As the experience of Marxist Social Democracy showed, he was correct.

In summary, while anarchists reject standing of socialists in elections ("*political action*," narrowly defined), we do not reject the need to fight for political reforms or specific political issues. However, we see such action as being based on collective working class **direct action** organised around combative organs of working class self-management and power rather than the individualistic act of placing a cross on a piece of paper once every few years and letting leaders fight your struggles for you.

## H.2.14 Are anarchist organisations "*ineffective*," "*elitist*" or "*downright bizarre*"?

Marxists often accuse anarchist organisations of being "*elitist*" or "*secret*." Pat Stack (of the British SWP) ponders the history of anarchist organisation (at least the SWP version of that history):

*"how otherwise [than Leninist vanguard political parties] do revolutionaries organise? Apart from the serious efforts of anarcho-syndicalists to grapple with this problem, anarchists have failed to pose any serious alternative. In as much as they do, they have produced either the ineffective, the elitist or the downright bizarre. Bakunin's organisation, the 'Alliance of Social Democracy', managed all three: The organisation had two overlapping forms, one secret, involving only the "intimates", and one public, the Alliance of Social Democracy. Even in its open, public mode, the*

*alliance was to be a highly centralised organisation, with all decisions on the national level approved by the Central Committee. Since it was the real controlling body, the secret organisation was even more tightly centralised . . . with first a Central Committee, then a "central Geneva section" acting as the "permanent delegation of the permanent Central Committee", and, finally, within the central Geneva section a "Central Bureau", which was to be both the "executive power . . . composed of three, or five, or even seven members" of the secret organisation and the executive directory of the public organisation.'*

*"That this was far more elitist and less democratic than Lenin's model is clear."*  
["Anarchy in the UK?", **Socialist Review**, no. 246]

There are, as is obvious, numerous problems with Stack's assertions. Firstly, he makes absolutely **no** attempt to discuss anarchist ideas on the question of revolutionary organisation. Rather, he prefers to present a somewhat distorted account of the ideas of Bakunin on the structural aspects of his organisation, ideas which died with him in 1876! Secondly, as Stack fails to discuss how anarchists (including Bakunin) see their organisations operating, its hard to determine whether they are "*ineffective*" or "*elitist*." This is hardly surprising, as they are neither. Thirdly, even as regards his own example (Bakunin's Alliance) his claim that it was "*ineffectual*" seems inappropriate in the extreme. Whether it was "*elitist*" or "*downright bizarre*" is hard to determine, as Stack quotes an unnamed author and their quotes from its structure. Fourthly, and ironically for Stack, Lenin's "*model*" shared many of the same features as those of Bakunin's!

Significantly, Stack fails to discuss any of the standard anarchist ideas on how revolutionaries should organise. As we discuss in [section J.3](#), there are three main types: the "*synthesis*" federation, the "*class struggle*" federation and those inspired by the "*Platform*." In the twenty-first century, these are the main types of anarchist organisation. As such, it would be extremely hard to argue that these are "*elitist*," "*ineffective*" or "*downright bizarre*." What these organisational ideas have in common is the vision of an anarchist organisation as a federation of autonomous self-managed groups which work with others as equals. How can directly democratic organisations, which influence others by the force of their ideas and by their example, be "*elitist*" or "*downright bizarre*"? Little wonder, then, that Stack used an example from 1868 to attack anarchism in the twenty-first century! If he actually presented an honest account of anarchist ideas then his claims would quickly be seen to be nonsense. And as for the claim of being "*ineffective*," well, given that Stack's article is an attempt to combat anarchist influence in the anti-globalisation movement it would suggest the opposite.

Even looking at the example of Bakunin's Alliance, we can see evidence that Stack's summary is simply wrong. It seems strange for Stack to claim that the Alliance was "*ineffective*." After all, Marx spent many years combating it (and Bakunin's influence) in the First International. Indeed, so effective was it that anarchist ideas dominated most sections of that organisation, forcing Marx to move the General Council to America to ensure that it did not fall into the hands of the anarchists (i.e. of the majority). Moreover, it was hardly "*ineffective*" when it came to building the International. As Marxist Paul Thomas notes, "*the International was to prove capable of expanding its membership only at the behest of the Bakuninists [sic!] and "[w]herever the International was spreading, it was doing so under the mantle of Bakuninism.*" [**Karl Marx and the Anarchists**, p. 315 and p. 319] Even Engels had to admit that the Spanish section was "*one of finest organisations within the International*

(which the Spanish Marxists had to "rescue from the influence of the Alliance humbugs"). [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 292]

Yet Stack considers this as an example of an "*ineffective*" organisation! But, to be fair, this seems to have been a common failing with Marxists. In 1877, for example, Engels showed his grasp of things by saying "*we may safely predict that the new departure [in Spain] will not come from these 'anarchist' spouters, but from the small body of intelligent and energetic workmen who, in 1872, remained true to the International.*" [Marx, Engels, Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 163] In reality, the Spanish Socialist Party was bureaucratic and reformist to the core while it was the anarchists who made the Spanish labour movement the most dynamic and revolutionary in the world.

As regards Stack's summary of Bakunin's organisation goes, we must note that Stack is quoting an unnamed source on Bakunin's views on this subject. We, therefore, have no way of evaluating whether this is a valid summary of Bakunin's ideas on this matter. As we indicate elsewhere (see [section J.3.7](#)) Leninist summaries of Bakunin's ideas on secret organising usually leave a lot to be desired (by usually leaving a lot out or quoting out of context certain phrases). As such, and given the total lack of relevance of this model for anarchists since the 1870s, we will not bother to discuss this summary. Simply put, it is a waste of time to discuss an organisational model which no modern anarchist supports.

Moreover, there is a key way in which Bakunin's ideas on this issue were far **less "elitist"** and **more "democratic"** than Lenin's model. Simply, Bakunin always stressed that his organisation "*rules out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 172] The "*main purpose and task of the organisation,*" he argued, would be to "*help the people to achieve self-determination.*" It would "*not threaten the liberty of the people because it is free from all official character*" and "*not placed above the people like state power.*" Its programme "*consists of the fullest realisation of the liberty of the people*" and its influence is "*not contrary to the free development and self-determination of the people, or its organisation from below according to its own customs and instincts because it acts on the people only by the natural personal influence of its members who are not invested with any power.*" Thus the revolutionary group would be the "*helper*" of the masses, with an "*organisation within the people itself.*" [quoted by Michael Confino, **Daughter of a Revolutionary**, p. 259, p. 261, p. 256 and p. 261] The revolution itself would see "*an end to all masters and to domination of every kind, and the free construction of popular life in accordance with popular needs, not from above downward, as in the state, but from below upward, by the people themselves, dispensing with all governments and parliaments - a voluntary alliance of agricultural and factory worker associations, communes, provinces, and nations; and, finally, . . . universal human brotherhood triumphing on the ruins of all the states.*" [Bakunin, **Statism and Anarchy**, p. 33] In other words, Bakunin saw the social revolution in terms of popular participation and control, **not** the seizing of power by a "revolutionary" party or group.

Unlike Lenin, Bakunin did not confuse party power with people power. His organisation, for all its faults (and they were many), did not aim to take power in the name of the working class and exercise power through a centralised, top-down state. Rather, its would be based on the "*natural influence*" of its members within mass organisations. The influence of anarchists would, therefore, be limited to the level by which their specific ideas were accepted by other members of the same organisations after discussion and debate. As regards the nature of the labour movement, we must point out that Bakunin provided the same "*serious*" answer as the

anarcho-syndicalists - namely, revolutionary labour unionism. As we discuss in [section H.2.8](#), Bakunin's ideas on this matter are nearly identical to those of the syndicalists Stack praises.

As noted, however, no anarchist group has reproduced the internal structure of the Alliance, which means that Stack's point is simply historical in nature. Sadly this is not the case with his own politics as the ideas he attacks actually parallel Lenin's model in many ways (although, as indicated above, how Bakunin's organisation would function in the class struggle was fundamentally different, as Lenin's party sought power for itself). Given that Stack is proposing Lenin's model as a viable means of organising revolutionaries, it is useful to summarise it. We shall take as an example two statements issued by the Second World Congress of the Communist International in 1920 under the direction of Lenin. These are "*Twenty-One Conditions of Communism*" and "*Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution*." These two documents provide a vision of Leninist organisation which is fundamentally elitist.

Lenin's "*model*" is clear from these documents. The parties adhering to the Communist International had to have two overlapping forms, one legal (i.e. public) and another "*illegal*" (i.e. secret). It was the "*duty*" of these parties "*to create everywhere a parallel illegal organisational apparatus.*" [**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 2, p. 767] Needless to say, this illegal organisation would be the real controlling body, as it would have to be made up of trusted communists and could only be even more tightly centralised than the open party as its members could only be appointed from above by the illegal organisation's central committee. To stress that the "*illegal*" (i.e. secret) organisation controlled the party, the Communist International agreed that that "*[i]n countries where the bourgeoisie . . . is still in power, the Communist parties must learn to combine legal and illegal activity in a planned way. However, the legal work must be placed under the actual control of the illegal party at all times.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 1, p. 198-9] In this, it should be noted, the Leninists followed Marx's in 1850 comments (which he later rejected) on the need to "*establish an independent secret and public organisation of the workers' party.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 10, p. 282]

Even in its open, public mode, the Communist Party was to be a highly centralised organisation, with all decisions on the national level made by the Central Committee. The parties must be as centralised as possible, with a party centre which has strength and authority and is equipped with the most comprehensive powers. Also, the party press and other publications, and all party publishing houses, must be subordinated to the party presidium. This applied on an international level as well, with the decisions of the Communist International's Executive Committee binding on all parties belonging to it. [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 2, p. 769] Moreover, "*Communist cells of all kinds must be subordinate to each other in a strictly hierarchical order of rank as precisely as possible.*" Democratic centralism itself was fundamentally hierarchical, with its "*basic principles*" being that "*the higher bodies shall be elected by the lower, that all instructions of the higher bodies are categorically and necessarily binding on the lower.*" Indeed, "*there shall be a strong party centre whose authority is universally and unquestionably recognised for all leading party comrades in the period between congresses.*" Any "*advocacy of broad 'autonomy' for the local party organisations only weakens the ranks of the Communist Party*" and "*favours petty-bourgeois, anarchist and disruptive tendencies.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 1, p. 198]

It seems strange for Stack to argue that Bakunin's ideas (assuming he presents an honest account of them, of course) were "*far more elitist and less democratic than Lenin's model*" as

they obviously were not. Indeed, the similarities between Stack's summary of Bakunin's ideas and Leninist theory are striking. The Leninist party has the same division between open and secret (legal and illegal) structures as in Bakunin's, the same centralism and top-down nature. Lenin argued that "*[i]n all countries, even in those that are freest, most 'legal,' and most 'peaceful' . . . it is now absolutely indispensable for every Communist Party to systematically combine legal and illegal work, legal and illegal organisation.*" He stressed that "*[o]nly the most reactionary philistine, no matter what cloak of fine 'democratic' and pacifist phrases he may don, will deny this fact or the conclusion that of necessity follows from it, viz., that all legal Communist parties must immediately form illegal organisations for the systematic conduct of illegal work.*" [Collected Works, vol. 31, p. 195] This was due to the threat of state repression, which also faced Bakunin's Alliance. As Murray Bookchin argued, "*Bakunin's emphasis on conspiracy and secrecy can be understood only against the social background of Italy, Spain, and Russia the three countries in Europe where conspiracy and secrecy were matters of sheer survival.*" [The Spanish Anarchists, p. 24]

For anarchists, the similarity in structure between Bakunin and Lenin is no source of embarrassment. Rather, we argue that it is due to a similarity in political conditions in Russia and **not** similarities in political ideas. If we look at Bakunin's ideas on social revolution and the workers' movement we see a fully libertarian perspective - of a movement from the bottom-up, based on the principles of direct action, self-management and federalism. Anarchists since his death have applied **these** ideas to the specific anarchist organisation as well, rejecting the non-libertarian elements of Bakunin's ideas which Stack correctly (if somewhat hypocritically and dishonestly) denounces. All in all, Stack has shown himself to be a hypocrite or, at best, a "*most reactionary philistine*" (to use Lenin's choice expression).

In addition, it would be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of Stack's Leninist alternative. Looking at the outcome of the Russian Revolution, we can only surmise that it is not very effective. This was because its goal is meant to be a socialist society based on soviet democracy. Did the Russian Revolution actually result in such a society? Far from it. The Kronstadt revolt was repressed in 1921 because it demanded soviet democracy. Nor was this an isolated example. The Bolsheviks had been disbanding soviets with elected non-Bolshevik majorities since early 1918 (i.e. **before** the start of the Civil War) and by 1920 leading Bolsheviks were arguing that dictatorship of the proletariat could only be expressed by means of the dictatorship of the party. Clearly, the Bolshevik method is hardly "*effective*" in the sense of achieving its stated goals. Nor was it particularly effective before the revolution either. During the 1905 revolution, the Bolsheviks opposed the councils of workers' deputies (soviets) which had been formed and gave them an ultimatum: either accept the programme of the Bolsheviks or else disband! The soviets ignored them. In February 1917 the Bolshevik party opposed the actions that produced the revolution which overthrew the Tsar. Simply put, the one event that validates the Bolshevik model is the October Revolution of 1917 and even that failed (see [section H.5.12](#)).

Moreover, it backfires on his own politics. The very issues which Stack raises as being "*elitist*" in Bakunin (secret and open organisation, centralisation, top-down decision making) are shared by Lenin. Given that no other anarchist organisation has ever followed the Alliance structure (and, indeed, it is even doubtful the Alliance followed it!), it makes a mockery of the scientific method to base a generalisation on an exception rather than the norm (indeed, the only exception). For Stack to use Bakunin's ideas on this issue as some kind of evidence against anarchism staggers belief. Given that anarchists reject Bakunin's

ideas on this subject while Leninists continue to subscribe to Lenin's, it is very clear that Stack is being extremely hypocritical in this matter.

One of Stack's comrades in the SWP highlighted another of the great Marxist myths about anarchist organisation when he stated categorically that "*[a]ll the major anarchist organisations in history have been centralised but have operated in secret.*" As evidence they echo Stack's distortions of Bakunin's Alliance before stating that the "*anarchist organisation inside the Spanish C.N.T., the F.A.I., was centralised and secret. A revolutionary party thrives on open debate and common struggle with wider groups of workers.*" [Socialist Worker, no. 1714, 16/09/2000]

It is just as well it stated "*all the major anarchist organisations*" as it is vague enough to allow the denial of obvious counter-examples as not being "major" enough. We can point to hundreds of anarchist organisations that are/were not secret. For example, the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI) was a non-secret organisation. Given that it had around 20,000 members in 1920, we wonder by what criteria the SWP excludes it from being a "*major anarchist organisation*"? After all, estimates of the membership of the F.A.I. vary from around 6,000 to around 30,000. Bakunin's "Alliance" amounted to, at most, under 100. In terms of size, the UAI was equal to the F.A.I. and outnumbered the "Alliance" considerably. Why was the UAI not a "*major anarchist organisation*"? Then there are the French anarchist organisations. In the 1930, the **Union Anarchiste** had over 2,000 members, an influential newspaper and organised many successful public meetings and campaigns (see David Berry's **A History of the French Anarchist movement, 1917-1945** for details). Surely that counts as a "*major anarchist organisation*"? Today, the French Anarchist Federation has a weekly newspaper and groups all across France as well as in Belgium. That is not secret and is one of the largest anarchist organisations in the world. We wonder why the SWP excluded such examples? Needless to say, all of these were based on federal structures rather than centralised ones.

As for the Spanish Anarchists, the common Leninist notion that it was centralised seems to flow from Felix Morrow's assertion that "*Spanish Anarchism had in the FAI a highly centralised party apparatus through which it maintained control of the CNT.*" [Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, p. 100] Like the SWP, no attempt was made to provide evidence to support this claim. It undoubtedly flows from the dogmatic Leninist belief that centralism is automatically more efficient than federalism combined with the fact that the Leninists could not take over the CNT. However, in reality, the FAI neither controlled the CNT nor was it centralised or secret.

The FAI - the Iberian Anarchist Federation - was a federation of regional federations (including the Portuguese Anarchist Union). These regional federations, in turn, were federations of highly autonomous anarchist affinity groups. "*Like the CNT,*" noted Murray Bookchin, "*the FAI was structured along confederal lines . . . Almost as a matter of second nature, dissidents were permitted a considerable amount of freedom in voicing and publishing material against the leadership and established policies.*" The FAI "*was more loosely jointed as an organisation than many of its admirers and critics seem to recognise. It has no bureaucratic apparatus, no membership cards or dues, and no headquarters with paid officials, secretaries, and clerks. . . They jealously guarded the autonomy of their affinity groups from the authority of higher organisational bodies - a state of mind hardly conducive to the development of a tightly knit, vanguard organisation . . . It had no official program by which all faistas could mechanically guide their actions.*" [The Spanish Anarchists, pp.

197-8] So regardless of Morrow's claims, the FAI was a federation of autonomous affinity groups in which, as one member put it, "*[e]ach FAI group thought and acted as it deemed fit, without bothering about what the others might be thinking or deciding . . . they had no . . . opportunity or jurisdiction . . . to foist a party line upon the grass-roots.*" [Francisco Carrasquer, quoted by Stuart Christie, **We, the Anarchists!**, p. 28]

Was the F.A.I. a "secret" organisation? When it was founded in 1927, Spain was under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and so it was illegal and secret by necessity. As Stuart Christie correctly notes, "*[a]s an organisation publicly committed to the overthrow of the dictatorship, the F.A.I. functioned, from 1927 to 1931, as an illegal rather than a secret organisation. From the birth of the Republic in 1931 onwards, the F.A.I. was simply an organisation which, until 1937, refused to register as an organisation as required by Republican Law.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 24] Thus it was illegal rather than secret. As one anarchist militant asked, "*[i]f it was secret, how come I was able to attend F.A.I. meetings without ever having joined or paid dues to the 'specific' organisation?*" [Francesco Carrasquer, quoted by Christie, **Op. Cit.**, p. 24] The organisation held public meetings, attended by thousands, as well as journals and newspapers. Its most notable members, such as Durruti, hardly kept their affiliation secret. Moreover, given the periods of repression suffered by the Spanish libertarian movement throughout its history (including being banned and forced underground during the Republic) being an illegal organisation made perfect sense. The SWP, like most Marxists, ignore historical context and so mislead the reader.

Did the F.A.I. ignore "*open debate and common struggle.*" No, of course not. The members of the F.A.I. were also members of the C.N.T. The C.N.T. was based around mass assemblies in which all members could speak. It was here that members of the F.A.I. took part in forming C.N.T. policy along with other C.N.T. members. Anarchists in the C.N.T. who were not members of the F.A.I. indicate this. Jose Borras Casacarosa noted that "*[o]ne has to recognise that the F.A.I. did not intervene in the C.N.T. from above or in an authoritarian manner as did other political parties in the unions. It did so from the base through militants . . . the decisions which determined the course taken by the C.N.T. were taken under constant pressure from these militants.*" Jose Campos states that F.A.I. militants "*tended to reject control of confederal committees and only accepted them on specific occasions . . . if someone proposed a motion in assembly, the other F.A.I. members would support it, usually successfully. It was the individual standing of the faista in open assembly.*" [quoted by Stuart Christie, **Op. Cit.**, p. 62] It should be remembered that at union conferences and congresses the "*delegates, whether or not they were members of the FAI, were presenting resolutions adopted by their unions at open membership meetings. Actions taken at the congress had to be reported back to their unions at open meetings, and given the degree of union education among the members, it was impossible for delegates to support personal, non-representative positions.*" [Juan Gomez Casas, **Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI**, p. 121]

Significantly, it should be noted that Morrow was re-cycling an argument which was produced by the reformist wing of the CNT in the 1930s after it had lost influence in the union rank-and-file ("*The myth of the FAI as conqueror and ruler of the CNT was created basically by the Treinistas.*" [Juan Gomez Casas, **Op. Cit.**, p. 134]). That a Trotskyist should repeat the arguments of failed bureaucrats in the CNT is not too surprising in that Trotskyism itself is simply the ideology of Russian failed bureaucrats.

Clearly, the standard Marxist account of anarchist organisations leave a lot to be desired. They concentrate on just one or two examples (almost always Bakunin's Alliance or the FAI,

usually both) and ignore the vast bulk of anarchist organisations. Their accounts of the atypical organisations they do pick is usually flawed, particularly in the case of the FAI where they simply do not understand the historic context nor how it actually did organise. Finally, somewhat ironically, in their attacks on Bakunin's ideas they fail to note the similarities between his ideas and Lenin's and, equally significantly, the key areas in which they differ. All in all, anarchists would argue that it is Leninist ideas on the vanguard party which are "*elitist*," "*ineffective*" and "*downright bizarre*." As we discuss in [section H.5](#), the only thing the Leninist "revolutionary" party is effective for is replacing one set of bosses with a new set (the leaders of the party).

## H.3 What are the myths of state socialism?

Ask most people what socialism means and they will point to the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and a host of other authoritarian, centralised, exploitative and oppressive party dictatorships. These regimes have in common two things. Firstly, the claim that their rulers are Marxists or socialists. Secondly, that they have successfully alienated millions of working class people from the very idea of socialism. Indeed, the supporters of capitalism simply had to describe the "socialist paradises" as they really are in order to put people off socialism. The Stalinist regimes and their various apologists (and even "opponents", like the Trotskyists, who defended them as "*degenerated workers' states*") let the bourgeoisie have an easy time in dismissing all working-class demands and struggles as so many attempts to set up similar party dictatorships.

The association of "*socialism*" or "*communism*" with these dictatorships has often made anarchists wary of calling themselves socialists or communists in case our ideas are associated with them. As Errico Malatesta argued in 1924:

*"I foresee the possibility that the communist anarchists will gradually abandon the term 'communist': it is growing in ambivalence and falling into disrepute as a result of Russian 'communist' despotism. If the term is eventually abandoned this will be a repetition of what happened with the word 'socialist.' We who, in Italy at least, were the first champions of socialism and maintained and still maintain that we are the true socialists in the broad and human sense of the word, ended by abandoning the term to avoid confusion with the many and various authoritarian and bourgeois deviations of socialism. Thus too we may have to abandon the term 'communist' for fear that our ideal of free human solidarity will be confused with the avaricious despotism which has for some time triumphed in Russia and which one party, inspired by the Russian example, seeks to impose world-wide."* [The Anarchist Revolution, p. 20]

That, to a large degree happened with anarchists simply calling themselves by that name (without adjectives) or libertarians to avoid confusion. This, sadly, resulted in two problems. Firstly, it gave Marxists even more potential to portray anarchism as being primarily against the state and not being as equally opposed to capitalism, hierarchy and inequality (as we argue in [section H.2.4](#), anarchists have opposed the state as just one aspect of class and hierarchical society). Secondly, extreme right-wingers tried to appropriate the names "*libertarian*" and "*anarchist*" to describe their vision of extreme capitalism as "*anarchism*," they claimed, was simply "*anti-government*" (see [section F](#) for discussion on why "anarcho"-capitalism is not anarchist). To counter these distortions of anarchist ideas, many anarchists

have re-appropriated the use of the words "*socialist*" and "*communist*," although always in combination with the words "*Anarchist*" and "*libertarian*."

Such combination of words is essential as the problem Malatesta predicted still remains. If one thing can be claimed for the 20th century, it is that it has seen the word "*socialism*" become narrowed and restricted into what anarchists call "*state socialism*" - socialism created and run from above, by the state (i.e. by the state bureaucracy and better described as state capitalism). This restriction of "*socialism*" has been supported by both Stalinist and Capitalist ruling elites, for their own reasons (the former to secure their own power and gain support by associating themselves with socialist ideals, the latter by discrediting those ideas by associating them with the horror of Stalinism). The Stalinist "*leadership thus portrays itself as socialist to protect its right to wield the club, and Western ideologists adopt the same pretence in order to forestall the threat of a more free and just society.*" The latter use it as "*a powerful ideological weapon to enforce conformity and obedience,*" to "*ensure that the necessity to rent oneself to the owners and managers of these [capitalist] institutions will be regarded as virtually a natural law, the only alternative to the 'socialist' dungeon.*" In reality, "*if there is a relation*" between Bolshevism and socialism, "*it is the relation of contradiction.*" [*The Soviet Union versus Socialism*", pp. 47-52, **The Radical Papers**, Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos (ed.), pp. 47-8]

This means that anarchists and other libertarian socialists have a major task on their hands - to reclaim the promise of socialism from the distortions inflicted upon it by both its enemies (Stalinists and capitalists) and its erstwhile and self-proclaimed supporters (Social Democracy and its offspring Bolshevism). A key aspect of this process is a critique of both the practice and ideology of Marxism and its various offshoots. Only by doing this can anarchists prove, to quote Rocker, that "**Socialism will be free, or it will not be at all.**" [**Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 14]

Such a critique raises the problem of which forms of "Marxism" to discuss. There is an extremely diverse range of Marxist viewpoints and groups in existence. Indeed, the different groups spend a lot of time indicating why all the others are not "real" Marxists (or Marxist-Leninists, or Trotskyists, and so on) and are just "sects" without "real" Marxist theory or ideas. This "diversity" is, of course, a major problem (and somewhat ironic, given that some Marxists like to insult anarchists by stating there are as many forms of anarchism as anarchists!). Equally, many Marxists go further than dismissing specific groups. Some even totally reject other branches of their movement as being non-Marxist (for example, some Marxists dismiss Leninism as having little, or nothing, to do with what they consider the "*real*" Marxist tradition to be). This means that discussing Marxism can be difficult as Marxists can argue that our FAQ does not address the arguments of this or that Marxist thinker, group or tendency.

With this in mind, this section of the FAQ will concentrate on the works of Marx and Engels (and so the movement they generated, namely Social Democracy) as well as the Bolshevik tradition started by Lenin and continued (by and large) by Trotsky. These are the core thinkers (and the recognised authorities) of most Marxists and so latter derivations of these tendencies can be ignored (for example Maoism, Castroism and so on). It should also be noted that even this grouping will produce dissent as some Marxists argue that the Bolshevik tradition is not part of Marxism. This perspective can be seen in the "*impossibilist*" tradition of Marxism (e.g. the **Socialist Party of Great Britain** and its sister parties) as well as in the left/council communist tradition (e.g. in the work of such Marxists as Anton Pannekoek and

Paul Mattick). The arguments for their positions are strong and well worth reading (indeed, any honest analysis of Marxism and Leninism cannot help but show important differences between the two). However, as the vast majority of Marxists today are also Leninists, we have to reflect this in our FAQ (and, in general, we do so by referring to "mainstream Marxists" as opposed to the small minority of libertarian Marxists).

Another problem arises when we consider the differences not only between Marxist tendencies, but also within a specific tendency before and after its representatives seize power. For example, as Chomsky pointed out, *"there are . . . very different strains of Leninism . . . there's the Lenin of 1917, the Lenin of the 'April Theses' and State and Revolution. That's one Lenin. And then there's the Lenin who took power and acted in ways that are unrecognisable . . . compared with, say, the doctrines of 'State and Revolution.' . . . this [is] not very hard to explain. There's a big difference between the libertarian doctrines of a person who is trying to associate himself with a mass popular movement to acquire power and the authoritarian power of somebody who's taken power and is trying to consolidate it. . . that is true of Marx also. There are competing strains in Marx."* As such, this section of our FAQ will try and draw out the contradictions within Marxism and indicate what aspects of the doctrine aided the development of the "second" Lenin for the seeds from which authoritarianism grew post-October 1917 existed from the start. Anarchists agree with Chomsky, namely that he considered it *"characteristic and unfortunate that the lesson that was drawn from Marx and Lenin for the later period was the authoritarian lesson. That is, it's the authoritarian power of the vanguard party and destruction of all popular forums in the interests of the masses. That's the Lenin who became known to later generations. Again, not very surprisingly, because that's what Leninism really was in practice."* [Language and Politics, p. 152]

Ironically, given Marx's own comments on the subject, a key hindrance to such an evaluation is the whole idea and history of Marxism itself. While, as Murray Bookchin noted *"to his lasting credit,"* Marx tried (to some degree) *"to create a movement that looks to the future instead of to the past,"* his followers have not done so. *"Once again,"* Bookchin argued, *"the dead are walking in our midst - ironically, draped in the name of Marx, the man who tried to bury the dead of the nineteenth century. So the revolution of our own day can do nothing better than parody, in turn, the October Revolution of 1918 and the civil war of 1918-1920 . . . The complete, all-sided revolution of our own day . . . follows the partial, the incomplete, the one-sided revolutions of the past, which merely changed the form of the 'social question,' replacing one system of domination and hierarchy by another."* [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 108 and p. 109] In Marx's words, the *"tradition of all the dead generations weighs down like a nightmare on the brain of the living."* Yet his own work, and the movements it inspired, now add to this dead-weight. In order to ensure, as Marx put it, the social revolution draws its poetry from the future rather than the past, Marxism itself must be transcended.

Which, of course, means evaluating both the theory **and** practice of Marxism. For anarchists, it seems strange that for a body of work whose followers stress its revolutionary and liberating, its results have been so bad. If Marxism is so obviously revolutionary and democratic, then why have so few of the people who read it drawn those conclusions? How could it be transmuted so easily into Stalinism? Why are there so few **libertarian** Marxists, if it were Lenin (or, following Lenin, Social Democracy) which "misinterpreted" Marx and Engels? So when Marxists argue that the problem is in the interpretation of the message not in the message itself, anarchists reply that the reason these numerous, allegedly false, interpretations exist at all simply suggests that there are limitations within Marxism **as such**

rather than the readings it has been subjected to. When something repeatedly fails and produces such terrible results in the progress then there has to be a fundamental flaw somewhere. Thus Cornelius Castoriadis:

*"Marx was, in fact, the first to stress that the significance of a theory cannot be grasped independently of the historical and social practice it inspires and initiates, to which it gives rise, in which it prolongs itself and under cover of which a given practice seeks to justify itself.*

*"Who, today, would dare proclaim that the only significance of Christianity for history is to be found in reading unaltered versions of the Gospels or that the historical practice of various Churches over a period of some 2,000 years can teach us nothing fundamental about the significance of this religious movement? A 'faithfulness to Marx' which would see the historical fate of Marxism as something unimportant would be just as laughable. It would in fact be quite ridiculous. Whereas for the Christian the revelations of the Gospels have a transcendental kernel and an intemporal validity, no theory could ever have such qualities in the eyes of a Marxist. To seek to discover the meaning of Marxism only in what Marx wrote (while keeping quiet about what the doctrine has become in history) is to pretend - in flagrant contradiction with the central ideas of that doctrine - that real history doesn't count and that the truth of a theory is always and exclusively to be found 'further on.' It finally comes to replacing revolution by revelation and the understanding of events by the exegesis of texts." [*"The Fate of Marxism," pp. 75-84 **The Anarchist Papers**, Dimitrios Roussopoulos (ed.), p. 77]

This does not mean forsaking the work of Marx and Engels. It means rejecting once and for all the idea that two people, writing over a period of decades over a hundred years ago have all the answers. As should be obvious! Ultimately, anarchists think we have to **build** upon the legacy of the past, not squeeze current events into it. We should stand on the shoulders of giants, not at their feet.

Thus this section of our FAQ will attempt to explain the various myths of Marxism and provide an anarchist critique of it and its offshoots. Of course, the ultimate myth of Marxism is what Alexander Berkman called "*The Bolshevik Myth*," namely the idea that the Russian Revolution was a success. However, given the scope of this revolution, we will not discuss it fully here except when it provides useful empirical evidence for our critique (see [section H.6](#) for more on the Russian Revolution). Our discussion here will concentrate for the most part on Marxist theory, showing its inadequacies, its problems, where it appropriated anarchist ideas and how anarchism and Marxism differ. This is a big task and this section of the FAQ can only be a small contribution to it.

As noted above, there are minority trends in Marxism which are libertarian in nature (i.e. close to anarchism). As such, it would be simplistic to say that anarchists are "*anti-Marxist*" and we generally do differentiate between the (minority) libertarian element and the authoritarian mainstream of Marxism (i.e. Social-Democracy and Leninism in its many forms). Without doubt, Marx contributed immensely to the enrichment of socialist ideas and analysis (as acknowledged by Bakunin, for example). His influence, as to be expected, was both positive and negative. For this reason he must be read and discussed critically. This FAQ is a contribution to this task of transcending the work of Marx. As with anarchist thinkers, we must take what is useful from Marx and reject the rubbish. But never forget that

anarchists are anarchists precisely because we think that anarchist thinkers have got more right than wrong and we reject the idea of tying our politics to the name of a long dead thinker.

### H.3.1 Do Anarchists and Marxists want the same thing?

Ultimately, the greatest myth of Marxism is the idea that anarchists and most Marxists want the same thing. Indeed, it could be argued that it is anarchist criticism of Marxism which has made them stress the similarity of long term goals with anarchism. *"Our polemics against [the Marxists],"* Bakunin argued, *"have forced them to recognise that freedom, or anarchy - that is, the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward - is the ultimate goal of social development."* He stressed that the means to this apparently similar end were different. The Marxists *"say that [a] state yoke, [a] dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, is the means . . . We reply that no dictatorship can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself, and that it can engender and nurture only slavery in the people who endure it. Liberty can be created only by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upwards."* [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 179]

As such, it is commonly taken for granted that the ends of both Marxists and Anarchists are the same, we just disagree over the means. However, within this general agreement over the ultimate end (a classless and stateless society), the details of such a society are somewhat different. This, perhaps, is to be expected given the differences in means. As is obvious from Bakunin's argument, anarchists stress the unity of means and goals, that the means which are used affect the goal reached. This unity between means and ends is expressed well by Martin Buber's observation that *"[o]ne cannot in the nature of things expect a little tree that has been turned into a club to put forth leaves."* [**Paths in Utopia**, p. 127] In summary, we cannot expect to reach our end destination if we take a path going in the opposite direction. As such, the agreement on ends may not be as close as often imagined.

So when it is stated that anarchists and state socialists want the same thing, the following should be borne in mind. Firstly, there are key differences on the question of current tactics. Secondly, there is the question of the immediate aims of a revolution. Thirdly, there is the long term goals of such a revolution. These three aspects form a coherent whole, with each one logically following on from the last. As we will show, the anarchist and Marxist vision of each aspect are distinctly different, so suggesting that the short, medium **and** long term goals of each theory are, in fact, different. We will discuss each aspect in turn.

First, there is the question of the nature of the revolutionary movement. Here anarchists and most Marxists have distinctly opposing ideas. The former argue that both the revolutionary organisation (i.e. an anarchist federation) and the wider labour movement should be organised in line with the vision of society which inspires us. This means that it should be a federation of self-managed groups based on the direct participation of its membership in the decision making process. Power, therefore, is decentralised and there is no division between those who make the decisions and those who execute them. We reject the idea of others acting on our behalf or on behalf of the people and so urge the use of direct action and solidarity, based upon working class self-organisation, self-management and autonomy. Thus, anarchists apply their ideas in the struggle against the current system, arguing what is "efficient" from a hierarchical or class position is deeply inefficient from a revolutionary perspective.

Marxists disagree. Most Marxists are also Leninists. They argue that we must form a "vanguard" party based on the principles of "*democratic centralism*" complete with institutionalised and hierarchical leadership. They argue that how we organise today is independent of the kind of society we seek and that the party should aim to become the recognised leadership of the working class. Every thing they do is subordinated to this end, meaning that no struggle is seen as an end in itself but rather as a means to gaining membership and influence for the party until such time as it gathers enough support to seize power. As this is a key point of contention between anarchists and Leninists, we discuss this in some detail in [section H.5](#) and its related sections and so not do so here.

Obviously, in the short term anarchists and Leninists cannot be said to want the same thing. While we seek a revolutionary movement based on libertarian (i.e. revolutionary) principles, the Leninists seek a party based on distinctly bourgeois principles of centralisation, delegation of power and representative over direct democracy. Both, of course, argue that only their system of organisation is effective and efficient (see [section H.5.8](#) on a discussion why anarchists argue that the Leninist model is not effective from a revolutionary perspective). The anarchist perspective is to see the revolutionary organisation as part of the working class, encouraging and helping those in struggle to clarify the ideas they draw from their own experiences and its role is to provide a lead rather than a new set of leaders to be followed (see [section J.3.6](#) for more on this). The Leninist perspective is to see the revolutionary party as the leadership of the working class, introducing socialist consciousness into a class which cannot generate itself (see [section H.5.1](#)).

Given the Leninist preference for centralisation and a leadership role by hierarchical organisation, it will come as no surprise that their ideas on the nature of post-revolutionary society are distinctly different from anarchists. While there is a tendency for Leninists to deny that anarchists have a clear idea of what will immediately be created by a revolution (see [section H.1.4](#)), we do have concrete ideas on the kind of society a revolution will immediately create. This vision is in almost every way different from that proposed by most Marxists.

Then there is the question of the state. Anarchists, unsurprisingly enough, seek to destroy it. Simply put, while anarchists want a stateless and classless society and advocate the means appropriate to those ends, most Marxists argue that in order to reach a stateless society we need a new "workers'" state, a state, moreover, in which their party will be in charge. Trotsky, writing in 1906, made this clear: *"Every political party deserving of the name aims at seizing governmental power and thus putting the state at the service of the class whose interests it represents."* [quoted by Israel Getzler, **Marxist Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Power**, p. 105] This fits in with Marx's and Engels's repeated equation of universal suffrage with the political power or political supremacy of the working class. In other words, "*political power*" simply means the ability to nominate a government (see [section H.3.10](#)).

While Marxists like to portray this new government as "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*," anarchist argue that, in fact, it will be the dictatorship **over** the proletariat. This is because if the working class **is** the ruling class (as Marxists claim) then, anarchists argue, how can they delegate their power to a government and remain so? Either the working class directly manages its own affairs (and so society) or the government does. Any state is simply rule by a few and so is incompatible with socialism (we discuss this issue in [section H.3.7](#)). The obvious implication of this is that Marxism seeks party rule, not working class direct

management of society (as we discuss in [section H.3.8](#), the Leninist tradition is extremely clear on this matter).

Then there is the question of the building blocks of socialism. Yet again, there is a clear difference between anarchism and Marxism. Anarchists have always argued that the basis of socialism is working class organisations, created in the struggle against capitalism and the state. This applies to both the social and economic structure of a post-revolutionary society. For most forms of Marxism, a radically different picture has been the dominant one. As we discuss in [section H.3.10](#), Marxists only reached a similar vision for the political structure of socialism in 1917 when Lenin supported the soviets as the framework of his workers' state. However, as we prove in [section H.3.11](#), he did so for instrumental purposes only, namely as the best means of assuring Bolshevik power. If the soviets clashed with the party, it was the latter which took precedence. Unsurprisingly, the Bolshevik mainstream moved from "*All Power to the Soviets*" to "*dictatorship of the party*" rather quickly. Thus, unlike anarchism, most forms of Marxism aim for party power, a "revolutionary" government above the organs of working class self-management.

Economically, there are also clear differences. Anarchists have consistently argued that the workers "*ought to be the real managers of industries.*" [Peter Kropotkin, **Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow**, p. 157] To achieve this, we have pointed to various organisations over time, such as factory committees and labour unions. As we discuss in more detail in [section H.3.12](#), Lenin, in contrast, saw socialism as being constructed on the basis of structures and techniques (including management ones) developed under capitalism. Rather than see socialism as being built around new, working class organisations, Lenin saw it being constructed on the basis of developments in capitalist organisation. "*The Leninist road to socialism,*" notes one expert on Lenin, "*emphatically ran through the terrain of monopoly capitalism. It would, according to Lenin, abolish neither its advanced technological base nor its institutionalised means for allocating resources or structuring industry. . . The institutionalised framework of advanced capitalism could, to put it shortly, be utilised for realisation of specifically socialist goals. They were to become, indeed, the principal (almost exclusive) instruments of socialist transformation.*" [Neil Harding, **Leninism**, p.145]

The role of workers' in this vision was basically unchanged. Rather than demand, like anarchists, workers' self-management of production in 1917, Lenin raised the demand for "*country-wide, all-embracing workers' control over the capitalists*" (and this is the "*important thing*", **not** "*confiscation of the capitalists' property*") [**The Lenin Anthology**, p. 402] Once the Bolsheviks were in power, the workers' own organs (the factory committees) were integrated into a system of state control, losing whatever power they once held at the point of production. Lenin then modified this vision by replacing capitalists with (state appointed) "*one-man management*" over the workers (see [section H.3.14](#)). In other words, a form of **state** capitalism in which workers would still be wage slaves under bosses appointed by the state. Unsurprisingly, the "*control*" workers exercised over their bosses (i.e. those with **real** power in production) proved to be as elusive in production as it was in the state. In this, Lenin undoubtedly followed the lead of the **Communist Manifesto** which stressed state ownership of the means of production without a word about workers' self-management of production. As we discuss in [section H.3.13](#), state "socialism" cannot help being "*state capitalism*" by its very nature.

Needless to say, as far as means go, few anarchists and syndicalists are complete pacifists. As syndicalist Emile Pouget argued, "*[h]istory teaches that the privileged have never surrendered their privileges without having been compelled so to do and forced into it by their rebellious victims. It is unlikely that the bourgeoisie is blessed with an exceptional greatness of soul and will abdicate voluntarily*" and so "*[r]ecourse to force . . . will be required.*" [The Party Of Labour] This does not mean that libertarians glorify violence or argue that all forms of violence are acceptable (quite the reverse!), it simply means that for self-defence against violent opponents violence is, unfortunately, sometimes required.

The way an anarchist revolution would defend itself also shows a key difference between anarchism and Marxism. As we discussed in [section H.2.1](#), anarchists (regardless of Marxist claims) have always argued that a revolution needs to defend itself. This would be organised in a federal, bottom-up way as the social structure of a free society. It would be based on voluntary working class militias. This model of working class self-defence was applied successfully in both the Spanish and Ukrainian revolutions (by the CNT-FAI and the Makhnovists, respectively). In contrast, the Bolshevik method of defending a revolution was the top-down, hierarchical and centralised "Red Army". As the example of the Makhnovists showed, the "Red Army" was not the only way the Russian Revolution could have been defended although it was the only way Bolshevik power could be.

So while Anarchists have consistently argued that socialism must be based on working class self-management of production and society based on working class organisations, the Leninist tradition has not supported this vision (although it has appropriated some of its imagery to gain popular support). Clearly, in terms of the immediate aftermath of a revolution, anarchists and Leninists do not seek the same thing. The former want a free society organised and run from below-upwards by the working class based on workers self-management of production while the latter seek party power in a new state structure which would preside over an essentially state capitalist economy.

Lastly, there is the question of the long term goal. Even in this vision of a classless and stateless society there is very little in common between anarchist communism and Marxist communism, beyond the similar terminology used to describe it. This is blurred by the differences in terminology used by both theories. Marx and Engels had raised in the 1840s the (long term) goal of "*an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all*" replacing "*the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms,*" in the **Communist Manifesto**. Before this "*vast association of the whole nation*" was possible, the proletariat would be "*raise[d] . . . to the position of ruling class*" and "*all capital*" would be "*centralise[d] . . . in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organised as the ruling class.*" As economic classes would no longer exist, "*the public power would lose its political character*" as political power "*is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another.*" [Selected Works, p. 53]

It was this, the means to the end, which was the focus of much debate (see [section H.1.1](#) for details). However, it cannot be assumed that the ends desired by Marxists and anarchists are identical. The argument that the "*public power*" could stop being "*political*" (i.e. a state) is a tautology, and a particularly unconvincing one at that. After all, if "*political power*" is defined as being an instrument of class rule it automatically follows that a classless society would have a non-political "*public power*" and so be without a state! This does not imply that a "*public power*" would no longer exist as a structure within (or, more correctly, over) society, it just implies that its role would no longer be "*political*" (i.e. an instrument of class

rule). Given that, according to the Manifesto, the state would centralise the means of production, credit and transportation and then organise it "*in accordance with a common plan*" using "*industrial armies, especially for agriculture*" this would suggest that the state structure would remain even after its "*political*" aspects had, to use Engels words, "*die[d] out.*" [Marx and Engels, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 52-3 and p. 424]

From this perspective, the difference between anarchist communism and Marxist-communism is clear. "*While both,*" notes John Clark, "*foresee the disappearance of the state, the achievement of social management of the economy, the end of class rule, and the attainment of human equality, to mention a few common goals, significant differences in ends still remain. Marxist thought has inherited a vision which looks to high development of technology with a corresponding degree of centralisation of social institutions which will continue even after the coming of the social revolution. . . . The anarchist vision sees the human scale as essential, both in the techniques which are used for production, and for the institutions which arise from the new modes of association . . . In addition, the anarchist ideal has a strong hedonistic element which has seen Germanic socialism as ascetic and Puritanical.*" [**The Anarchist Moment**, p. 68] Thus Marx presents "*a formulation that calls not for the ultimate abolition of the State but suggests that it will continue to exist (however differently it is reconstituted by the proletariat) as a 'nonpolitical' (i.e., administrative) source of authority.*" [Murray Bookchin, **The Ecology of Freedom**, p. 196fn]

Moreover, it is unlikely that such a centralised system could become stateless and classless in actuality. As Bakunin argued, in the Marxist state "*there will be no privileged class. Everybody will be equal, not only from the judicial and political but also from the economic standpoint. This is the promise at any rate . . . So there will be no more class, but a government, and, please note, an extremely complicated government which, not content with governing and administering the masses politically . . . will also administer them economically, by taking over the production and fair sharing of wealth, agriculture, the establishment and development of factories, the organisation and control of trade, and lastly the injection of capital into production by a single banker, the State.*" Such a system would be, in reality, "*the reign of the scientific mind, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes*" base on "*a new class, a new hierarchy of real or bogus learning, and the world will be divided into a dominant, science-based minority and a vast, ignorant majority.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 266]

George Barrett's words also seem appropriate:

*"The modern Socialist . . . have steadily worked for centralisation, and complete and perfect organisation and control by those in authority above the people. The anarchist, on the other hand, believes in the abolition of that central power, and expects the free society to grow into existence from below, starting with those organisations and free agreements among the people themselves. It is difficult to see how, by making a central power control everything, we can be making a step towards the abolition of that power."* [**Objections to Anarchism**, p. 348]

Indeed, by giving the state increased economic activities it ensures that this so-called "transitional" state grows with the implementation of the Marxist programme. Moreover, given the economic tasks the state now does it hardly makes much sense to assert it will "wither away" - unless you think that the centralised economic planning which this regime does also "wither away." Marx argued that once the "*abolition of classes*" has "*been*

*attained*" then "*the power of the State . . . disappears, and the functions of government are transformed into simple administrative functions.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 76] In other words, the state apparatus does not "wither away" rather its function as an instrument of class rule does. This is an automatic result of classes themselves withering away as private property is nationalised. Yet as class is defined as being rooted in ownership of the means of production, this becomes a meaningless tautology. Obviously, as the state centralises the means of production into its own hands then (the existing) economic classes cease to exist and, as a result, the state "disappears." Yet the power and size of the State is, in fact, increased by this process and so the elimination of economic classes actually increases the power and size of the state machine.

As Brian Morris notes, "*Bakunin's fears that under Marx's kind of socialism the workers would continue to labour under a regimented, mechanised, hierarchical system of production, without direct control over their labour, has been more than confirmed by the realities of the Bolshevik system. Thus, Bakunin's critique of Marxism has taken on an increasing relevance in the age of bureaucratic State capitalism.*" [**Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom**, p. 132] Thus the "*central confusions of Marxist political theorists*" are found in the discussion on the state in **The Communist Manifesto**. If class is "*an exclusively economic category, and if the old conditions of production are changed so that there is no longer any private ownership of the means of production, then classes no longer exist by definition when they are defined in terms of . . . the private ownership of the means of production . . . If Marx also defines 'political power' as 'the organised power of one [economic] class for oppressing another', then the . . . argument is no more than a tautology, and is trivially true.*" Unfortunately, as history has confirmed, "*we cannot conclude . . . if it is a mere tautology, that with a condition of no private ownership of the means of production there could be no . . . dominant and subordinate strata.*" [**Alan Carter, Marx: A Radical Critique**, p. 221 and pp. 221-2]

Unsurprisingly, therefore, anarchists are not convinced that a highly centralised structure (as a state is) managing the economic life of society can be part of a truly classless society. While economic class as defined in terms of ownership of the means of production may not exist, social classes (defined in terms of inequality of power, authority and control) will continue simply because the state is designed to create and protect minority rule (see [section H.3.7](#)). As Bolshevik and Stalinist Russia showed, nationalising the means of production does not end class society. As Malatesta argued:

*"When F. Engels, perhaps to counter anarchist criticisms, said that once classes disappear the State as such has no *raison d'être* and transforms itself from a government of men into an administration of things, he was merely playing with words. Whoever has power over things has power over men; whoever governs production also governs the producers; who determines consumption is master over the consumer.*

*"This is the question; either things are administered on the basis of free agreement of the interested parties, and this is anarchy; or they are administered according to laws made by administrators and this is government, it is the State, and inevitably it turns out to be tyrannical.*

*"It is not a question of the good intentions or the good will of this or that man, but of the inevitability of the situation, and of the tendencies which man generally develops in given circumstances."* [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 145]

The anarchist vision of the future society, therefore, does not exactly match the state communist vision, as much as the latter would like to suggest it does. The difference between the two is authority, which cannot be anything but the largest difference possible. Anarchist economic and organisational theories are built around an anti-authoritarian core and this informs both our means and aims. For anarchists, the Leninist vision of socialism is unattractive. Lenin continually stressed that his conception of socialism and "*state capitalism*" were basically identical. Even in **State and Revolution**, allegedly Lenin's most libertarian work, we discover this particularly unvisionary and uninspiring vision of "socialism":

*"All citizens are transformed into the salaried employees of the state . . . All citizens become employees and workers of a single national state 'syndicate' . . . The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory with equality of work and equality of pay."* [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 348]

To which, anarchists point to Engels and his comments on the tyrannical and authoritarian character of the modern factory (as we discuss in [section H.4.4](#)). Clearly, Lenin's idea of turning the world into one big factory takes on an extremely frightening nature given Engels' lovely vision of the lack of freedom in the workplace.

For these reasons anarchists reject the simplistic Marxist analysis of inequality being rooted simply in economic class. Such an analysis, as the comments of Lenin and Engels prove, show that social inequality can be smuggled in by the backdoor of a proposed classless and stateless society. Thus Bookchin:

*"Basic to anti-authoritarian Socialism --specifically, to Anarchist Communism - is the notion that hierarchy and domination cannot be subsumed by class rule and economic exploitation, indeed, that they are more fundamental to an understanding of the modern revolutionary project . . . Power of human over human long antedates the very formation of classes and economic modes of social oppression. . . This much is clear: it will no longer do to insist that a classless society, freed from material exploitation, will necessarily be a liberated society. There is nothing in the social future to suggest that bureaucracy is incompatible with a classless society, the domination of women, the young, ethnic groups or even professional strata."*

[Toward an Ecological Society, pp. 208-9]

Ultimately, anarchists see that "*there is a realm of domination that is broader than the realm of material exploitation. The tragedy of the socialist movement is that, steeped in the past, it uses the methods of domination to try to 'liberate' us from material exploitation.*" Needless to say, this is doomed to failure. Socialism "*will simply mire us in a world we are trying to overcome. A non-hierarchical society, self-managed and free of domination in all its forms, stands on the agenda today, not a hierarchical system draped in a red flag.*" [Bookchin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 272 and pp. 273-4]

In summary, it cannot be said that anarchists and most Marxists want the same thing. While they often use the same terms, these terms often hide radically different concepts. Just

because, say, anarchists and mainstream Marxists talk about "*social revolution*," "*socialism*," "*all power to the soviets*" and so on, it does not mean that we mean the same thing by them. For example, the phrase "*all power to the soviets*" for anarchists means exactly that (i.e. that the revolution must be directly managed by working class organs). Leninists mean "*all power to a central government elected by a national soviet congress*." Similarly with other similar phrases (which shows the importance of looking at the details of any political theory and its history).

We have shown that discussion over ends is as important as discussion over means as they are related. As Kropotkin once pointed out, those who downplay the importance of discussing the "*order of things which . . . should emerge from the coming revolution*" in favour of concentrating on "*practical things*" are being less than honest as "*far from making light of such theories, they propagate them, and all that they do now is a logical extension of their ideas. In the end those words 'Let us not discuss theoretical questions' really mean: 'Do not subject our theory to discussion, but help us to put it into execution.'*" [Words of a Rebel, p. 200]

Hence the need to critically evaluate both ends and means. This shows the weakness of the common argument that anarchists and Leftists share some common visions and so we should work with them to achieve those common things. Who knows what happens after that? As can be seen, this is not the case. Many aspects of anarchism and Marxism are in opposition and cannot be considered similar (for example, what a Leninist considers as socialism is extremely different to what an anarchist thinks it is). If you consider "*socialism*" as being a "*workers' state*" presided over by a "*revolutionary*" government, then how can this be reconciled with the anarchist vision of a federation of self-managed communes and workers' associations? As the Russian Revolution shows, only by the armed might of the "*revolutionary*" government crushing the anarchist vision.

The only thing we truly share with these groups is a mutual opposition to existing capitalism. Having a common enemy does not make someone friends. Hence anarchists, while willing to work on certain mutual struggles, are well aware there is substantial differences in both terms of means and goals. The lessons of revolution in the 20th Century is that once in power, Leninists will repress anarchists, their current allies against the capitalist system. This does not occur by accident, it flows from the differences in vision between the two movements, both in terms of means and goals.

### **H.3.2 Is Marxism '*socialism from below*'?**

Some Marxists, such as the **International Socialist Tendency**, like to portray their tradition as being "*socialism from below*." Under "*socialism from below*," they place the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, arguing that they and they alone have continued this, the true, ideal of socialism (Hal Draper's essay "*The Two Souls of Socialism*" seems to have been the first to argue along these lines). They contrast this idea of socialism "*from below*" with "*socialism from above*," in which they place reformist socialism (social democracy, Labourism, etc.), elitist socialism (Lassalle and others who wanted educated and liberal members of the middle classes to liberate the working class) and Stalinism (bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class). Anarchism, it is argued, should be placed in the latter camp, with Proudhon and Bakunin showing that anarchist libertarianism simply a "*myth*".

For those who uphold this idea, "*Socialism from below*" is simply the self-emancipation of the working class by its own efforts. To anarchist ears, the claim that Marxism (and in particular Leninism) is socialism "*from below*" sounds paradoxical, indeed laughable. This is because anarchists from Proudhon onwards have used the imagery of socialism being created and run from below upwards. They have been doing so for far longer than Marxists have. As such, "*socialism from below*" simply sums up the **anarchist** ideal!

Thus we find Proudhon in 1848 talking about being a "*revolutionary from below*" and that every "*serious and lasting Revolution*" was "*made from below, by the people.*" A "*Revolution from above*" was "*pure governmentalism,*" "*the negation of collective activity, of popular spontaneity*" and is "*the oppression of the wills of those below.*" [quoted by George Woodcock, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, p. 143] For Proudhon, the means of this revolution "*from below*" would be federations of working class associations for both credit (mutual banks) and production (workers' associations or co-operatives) as well as federations of communes (democratically organised communities). The workers, "*organised among themselves, without the assistance of the capitalist*" would march by "*[w]ork to the conquest of the world*" by the "*force of principle.*" Thus capitalism would be reformed away by the actions of the workers themselves. The "*problem of association,*" Proudhon argued, "*consists in organising . . . the producers, and by this subjecting capital and subordinating power. Such is the war of liberty against authority, a war of the producer against the non-producer; a war of equality against privilege . . . An agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave.*" [quoted by K. Steven Vincent, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 148 and p. 157] Ultimately, "*any revolution, to be effective, must be spontaneous and emanate, not from the heads of authorities, but from the bowels of the people . . . the only connection between government and labour is that labour, in organising itself, has the abrogation of governments as its mission.*" [Proudhon, **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 52]

Similarly, Bakunin saw an anarchist revolution as coming "*from below.*" As he put it, "*liberty can be created only by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.*" [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 179] Elsewhere he wrote that "*popular revolution*" would "*create its own organisation from the bottom upwards and from the circumference inwards, in accordance with the principle of liberty, and not from the top downwards and from the centre outwards, as in the way of authority.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 170] His vision of revolution and revolutionary self-organisation and construction from below was a core aspect of his anarchist ideas and he argued repeatedly for "*the free organisation of the people's lives in accordance with their needs - not from the top down, as we have it in the State, but from the bottom up, an organisation formed by the people themselves . . . a free union of associations of agricultural and factory workers, of communes, regions, and nations.*" He stressed that "*the politics of the Social Revolution*" was "*the abolition of the State*" and "*the economic, altogether free organisation of the people, an organisation from below upward, by means of federation.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, pp. 297-8]

While Proudhon wanted to revolutionise society, he rejected revolutionary means to do so (i.e. collective struggle, strikes, insurrection, etc.). Bakunin, however, was a revolutionary in this, the popular, sense of the word. Yet he shared with Proudhon the idea of socialism being created by the working class itself. As he put it, in "*a social revolution, which in everything is diametrically opposed to a political revolution, the actions of individuals hardly count at all,*

*whereas the spontaneous action of the masses is everything. All that individuals can do is clarify, propagate and work out the ideas corresponding to the popular instinct, and, what is more, to contribute their incessant efforts to revolutionary organisation of the natural power of the masses - but nothing else beyond that; the rest can and should be done by the people themselves . . . revolution can be waged and brought to its full development only through the spontaneous and continued mass action of groups and associations of the people." [Op. Cit., pp. 298-9]*

Therefore, the idea of "*socialism from below*" is a distinctly anarchist notion, one found in the works of Proudhon and Bakunin and repeated by anarchists ever since. As such, to hear Marxists appropriate this obviously anarchist terminology and imagery appears to many anarchists as opportunistic and attempt to cover the authoritarian reality of mainstream Marxism with anarchist rhetoric. Moreover, the attempt to suggest that anarchism is part of the elitist "*socialism from above*" school rests on little more than selective quoting of Proudhon and Bakunin (including from Bakunin's pre-anarchist days) to present a picture of their ideas distinctly at odds with reality. However, there are "libertarian" strains of Marxism which are close to anarchism. Does this mean that there are no elements of a "*socialism from below*" to be found in Marx and Engels?

If we look at Marx, we get contradictory impressions. On the one hand, he argued that freedom "*consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it.*" Combine this with his comments on the Paris Commune (see his "*The Civil War in France*"), we can say that there are clearly elements of "*socialism from below*" in Marx's work. On the other hand, he often stresses the need for strict centralisation of power. In 1850, for example, he argued that the workers must "*not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority.*" This was because "*the path of revolutionary activity*" can "*proceed only from the centre.*" This meant that the workers must be opposed to the "*federative republic*" planned by the democrats and "*must not allow themselves to be misguided by the democratic talk of freedom for the communities, of self-government, etc.*" This centralisation of power was essential to overcome local autonomy, which would allow "*every village, every town and every province*" to put "*a new obstacle in the path*" the revolution due to "*local and provincial obstinacy.*" Decades later, Marx dismissed Bakunin's vision of "*the free organisation of the worker masses from bottom to top*" as "*nonsense.*" [**Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 537, p. 509 and p. 547]

Thus we have a contradiction. While arguing that the state must become subordinate to society, we have a central power imposing its will on "*local and provincial obstinacy.*" This implies a vision of revolution in which the centre (indeed, "*the state authority*") forces its will on the population, which (by necessity) means that the centre power is "*superimposed upon society*" rather than "*subordinate*" to it. Given his dismissal of the idea of organisation from bottom to top, we cannot argue that by this he meant simply the co-ordination of local initiatives. Rather, we are struck by the "*top-down*" picture of revolution Marx presents. Indeed, his argument from 1850 suggests that Marx favoured centralism not only in order to prevent the masses from creating obstacles to the revolutionary activity of the "*centre,*" but also to prevent them from interfering with their own liberation.

Looking at Engels, we discover him writing that "[a]s soon as our Party is in possession of political power it has simply to expropriate the big landed proprietors just like the manufacturers in industry . . . thus restored to the community [they] are to be turned over by

*us to the rural workers who are already cultivating them and are to be organised into co-operatives.*" He even states that this expropriation may "be compensated," depending on "*the circumstances which we obtain power, and particularly by the attitude adopted by these gentry.*" [Selected Writings, pp. 638-9] Thus we have the party taking power, then expropriating the means of life **for the workers** and, lastly, "*turning over*" these to them. While this fits into the general scheme of the **Communist Manifesto**, it cannot be said to be "*socialism from below*" which can only signify the direct expropriation of the means of production by the workers themselves, organising themselves into free producer associations to do so.

It may be argued that Marx and Engels did not exclude such a solution to the social question. For example, we find Engels stating that "*the question is not whether the proletariat when it comes to power will simply seize by force the tools of production, the raw materials and means of subsistence*" or "*whether it will redeem property therein by instalments spread over a long period.*" To attempt to predict this "*for all cases would be utopia-making.*" [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 386] However, Engels is assuming that the social revolution (the proletariat "*com[ing] to power*") comes **before** the social revolution (the seizure of the means of production). In this, we can assume that it is the "*revolutionary*" government which does the seizing (or redeeming) rather than rebel workers.

This vision of revolution as the party coming to power can be seen from Engels' warning that the "*worse thing that can befall the leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to assume power at a time when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class he represents and for the measures this domination implies.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 10, p. 469] Needless to say, such a vision is hard to equate with "*socialism from below*" which implies the active participation of the working class in the direct management of society from the bottom-up. If the leaders "*assume power*" then **they** have the real power, not the class they claim to "*represent.*" Equally, it seems strange that socialism can be equated with a vision which equates "*domination*" of a class being achieved by the fact a leader "*represents*" it. Can the working class really be said to be the ruling class if its role in society is to select those who exercise power on its behalf (i.e. to elect representatives)? Bakunin quite rightly answered in the negative. While representative democracy may be acceptable to ensure bourgeois rule, it cannot be assumed that it can be utilised to create a socialist society. It was designed to defend class society and its centralised and top-down nature reflects this role.

Moreover, Marx and Engels had argued in **The Holy Family** that the "*question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.*" [quoted by Murray Bookchin, **The Spanish Anarchists**, p. 280] As Murray Bookchin argued:

*"These lines and others like them in Marx's writings were to provide the rationale for asserting the authority of Marxist parties and their armed detachments over and even against the proletariat. Claiming a deeper and more informed comprehension of the situation than 'even the whole of the proletariat at the given moment,' Marxist parties went on to dissolve such revolutionary forms of proletarian organisation as factory committees and ultimately to totally regiment the proletariat according to lines established by the party leadership."* [Op. Cit., p. 289]

Thus the ideological underpinning of a "*socialism from above*" is expounded, one which dismisses what the members of the working class actually want or desire at a given point (a position which Trotsky, for one, explicitly argued). A few years later, they argued in **The Communist Manifesto** that "*a portion of the bourgeois goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.*" They also noted that the Communists are "*the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties*" and "*they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the general results of the proletarian movement.*" This gives a privileged place to the party (particularly the "*bourgeois ideologists*" who join it), a privileged place which their followers had no problem abusing in favour of party power and hierarchical leadership from above. As we discuss in [section H.5](#), Lenin was just expressing orthodox Social-Democratic (i.e. Marxist) policy when he argued that socialist consciousness was created by bourgeois intellectuals and introduced into the working class from outside. Against this, we have to note that the Manifesto states that the proletarian movement was "*the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority*" (although, as discussed in [section H.1.1](#), when they wrote this the proletariat was a **minority** in all countries bar Britain). [**Selected Works**, p. 44, p. 46 and p. 45]

Looking at the tactics advocated by Marx and Engels, we see a strong support for "*political action*" in the sense of participating in elections. This support undoubtedly flows from Engels's comments that universal suffrage "*in an England two-thirds of whose inhabitants are industrial proletarians means the exclusive political rule of the working class with all the revolutionary changes in social conditions which are inseparable from it.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 10, p. 298] Marx, likewise, repeatedly argued along identical lines. For example, in 1855, he stated that "*universal suffrage . . . implies the assumption of political power as means of satisfying [the workers'] social means*" and, in Britain, "*revolution is the direct content of universal suffrage.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 11, pp. 335-6] Yet how could an entire class, the proletariat organised as a "*movement*" exercise its power under such a system? While the atomised voting to nominate representatives (who, in reality, held the real power in society) may be more than adequate to ensure bourgeois, i.e. minority, power, could it be used for working class, i.e. majority, power?

This seems highly unlikely because such institutions are designed to place policy-making in the hands of representatives and were created explicitly to **exclude** mass participation in order to ensure bourgeois control (see [section B.2.5](#)). They do not (indeed, cannot) constitute a "*proletariat organised as a ruling class.*" If public policy, as distinguished from administrative activities, is not made by the people themselves, in federations of self-managed assemblies, then a movement of the vast majority does not, cannot, exist. For people to acquire real power over their lives and society, they must establish institutions organised and run, as Bakunin constantly stressed, from below. This would necessitate that they themselves directly manage their own affairs, communities and workplaces and, for co-ordination, mandate federal assemblies of revocable and strictly controllable delegates, who will execute their decisions. Only in this sense can a majority class, especially one committed to the abolition of all classes, organise as a class to manage society.

As such, Marx and Engels tactics are at odds with any idea of "*socialism from below.*" While, correctly, supporting strikes and other forms of working class direct action (although, significantly, Engels dismissed the general strike) they placed that support within a general

political strategy which emphasised electioneering and representative forms. This, however, is a form of struggle which can only really be carried out by means of leaders. The role of the masses is minor, that of voters. The focus of the struggle is at the top, in parliament, where the duly elected leaders are. As Luigi Galleani argued, this form of action involved the "*ceding of power by all to someone, the delegate, the representative, individual or group.*" This meant that rather than the anarchist tactic of "*direct pressure put against the ruling classes by the masses,*" the Socialist Party "*substituted representation and the rigid discipline of the parliamentary socialists,*" which inevitably resulted in it "*adopt[ing] class collaboration in the legislative arena, without which all reforms would remain a vain hope.*" It also resulted in the socialists needing "*authoritarian organisations*", i.e. ones which are centralised and disciplined from above down. [**The End of Anarchism?**, p. 14, p. 12 and p. 14] The end result was the encouragement of a viewpoint that reforms (indeed, the revolution) would be the work of leaders acting on behalf of the masses whose role would be that of voters and followers, not active participants in the struggle (see [section J.2](#) for a discussion on direct action and why anarchists reject electioneering).

By the 1890s, the top-down and essentially reformist nature of these tactics had made their mark in both Engels' politics and the practical activities of the Social-Democratic parties. Engels "*introduction*" to Marx's **The Class Struggles in France** indicated how far Marxism had progressed and undoubtedly influenced by the rise of Social-Democracy as an electoral power, it stressed the use of the ballot box as the ideal way, if not the only way, for the party to take power. He noted that "*[w]e, the 'revolutionists', the 'overthrowers'*" were "*thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow*" and the bourgeoisie "*cry despairingly . . . legality is the death of us*" and were "*much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers' party, of the results of elections than of those of rebellion.*" He argued that it was essential "*not to fitter away this daily increasing shock force [of party voters] in vanguard skirmishes, but to keep it intact until the decisive day.*" [**Selected Writings**, p. 656, p. 650 and p. 655]

The net effect of this would simply be keeping the class struggle within the bounds decided upon by the party leaders, so placing the emphasis on the activities and decisions of those at the top rather than the struggle and decisions of the mass of working class people themselves. As we noted in [section H.1.1](#), when the party was racked by the "*revisionism*" controversy after Engels death, it was fundamentally a conflict between those who wanted the party's rhetoric to reflect its reformist tactics and those who sought the illusion of radical words to cover the reformist practice. The decision of the Party leadership to support their state in the First World War simply proved that radical words cannot defeat reformist tactics.

Needless to say, from this contradictory inheritance Marxists had two ways of proceeding. Either they become explicitly anti-state (and so approach anarchism) or become explicitly in favour of party and state power and so, by necessity, "*revolution from above.*" The council communists and other libertarian Marxists followed the first path, the Bolsheviks and their followers the second. As we discuss in the [next section](#), Lenin explicitly dismissed the idea that Marxism proceeded "*only from below,*" stating that this was an anarchist principle. Nor was he shy in equating party power with working class power. Indeed, this vision of socialism as involving party power was not alien to the mainstream social-democracy Leninism split from. The leading left-wing Menshevik Martov argued as follows:

*"In a class struggle which has entered the phase of civil war, there are bound to be times when the advance guard of the revolutionary class, representing the interests of*

*the broad masses but ahead of them in political consciousness, is obliged to exercise state power by means of a dictatorship of the revolutionary minority. Only a short-sighted and doctrinaire viewpoint would reject this prospect as such. The real question at stake is whether this dictatorship, which is unavoidable at a certain stage of any revolution, is exercised in such a way as to consolidate itself and create a system of institutions enabling it to become a permanent feature, or whether, on the contrary, it is replaced as soon as possible by the organised initiative and autonomy of the revolutionary class or classes as a whole. The second of these methods is that of the revolutionary Marxists who, for this reason, style themselves Social Democrats; the first is that of the Communists."* [The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution, Abraham Ascher (ed.), p. 119]

All this is to be expected, given the weakness of the Marxist theory of the state. As we discuss in [section H.3.7](#), Marxists have always had an a-historic perspective on the state, considering it as purely an instrument of class rule rather than what it is, an instrument of **minority** class rule. For anarchists, the "*State is the minority government, from the top downward, of a vast quantity of men.*" This automatically means that a socialism, like Marx's, which aims for a socialist government and a workers' state automatically becomes, against the wishes of its best activists, "*socialism from above.*" As Bakunin argued, Marxists are "*worshippers of State power, and necessarily also prophets of political and social discipline and champions of order established from the top downwards, always in the name of universal suffrage and the sovereignty of the masses, for whom they save the honour and privilege of obeying leaders, elected masters.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 265 and pp. 237-8]

For this reason anarchists from Bakunin onwards have argued for a bottom-up federation of workers' councils as the basis of revolution and the means of managing society after capitalism and the state have been abolished. If these organs of workers' self-management are co-opted into a state structure (as happened in Russia) then their power will be handed over to the real power in any state - the government and its bureaucracy. The state is the delegation of power - as such, it means that the idea of a "*workers' state*" expressing "*workers' power*" is a logical impossibility. If workers are running society then power rests in their hands. If a state exists then power rests in the hands of the handful of people at the top, not in the hands of all. The state was designed for minority rule. No state can be an organ of working class (i.e. majority) self-management due to its basic nature, structure and design.

So, while there are elements of "*socialism from below*" in the works of Marx and Engels they are placed within a distinctly centralised and authoritarian context which undermines them. As John Clark summarises, "*in the context of Marx's consistent advocacy of centralist programmes, and the part these programmes play in his theory of social development, the attempt to construct a libertarian Marxism by citing Marx's own proposals for social change would seem to present insuperable difficulties.*" [Op. Cit., p. 93]

### H.3.3 Is Leninism "*socialism from below*"?

As discussed in the [last section](#), Marx and Engels left their followers with an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, there **are** elements of "*socialism from below*" in their politics (most explicitly in Marx's comments on the libertarian influenced Paris Commune). On the other, there are distinctly centralist and statist themes in their work.

From this legacy, Leninism took the statist themes. This explains why anarchists think the idea of Leninism being "*socialism from below*" is incredible. Simply put, the actual comments and actions of Lenin and his followers show that they had no commitment to a "*socialism from below*." As we will indicate, Lenin disassociated himself repeatedly from the idea of politics "*from below*," considering it (quite rightly) an anarchist idea. In contrast, he stressed the importance of a politics which somehow combined action "*from above*" and "*from below*." For those Leninists who maintain that their tradition is "*socialism from below*" (indeed, the only "*real*" socialism "*from below*"), this is a major problem and, unsurprisingly, they generally fail to mention it.

So what was Lenin's position on "*from below*"? In 1904, during the debate over the party split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Lenin stated that the argument "[*b*]ureaucracy **versus** democracy is in fact centralism **versus** autonomism; it is the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy as opposed to the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy. The latter strives to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible . . . upholds autonomism and 'democracy,' carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism. The former strives to proceed from the top downward." [**Collected Works**, vol. 7, pp. 396-7] Thus it is the non-Bolshevik ("opportunist") wing of Marxism which bases itself on the "*organisational principle*" of "*from the bottom upward*," not the Bolshevik tradition (as we note in [section H.5.5](#), Lenin also rejected the "*primitive democracy*" of mass assemblies as the basis of the labour and revolutionary movements). Moreover, this vision of a party run from the top down was enshrined in the Bolshevik ideal of "*democratic centralism*". How you can have "*socialism from below*" when your "*organisational principle*" is "*from the top downward*" is not explained by Leninist exponents of "*socialism from below*."

Lenin repeated this argument in his discussion on the right tactics to apply during the near revolution of 1905. He mocked the Mensheviks for only wanting "*pressure from below*" which was "*pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government*." Instead, he argued for "*pressure . . . from above as well as from below*," where "*pressure from above*" was "*pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens*." He notes that Engels "*appreciated the importance of action from above*" and that he saw the need for "*the utilisation of the revolutionary governmental power*." Lenin summarised his position (which he considered as being in line with that of orthodox Marxism) by stating: "*Limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below and renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 8, p. 474, p. 478, p. 480 and p. 481] This seems to have been a common Bolshevik position at the time, with Stalin stressing in the same year that "*action only from 'below'*" was "*an anarchist principle, which does, indeed, fundamentally contradict Social-Democratic tactics.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 1, p. 149]

It is in this context of "*above and below*" in which we must place Lenin's comments in 1917 that socialism was "*democracy from below, without a police, without a standing army, voluntary social duty by a militia formed from a universally armed people.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 24, p. 170] Given that Lenin had rejected the idea of "*only from below*" as an anarchist principle (which it is), we need to bear in mind that this "*democracy from below*" was **always** placed in the context of a Bolshevik government. Lenin always stressed that the "*Bolsheviks must assume power.*" The Bolsheviks "*can and must take state power into their own hands.*" He raised the question of "*will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?*" and answered it: "*I have already had occasion . . . to answer this question in the affirmative.*" Moreover, "*a political party . . . would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name*

*of party . . . if it refused to take power when opportunity offers."* [Op. Cit., vol. 26, p. 19 and p. 90] Lenin's "democracy from below" always meant representative government, **not** popular power or self-management. The role of the working class was that of voters and so the Bolsheviks' first task was "*to convince the majority of the people that its programme and tactics are correct.*" The second task "*that confronted our Party was to capture political power.*" The third task was for "*the Bolshevik Party*" to "**administer Russia,**" to be the "*governing party.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, pp. 241-2] Thus Bolshevik power was equated with working class power.

Towards the end of 1917, he stressed this vision of a Bolshevik run "*democracy from below*" by arguing that since "*the 1905 revolution Russia has been governed by 130,000 landowners . . . Yet we are told that the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik party will not be able to govern Russia, govern her in the interests of the poor.*" He even equated rule by the party with rule by the class, noting that "*proletarian revolutionary power*" and *Bolshevik power*" are "*now one the same thing.*" He admitted that the proletariat could not actually govern itself for "*[w]e know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration . . . We demand that training in th[is] work . . . be conducted by the class-conscious workers and soldiers.*" The "*class-conscious workers must lead, but for the work of administration they can enlist the vast mass of the working and oppressed people.*" Thus democratic sounding rhetoric, in reality, hide the fact that the party would govern (i.e., have power) and working people would simply administer the means by which its decisions would be implemented. Lenin also indicated that once in power, the Bolsheviks "*shall be fully and unreservedly in favour of a strong state power and of centralism.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 26, p. 111, p. 179, p. 113, p. 114 and p. 116]

Clearly, Lenin's position had not changed. The goal of the revolution was simply a Bolshevik government, which, if it were to be effective, had to have the real power in society. Thus, socialism would be implemented from above, by the "*strong*" and centralised government of the "*class-conscious workers*" who would "*lead*" and so the party would "*govern*" Russia, in the "*interests*" of the masses. Rather than govern themselves, they would be subject to "*the power of the Bolsheviks.*" While, eventually, the "*working*" masses would take part in the administration of state decisions, their role would be the same as under capitalism as, we must note, there is a difference between making policy and carrying it out, between the "*work of administration*" and governing, a difference Lenin obscures. In fact, the name of this essay clearly shows who would be in control under Lenin: "*Can the Bolsheviks retain State Power?"*

As one expert noted, the Bolsheviks made "*a distinction between the execution of policy and the making of policy. The 'broad masses' were to be the executors of state decrees, not the formulators of legislation.*" However, by "*claiming to draw 'all people' into [the state] administration, the Bolsheviks claimed also that they were providing a greater degree of democracy than the parliamentary state.*" [Frederick I. Kaplan, **Bolshevik Ideology and the Ethics of Soviet Labor**, p. 212] The difference is important. Ante Ciliga, once a political prisoner under Stalin, once noted how the secret police "*liked to boast of the working class origin of its henchmen.*" He quoted a fellow prisoner, and ex-Tsarist convict, who retorted: "*You are wrong if you believe that in the days of the Tsar the gaolers were recruited from among dukes and the executioners from among the princes!*" [The Russian Enigma, pp. 255-6]

All of which explains the famous leaflet addressed to the workers of Petrograd immediately after the October Revolution, informing them that "*the revolution has won.*" The workers were called upon to "*show . . . the greatest firmness and endurance, in order to facilitate the execution of all the aims of the new People's Government.*" They were asked to "*cease immediately all economic and political strikes, to take up your work, and do it in perfect order . . . All to your places*" as the "*best way to support the new Government of Soviets in these days*" was "*by doing your job.*" [quoted by John Read, **Ten Days that Shook the World**, pp. 341-2] Which smacks far more of "*socialism from above*" than "*socialism from below*!"

The implications of Lenin's position became clearer after the Bolsheviks had taken power. Now it was the concrete situation of a "revolutionary" government exercising power "*from above*" onto the very class it claimed to represent. As Lenin explained to his political police, the Cheka, in 1920:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Op. Cit., vol. 42, p. 170]

It could be argued that this position was forced on Lenin by the problems facing the Bolsheviks in the Civil War, but such an argument is flawed. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, according to Lenin himself civil war was inevitable and so, unsurprisingly, Lenin considered his comments as universally applicable. Secondly, this position fits in well with the idea of pressure "*from above*" exercised by the "revolutionary" government against the masses (and nothing to do with any sort of "*socialism from below*"). Indeed, "*wavering*" and "*unstable*" elements is just another way of saying "*pressure from below*," the attempts by those subject to the "revolutionary" government to influence its policies. As we noted in [section H.1.2](#), it was in this period (1919 and 1920) that the Bolsheviks openly argued that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" was, in fact, the "*dictatorship of the party*" (see [section H.3.8](#) on how the Bolsheviks modified the Marxist theory of the state in line with this). Rather than the result of the problems facing Russia at the time, Lenin's comments simply reflect the unfolding of certain aspects of his ideology when his party held power (as we make clear in [section H.6](#) the ideology of the ruling party and the ideas held by the masses are also factors in history).

To show that Lenin's comments were not caused by circumstantial factors, we can turn to his infamous work **Left-Wing Communism**. In this 1920 tract, written for the Second Congress of the Communist International, Lenin lambasted those Marxists who argued for direct working class power against the idea of party rule (i.e. the various council communists around Europe). We have already noted in [section H.1.2](#) that Lenin had argued in that work that it was "*ridiculously absurd, and stupid*" to "*a contrast, in general, between the dictatorship of the masses and the dictatorship of the leaders.*" [**The Lenin Anthology**, p. 568] Here we provide his description of the "*top-down*" nature of Bolshevik rule:

*"In Russia today, the connection between leaders, party, class and masses . . . are concretely as follows: the dictatorship is exercised by the proletariat organised in the Soviets and is guided by the Communist Party . . . The Party, which holds annual congresses . . . , is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the congress, while the current work in Moscow has to be carried on by [two] still*

*smaller bodies . . . which are elected at the plenary sessions of the Central Committee, five members of the Central Committee to each bureau. This, it would appear, is a full-fledged 'oligarchy.' No important political or organisational question is decided by any state institution in our republic [sic!] without the guidance of the Party's Central Committee.*

*"In its work, the Party relies directly on the trade unions, which . . . have a membership of over four million and are formally non-Party. Actually, all the directing bodies of the vast majority of the unions . . . are made up of Communists, and carry out all the directives of the Party. Thus . . . we have a formally non-communist . . . very powerful proletarian apparatus, by means of which the Party is closely linked up with the class and the masses, and by means of which, under the leadership of the Party, the class dictatorship of the class is exercised." [Op. Cit., pp. 571-2]*

This was "*the general mechanism of the proletarian state power viewed 'from above,' from the standpoint of the practical realisation of the dictatorship*" and so "*all this talk about 'from above' or 'from below,' about 'the dictatorship of leaders' or 'the dictatorship of the masses,'*" is "*ridiculous and childish nonsense.*" [Op. Cit., p. 573] Lenin, of course, did not bother to view "*proletarian*" state power "*from below,*" from the viewpoint of the proletariat. If he had, perhaps he would have recounted the numerous strikes and protests broken by the Cheka under martial law, the gerrymandering and disbanding of soviets, the imposition of "*one-man management*" onto the workers in production, the turning of the unions into agents of the state/party and the elimination of working class freedom by party power? Which suggests that there are fundamental differences, at least for the masses, between "*from above*" and "*from below.*"

At the Comintern congress itself, Zinoviev announced that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.*" [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, vol. 1, p. 152] Trotsky also universalised Lenin's argument when he pondered the important decisions of the revolution and who would make them in his reply to the delegate from the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT:

*"Who decides this question [and others like it]? We have the Council of People's Commissars but it has to be subject to some supervision. Whose supervision? That of the working class as an amorphous, chaotic mass? No. The Central Committee of the party is convened to discuss . . . and to decide . . . Who will solve these questions in Spain? The Communist Party of Spain." [Op. Cit., p. 174]*

As is obvious, Trotsky was drawing general lessons from the Russian Revolution for the international revolutionary movement. Needless to say, he still argued that the "*working class, represented and led by the Communist Party, [was] in power here*" in spite of it being "*an amorphous, chaotic mass*" which did not make any decisions on important questions affecting the revolution!

Incidentally, his and Lenin's comments of 1920 disprove Trotsky's later assertion that it was "[o]nly after the conquest of power, the end of the civil war, and the establishment of a stable regime" when "*the Central Committee little by little begin to concentrate the leadership of Soviet activity in its hands. Then would come Stalin's turn.*" [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 328] While it was definitely the "*conquest of power*" by the Bolsheviks which lead to the marginalisation

of the soviets, this event cannot be shunted to after the civil war as Trotsky would like (particularly as Trotsky admitted that in 1917 "[a]fter eight months of inertia and of democratic chaos, came the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks." [Op. Cit., vol. 2, p. 242]). We must note Trotsky argued for the "*objective necessity*" of the "*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party*" well into the 1930s (see [section H.1.2](#)).

Clearly, the claim that Leninism (and its various off-shoots like Trotskyism) is "*socialism from below*" is hard to take seriously. As proven above, the Leninist tradition is explicitly against the idea of "*only from below*," with Lenin explicitly stating that it was an "*anarchist stand*" to be for "*'action only from below', not 'from below and from above'*" which was the position of Marxism. [Collected Works, vol. 9, p. 77] Once in power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks implemented this vision of "*from below and from above*," with the highly unsurprising result that "*from above*" quickly repressed "*from below*" (which was dismissed as "*wavering*" by the masses). This was to be expected, for a government to enforce its laws, it has to have power over its citizens and so socialism "*from above*" is a necessary side-effect of Leninist theory.

Ironically, Lenin's argument in **State and Revolution** comes back to haunt him. In that work he had argued that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" meant "*democracy for the people*" which "*imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists.*" These must be crushed "*in order to free humanity from wage-slavery; their resistance must be broken by force; it is clear that where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.*" [Essential Works of Lenin, pp. 337-8] If the working class itself is being subject to "*suppression*" then, clearly, there is "*no freedom, no democracy*" for that class - and the people "*will feel no better if the stick with which they are being beaten is labelled 'the people's stick.'*" [Bakunin, Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 338]

So when Leninists argue that they stand for the "*principles of socialism from below*" and state that this means the direct and democratic control of society by the working class then, clearly, they are being less than honest. Looking at the tradition they place themselves, the obvious conclusion which must be reached is that Leninism is **not** based on "*socialism from below*" in the sense of working class self-management of society (i.e. the only condition when the majority can "*rule*" and decisions truly flow from below upwards). At best, they subscribe to the distinctly bourgeois vision of "*democracy*" as being simply the majority designating (and trying to control) its rulers. At worse, they defend politics which have eliminated even this form of democracy in favour of party dictatorship and "*one-man management*" armed with "*dictatorial*" powers in industry (most members of such parties do not know how the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and disbanded soviets to maintain power, raised the dictatorship of the party to an ideological truism and wholeheartedly advocated "*one-man management*" rather than workers' self-management of production). As we discuss in [section H.5](#), this latter position flows easily from the underlying assumptions of vanguardism which Leninism is based on.

So, Lenin, Trotsky and so on simply cannot be considered as exponents of "*socialism from below*." Any one who makes such a claim is either ignorant of the actual ideas and practice of Bolshevism or they seek to deceive. For anarchists, "*socialism from below*" can only be another name, like libertarian socialism, for anarchism (as Lenin, ironically enough, acknowledged). This does not mean that "*socialism from below*," like "*libertarian socialism*," is identical to anarchism, it simply means that libertarian Marxists and other socialists are far closer to anarchism than mainstream Marxism.

### H.3.4 Don't anarchists just quote Marxists selectively?

No, far from it. While it is impossible to quote everything a person or an ideology says, it is possible to summarise those aspects of a theory which influenced the way it developed in practice. As such, **any** account is "*selective*" in some sense, the question is whether this results in a critique rooted in the ideology and its practice or whether it presents a picture at odds with both. As Maurice Brinton put it in the introduction to his classic account of workers' control in the Russian Revolution:

*"Other charges will also be made. The quotations from Lenin and Trotsky will not be denied but it will be stated that they are 'selective' and that 'other things, too' were said. Again, we plead guilty. But we would stress that there are hagiographers enough in the trade whose 'objectivity' . . . is but a cloak for sophisticated apologetics . . . It therefore seems more relevant to quote those statements of the Bolshevik leaders of 1917 which helped determine Russia's evolution [towards Stalinism] rather than those other statements which, like the May Day speeches of Labour leaders, were forever to remain in the realm of rhetoric." [The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, p. xv]*

Hence the need to discuss all aspects of Marxism rather than take what its adherents like to claim for it as granted. In this, we agree with Marx himself who argued that we cannot judge people by what they say about themselves but rather what they do. Unfortunately while many self-proclaimed Marxists (like Trotsky) may quote these comments, fewer apply them to their own ideology or actions (again, like Trotsky).

This can be seen from the almost ritualistic way many Marxists response to anarchist (or other) criticisms of their ideas. When they complain that anarchists "*selectively*" quote from the leading proponents of Marxism, they are usually at pains to point people to some document which they have selected as being more "*representative*" of their tradition.

Leninists usually point to Lenin's **State and Revolution**, for example, for a vision of what Lenin "*really*" wanted. To this anarchists reply by, as we discussed in [section H.1.7](#), pointing out that much of that passes for 'Marxism' in **State and Revolution** is anarchist and, equally important, it was not applied in practice. This explains an apparent contradiction. Leninists point to the Russian Revolution as evidence for the democratic nature of their politics.

Anarchists point to it as evidence of Leninism's authoritarian nature. Both can do this because there is a substantial difference between Bolshevism before it took power and afterwards. While the Leninists ask you to judge them by their manifesto, anarchists say judge them by their record!

Simply put, Marxists quote selectively from their own tradition, ignoring those aspects of it which would be unappealing to potential recruits. While the leaders may know their tradition has skeletons in its closet, they try their best to ensure no one else gets to know. Which, of course, explains their hostility to anarchists doing so! That there is a deep divide between aspects of Marxist rhetoric and its practice and that even its rhetoric is not consistent we will now prove. By so doing, we can show that anarchists do not, in fact, quote Marxist's "*selectively*."

As an example, we can point to the leading Bolshevik Grigorii Zinoviev. In 1920, as head of the Communist International he wrote a letter to the **Industrial Workers of the World**, a

revolutionary labour union, which stated that the "*Russian Soviet Republic . . . is the most highly centralised government that exists. It is also the most democratic government in history. For all the organs of government are in constant touch with the working masses, and constantly sensitive to their will.*" The same year he explained to the Second Congress of the Communist International that "[t]oday, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class . . . [T]he dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party." [**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 2, p. 928 and pp. 151-2]

It seems redundant to note that the second quote is the accurate one, the one which matches the reality of Bolshevik Russia. Therefore it is hardly "selective" to quote the latter and not the former, as it expresses the reality of Bolshevism rather than its rhetoric.

This duality and the divergence between practice and rhetoric comes to the fore when Trotskyists discuss Stalinism and try to counter pose the Leninist tradition to it. For example, we find the British SWP's Chris Harman arguing that the "*whole experience of the workers' movement internationally teaches that only by regular elections, combined with the right of recall by shop-floor meetings can rank-and-file delegates be made really responsible to those who elect them.*" [**Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, pp. 238-9]

Significantly, Harman does not mention that both Lenin and Trotsky rejected this experience once in power. As we discuss in [section H.3.8](#), Leninism came not only to practice but to argue theoretically for state power explicitly to eliminate such control from below. How can the numerous statements of leading Leninists (including Lenin and Trotsky) on the necessity of party dictatorship be reconciled with it?

The ironies do not stop there, of course. Harman correctly notes that under Stalinism, the "*bureaucracy is characterised, like the private capitalist class in the West, by its control over the means of production.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 147] However, he fails to note that it was **Lenin**, in early 1918, who had raised and then implemented such "control" in the form of "*one-man management.*" As he put it: "*Obedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 316] To fail to note this link between Lenin and the Stalinist bureaucracy on this issue is quoting "selectively."

The contradictions pile up. Harman argues that "*people who seriously believe that workers at the height of revolution need a police guard to stop them handing their factories over to capitalists certainly have no real faith in the possibilities of a socialist future.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 144] Yet this does not stop him praising the regime of Lenin and Trotsky and contrasting it with Stalinism, in spite of the fact that this was precisely what the Bolsheviks **did** from 1918 onwards! Indeed this tyrannical practice played a role in provoking the strikes in Petrograd which preceded the Kronstadt revolt in 1921, when "*the workers wanted the special squads of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories.*" [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, p. 42] It seems equally strange that Harman denounces the Stalinist suppression of the Hungarian revolution for workers' democracy and genuine socialism while he defends the Bolshevik suppression of the Kronstadt revolt for the same

goals. Similarly, when Harman argues that if by "*political party*" it is "*meant a party of the usual sort, in which a few leaders give orders and the masses merely obey . . . then certainly such organisations added nothing to the Hungarian revolution.*" However, as we discuss in [section H.5](#), such a party was **precisely** what Leninism argued for and applied in practice. Simply put, the Bolsheviks were never a party "*that stood for the councils taking power.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 186 and p. 187] As Lenin repeatedly stressed, its aim was for the Bolshevik party to take power **through** the councils (see [section H.3.11](#)). Once in power, the councils were quickly marginalised and became little more than a fig-leaf for party rule.

This confusion between what was promised and what was done is a common feature of Leninism. Felix Morrow, for example, wrote what is usually considered the definitive Trotskyist work on the Spanish Revolution (in spite of it being, as we discuss in the appendix "[Marxists and Spanish Anarchism,](#)" deeply flawed). Morrow stated that the "*essential points of a revolutionary program [are] all power to the working class, and democratic organs of the workers, peasants and combatants, as the expression of the workers' power.*" [**Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain**, p. 133] How this can be reconciled with, say, Trotsky's opinion of ten years previously that "*[w]ith us the dictatorship of the party (quite falsely disputed theoretically by Stalin) is the expression of the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat . . . The dictatorship of a party is a part of the socialist revolution?*" [**Leon Trotsky on China**, p. 251] Or with Lenin's and Trotsky's repeated call for the party to seize and exercise power? Or their opinion that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise the proletarian dictatorship? How can the working class "*have all power*" if power is held not by mass organisations but rather by a vanguard party? Particularly, as we note in [section H.1.2](#) when party dictatorship is placed at the heart of Leninist ideology.

Given all this, who is quoting who "*selectively*"? The Marxists who ignore what the Bolsheviks did when in power and repeatedly point to Lenin's **The State and Revolution** or the anarchists who link what they did with what they said outside of that holy text? Considering this absolutely contradictory inheritance, anarchists feel entitled to ask the question "*Will the real Leninist please stand up?*" What is it to be, popular democracy or party rule? If we look at Bolshevik practice, the answer is the latter anarchists argue. Ironically, the likes of Lenin and Trotsky concurred, incorporating the necessity of party power into their ideology as a key lesson of the Russian revolution. As such, anarchists do not feel they are quoting Leninism "*selectively*" when they argue that it is based on party power, not working class self-management. That Leninists often publicly deny this aspect of their own ideology or, at best, try to rationalise and justify it, suggests that when push comes to shove (as it does in every revolution) they will make the same decisions and act in the same way.

In addition there is the question of what could be called the "*social context.*" Marxists often accuse anarchists of failing to place the quotations and actions of, say, the Bolsheviks into the circumstances which generated them. By this they mean that Bolshevik authoritarianism can be explained purely in terms of the massive problems facing them (i.e. the rigours of the Civil War, the economic collapse and chaos in Russia and so on). As we discuss this question in [section H.6](#), we will simply summarise the anarchist reply by noting that this argument has three major problems with it. Firstly, there is the problem that Bolshevik authoritarianism started **before** the start of the Civil War and, moreover, intensified **after** its end. As such, the Civil War cannot be blamed. The second problem is simply that Lenin continually stressed that civil war and economic chaos was inevitable during a revolution. If Leninist politics

cannot handle the inevitable then they are to be avoided. Equally, if Leninists blame what they should **know** is inevitable for the degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution it would suggest their understanding of what revolution entails is deeply flawed. The last problem is simply that the Bolsheviks did not care. As Samuel Farber notes, "*there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921. In fact . . . the very opposite is the case.*" [**Before Stalinism**, p. 44] Hence the continuation (indeed, intensification) of Bolshevik authoritarianism after their victory in the civil war. Given this, it is significant that many of the quotes from Trotsky given above date from the late 1930s. To argue, therefore, that "social context" explains the politics and actions of the Bolsheviks seems incredulous.

Lastly, it seems ironic that Marxists accuse anarchists of quoting "*selectively*." After all, as proven in [section H.2](#), this is **exactly** what Marxists do to anarchism!

In summary, rather than quote "*selectively*" from the works and practice of Marxism, anarchists summarise those tendencies of both which, we argue, contribute to its continual failure in practice as a revolutionary theory. Moreover, Marxists themselves are equally as "*selective*" as anarchists in this respect. Firstly, as regards anarchist theory and practice and, secondly, as regards their own.

### H.3.5 Has Marxist appropriation of anarchist ideas changed it?

As is obvious in any account of the history of socialism, Marxists (of various schools) have appropriated key anarchist ideas and (often) present them as if Marxists thought of them first.

For example, as we discuss in [section H.3.10](#), it was anarchists who first raised the idea of smashing the bourgeois state and replacing it with the fighting organisations of the working class (such as unions, workers' councils, etc.). It was only in 1917, decades after anarchists had first raised the idea, that Marxists started to argue these ideas but, of course, with a twist. While anarchists meant that working class organisations would be the basis of a free society, Lenin saw these organs as the best means of achieving Bolshevik party power.

Similarly with the libertarian idea of the "*militant minority*." By this, anarchists and syndicalists meant groups of workers who gave an example by their direct action which their fellow workers could imitate (for example by leading wildcat strikes which would use flying pickets to get other workers to join in). This "*militant minority*" would be at the forefront of social struggle and would show, by example, practice and discussion, that their ideas and tactics were the correct ones. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Bolsheviks argued that this idea was similar to their idea of a vanguard party. This ignored two key differences. Firstly that the libertarian "*militant minority*" did not aim to take power on behalf of the working class but rather to encourage it, by example, to manage its own struggles and affairs (and, ultimately, society). Secondly, that "*vanguard parties*" are organised in hierarchical ways alien to the spirit of anarchism. While both the "*militant minority*" and "*vanguard party*" approaches are based on an appreciation of the uneven development of ideas within the working class, vanguardism transforms this into a justification for party rule **over** the working class by a so-called "*advanced*" minority (see [section H.5](#) for a full discussion).

Other concepts, such as "*workers' control*," direct action, and so on have suffered a similar fate.

A classic example of this appropriation of anarchist ideas into Marxism is provided by the general strike. In 1905, Russia had a near revolution in which the general strike played a key role. Unsurprisingly, as anarchists had been arguing for the general strike since the 1870s, we embraced these events as a striking confirmation of our long held ideas on revolutionary change. Marxists had a harder task as such ideas were alien to mainstream Social Democracy. Yet faced with the success and power of the general strike in practice, the more radical Marxists, like Rosa Luxemburg, had to incorporate it into their politics.

Yet they faced a problem. The general strike was indelibly linked with such hearsays as anarchism and syndicalism. Had not Engels himself proclaimed the nonsense of the general strike in his diatribe "*The Bakuninists at work*"? Had his words not been repeated ad infinitum against anarchists (and radical socialists) who questioned the wisdom of social democratic tactics, its reformism and bureaucratic inertia? The Marxist radicals knew that Engels would again be invoked by the bureaucrats and reformists in the Social Democratic movement to throw cold water over any attempt to adjust Marxist politics to the economic power of the masses as expressed in mass strikes. The Social Democratic hierarchy would simply dismiss them as "anarchists." This meant that Luxemburg was faced with the problem of proving Engels was right, even when he was wrong.

She did so in an ingenious way. Like Engels himself, she simply distorted what the anarchists thought about the general strike in order to make it acceptable to Social Democracy. Her argument was simple. Yes, Engels had been right to dismiss the "general strike" idea of the anarchists in the 1870s. But today, thirty years later, Social Democrats should support the general strike (or mass strike, as she called it) because the concepts were different. The anarchist "general strike" was utopian. The Marxist "mass strike" was practical.

To discover why, we need to see what Engels had argued in the 1870s. Engels, mocked the anarchists (or "Bakuninists") for thinking that "*a general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started*." He accusing them of imagining that "[o]ne fine morning, all the workers in all the industries of a country, or even of the whole world, stop work, thus forcing the propertied classes either humbly to submit within four weeks at most, or to attack the workers, who would then have the right to defend themselves and use the opportunity to pull down the entire old society." He stated that at the September 1 1873 Geneva congress of the anarchist Alliance of Social Democracy, it was "*universally admitted that to carry out the general strike strategy, there had to be a perfect organisation of the working class and a plentiful funds*." He noted that that was "*the rub*" as no government would stand by and "*allow the organisation or funds of the workers to reach such a level*." Moreover, the revolution would happen long before "*such an ideal organisation*" was set up and if they had been "*there would be no need to use the roundabout way of a general strike*" to achieve it. [**Collected Works**, vol. 23, pp. 584-5]

Rosa Luxemburg repeated Engels arguments in her essay "*The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*" in order to show how her support for the general strike was in no way contrary to Marxism. [**Rosa Luxemburg Speaks**, pp. 153-218] Her "mass strike" was different from the anarchist "general strike" as mocked by Engels as it was dynamic process and could not be seen as one act, one isolated action which overthrows the bourgeoisie. Rather, the mass strike to the product of the everyday class struggle within

society, leads to a direct confrontation with the capitalist state and so it was inseparable from the revolution.

The only problem with all this is that the anarchists did not actually argue along the lines Engels and Luxemburg claimed. Most obviously, as we indicated in [section H.2.8](#), Bakunin saw the general strike as a **dynamic** process which would **not** be set for a specific date and did **not** need all workers to be organised before hand. As such, Bakunin's ideas are totally at odds with Engels assertions on what anarchist ideas on the general strike were about (they, in fact, reflect what actually happened in 1905).

But what of the "Bakuninists"? Again, Engels account leaves a lot to be desired. Rather than the September 1873 Geneva congress being, as he claimed, of the (disbanded) Alliance of Social Democracy, it was in fact a meeting of the non-Marxist federations of the First International. Contra Engels, anarchists did not see the general strike as requiring all workers to be perfectly organised and then passively folding arms "*one fine morning*." The Belgian libertarians who proposed the idea at the congress saw it as a tactic which could mobilise workers for revolution, "*a means of bringing a movement onto the street and leading the workers to the barricades*." Moreover, leading anarchist James Guillaume explicitly rejected the idea that it had "*to break out everywhere at an appointed day and hour*" with a resounding "*No!*" In fact, he stressed that they did "*not even need to bring up this question and suppose things could be like this. Such a supposition could lead to fatal mistakes. The revolution has to be contagious.*" [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886**, p. 223 and p. 224]

Another account of this meeting notes that how the general strike was to start was "*left unsaid*", with Guillaume "*recognis[ing] that it as impossible for the anarchists simply to set the hour for the general strike.*" Another anarchist did "*not believe that the strike was a sufficient means to win the social revolution*" but could "*set the stage for the success of an armed insurrection.*" Only one delegate, regardless of Engels' claims, thought it "*demanded the utmost organisation of the working class*" and if that were the case "*then the general strike would not be necessary.*" This was the delegate from the reformist British trade unions and he was "*attack[ing]*" the general strike as "*an absurd and impractical proposition.*" [Phil H. Goodstein, **The Theory of the General Strike**, pp. 43-5]

Perhaps this is why Engels did not bother to quote a single anarchist when recounting their position on this matter? Needless to say, Leninists continue to parrot Engels assertions to this day. The facts are somewhat different. Clearly, the "anarchist" strategy of overthrowing the bourgeoisie with one big general strike set for a specific date exists only in Marxist heads, nowhere else. Once we remove the distortions promulgated by Engels and repeated by Luxemburg, we see that the 1905 revolution and "*historical dialectics*" did not, as Luxemburg claim, validate Engels and disprove anarchism. Quite the reverse as the general strikes in Russia followed the anarchist ideas of what a general strike would be like quite closely. Little wonder, then, that Kropotkin argued that the 1905 general strike "*demonstrated*" that the Latin workers who had been advocating the general strike "*as a weapon which would irresistible in the hands of labour for imposing its will*" had been "*right.*" [**Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution**, p. 288]

So, contra Luxemburg, "*the fatherland of Bakunin*" was **not** "*the burial-place of [anarchism's] teachings.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 157] As Nicholas Walter argued, while the numbers of actual anarchists was small, "*the 1905 Revolution was objectively an anarchist revolution.*

*The military mutinies, peasant uprisings and workers' strikes (culminating in a general strike), led to the establishment of soldiers' and workers' councils . . . and peasants' communes, and the beginning of agrarian and industrial expropriation - all along the lines suggested by anarchist writers since Bakunin."* [The Anarchist Past and Other Essays, p. 122] The real question must be when will Marxists realise that quoting Engels does not make it true?

Moreover, without becoming an insurrection, as anarchists had stressed, the limits of the general strike were exposed in 1905. Unlike the some of the syndicalists in the 1890s and 1900s, this limitation was understood by the earliest anarchists. Consequently, they saw the general strike as the start of a revolution and not as the revolution itself. So, for all the Leninist accounts of the 1905 revolution claiming it for their ideology, the facts suggest that it was anarchism, not Marxism, which was vindicated by it. Luxemburg was wrong. The "*land of Bakunin's birth*" provided an unsurpassed example of how to make a revolution precisely because it applied (and confirmed) anarchist ideas on the general strike (and, it should be added, workers' councils). Marxists (who had previously quoted Engels to dismiss such things) found themselves repudiating aspect upon aspect of their dogma to remain relevant. Luxemburg, as Bookchin noted, "*grossly misrepresented the anarchist emphasis on the general strike after the 1905 revolution in Russia in order to make it acceptable to Social Democracy.*" (he added that Lenin "*was to engage in the same misrepresentation on the issue of popular control in State and Revolution*"). [Towards an Ecological Society, p. 227fn]

As such, while Marxists have appropriated certain anarchist concepts, it does not automatically mean that they mean exactly the same thing by them. Rather, as history shows, radically different concepts can be hidden behind similar sounding rhetoric. As Murray Bookchin argued, many Marxist tendencies "*attach basically alien ideas to the withering conceptual framework of Marxism - not to say anything new but to preserve something old with ideological formaldehyde - to the detriment of any intellectual growth that the distinctions are designed to foster. This is mystification at its worst, for it not only corrupts ideas but the very capacity of the mind to deal with them. If Marx's work can be rescued for our time, it will be by dealing with it as an invaluable part of the development of ideas, not as pastiche that is legitimated as a 'method' or continually 'updated' by concepts that come from an alien zone of ideas.*" [Op. Cit., p. 242f]

This is not some academic point. The ramifications of Marxists appropriating such "*alien ideas*" (or, more correctly, the rhetoric associated with those ideas) has had negative impacts on actual revolutionary movements. For example, Lenin's definition of "*workers' control*" was radically different than that current in the factory committee movement during the Russian Revolution (which had more in common with anarchist and syndicalist use of the term). The similarities in rhetoric allowed the factory committee movement to put its weight behind the Bolsheviks. Once in power, Lenin's position was implemented while that of the factory committees was ignored. Ultimately, Lenin's position was a key factor in creating state capitalism rather than socialism in Russia (see [section H.3.14](#) for more details).

This, of course, does not stop modern day Leninists appropriating the term workers' control "*without bating an eyelid. Seeking to capitalise on the confusion now rampant in the movement, these people talk of 'workers' control' as if a) they meant by those words what the politically unsophisticated mean (i.e. that working people should themselves decide about the fundamental matters relating to production) and b) as if they - and the Leninist doctrine to which they claim to adhere - had always supported demands of this kind, or as if Leninism*

*had always seen in workers' control the universally valid foundation of a new social order, rather than just a slogan to be used for manipulatory purposes in specific and very limited historical contexts.*" [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. iv] This clash between the popular idea of workers' control and the Leninist one was a key reason for the failure of the Russian Revolution precisely because, once in power, the latter was imposed.

Thus the fact that Leninists have appropriated libertarian (and working class) ideas and demands does not, in fact, mean that we aim for the same thing (as we discussed in [section H.3.1](#), this is far from the case). The use of anarchist/popular rhetoric and slogans means little and we need to look at the content of the ideas proposed. Given the legacy of the appropriation of libertarian terminology to popularise authoritarian parties and its subsequent jettison in favour of authoritarian policies once the party is in power, anarchists have strong grounds to take Leninist claims with a large pinch of salt!

Equally with examples of actual revolutions. As Martin Buber noted, while "*Lenin praises Marx for having 'not yet, in 1852, put the concrete question as to what should be set up in place of the State machinery after it had been abolished,*" Lenin argued that "*it was only the Paris Commune that taught Marx this.*" However, as Buber correctly pointed out, the Paris Commune "*was the realisation of the thoughts of people who had put this question very concretely indeed . . . the historical experience of the Commune became possible only because in the hearts of passionate revolutionaries there lived the picture of a decentralised, very much 'de-Stated' society, which picture they undertook to translate into reality. The spiritual fathers of the Commune had such that ideal aiming at decentralisation which Marx and Engels did not have, and the leaders of the Revolution of 1871 tried, albeit with inadequate powers, to begin the realisation of that idea in the midst of revolution.*" [**Paths in Utopia**, pp. 103-4] Thus, while the Paris Commune and other working class revolts are praised, their obvious anarchistic elements (which were usually often predicted by anarchist thinkers) are not mentioned. This results in some strange dichotomies. For example, Bakunin's vision of revolution is based on a federation of workers' councils, predating Marxist support for such bodies by decades, yet Marxists argue that Bakunin's ideas have nothing to teach us. Or, the Paris Commune being praised by Marxists as the first "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" when it implements federalism, delegates being subjected to mandates and recall and raises the vision of a socialism of associations while anarchism is labelled "*petit-bourgeois*" in spite of the fact that these ideas can be found in works of Proudhon and Bakunin which predate the 1871 revolt!

From this, we can draw two facts. Firstly, anarchism has successfully predicted certain aspects of working class revolution. Anarchist K.J. Kenafick stated the obvious when he argues that any "*comparison will show that the programme set out [by the Paris Commune] is . . . the system of Federalism, which Bakunin had been advocating for years, and which had first been enunciated by Proudhon. The Proudhonists . . . exercised considerable influence in the Commune. This 'political form' was therefore not 'at last' discovered; it had been discovered years ago; and now it was proven to be correct by the very fact that in the crisis the Paris workers adopted it almost automatically, under the pressure of circumstance, rather than as the result of theory, as being the form most suitable to express working class aspirations.*" [**Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 212-3] Rather than being somehow alien to the working class and its struggle for freedom, anarchism in fact bases itself on the class struggle. This means that it should come as no surprise when the ideas of anarchism are developed and applied by those in struggle, for those ideas are just generalisations derived

from past working class struggles! If anarchism ideas are applied spontaneously by those in struggle, it is because those involved are themselves drawing similar conclusions from their own experiences.

The other fact is that while mainstream Marxism often appropriated certain aspects of libertarian theory and practice, it does so selectively and places them into an authoritarian context which undermines their libertarian nature. Hence anarchist support for workers councils becomes transformed by Leninists into a means to ensure party power (i.e. state authority) rather than working class power or self-management (i.e. no authority). Similarly, anarchist support for leading by example becomes transformed into support for party rule (and often dictatorship). Ultimately, the practice of mainstream Marxism shows that libertarian ideas cannot be transplanted selectively into an authoritarian ideology and be expected to blossom.

Significantly, those Marxists who **do** apply anarchist ideas honestly are usually labelled by their orthodox comrades as "*anarchists*." As an example of Marxists appropriating libertarian ideas honestly, we can point to the council communist and currents within Autonomist Marxism. The council communists broke with the Bolsheviks over the question of whether the party would exercise power or whether the workers' councils would. Needless to say, Lenin labelled them an "*anarchist deviation*." Currents within Autonomist Marxism have built upon the council communist tradition, stressing the importance of focusing analysis on working class struggle as the key dynamic in capitalist society.

In this they go against the mainstream Marxist orthodoxy and embrace a libertarian perspective. As libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis argued, *"the economic theory expounded [by Marx] in Capital is based on the postulate that capitalism has managed completely and effectively to transform the worker - who appears there only as labour power - into a commodity; therefore the use value of labour power - the use the capitalist makes of it - is, as for any commodity, completely determined by the use, since its exchange value - wages - is determined solely by the laws of the market . . . This postulate is necessary for there to be a 'science of economics' along the physico-mathematical model Marx followed . . . But he contradicts the most essential fact of capitalism, namely, that the use value and exchange value of labour power are objectively indeterminate; they are determined rather by the struggle between labour and capital both in production and in society. Here is the ultimate root of the 'objective' contradictions of capitalism . . . The paradox is that Marx, the 'inventor' of class struggle, wrote a monumental work on phenomena determined by this struggle in which the struggle itself was entirely absent."* [Political and Social Writings, vol. 2, pp. 202-3] Castoriadis explained the limitations of Marx's vision most famously in his "Modern Capitalism and Revolution." [Op. Cit., pp. 226-343]

By rejecting this heritage which mainstream Marxism bases itself on and stressing the role of class struggle, Autonomist Marxism breaks decisively with the Marxist mainstream and embraces a position previously associated with anarchists and other libertarian socialists. The key role of class struggle in invalidating all deterministic economic "laws" was expressed by French syndicalists at the start of the twentieth century. This insight predated the work of Castoriadis and the development of Autonomist Marxism by over 50 years and is worth quoting at length:

*"the keystone of socialism . . . proclaimed that 'as a general rule, the average wage would be no more than what the worker strictly required for survival'. And it was*

*said: 'That figure is governed by capitalist pressure alone and this can even push it below the minimum necessary for the working man's subsistence . . . The only rule with regard to wage levels is the plentiful or scarce supply of man-power . . .'*

*"By way of evidence of the relentless operation of this law of wages, comparisons were made between the worker and a commodity: if there is a glut of potatoes on the market, they are cheap; if they are scarce, the price rises . . . It is the same with the working man, it was said: his wages fluctuate in accordance with the plentiful supply or dearth of labour!*

*"No voice was raised against the relentless arguments of this absurd reasoning: so the law of wages may be taken as right . . . for as long as the working man [or woman] is content to be a commodity! For as long as, like a sack of potatoes, she remains passive and inert and endures the fluctuations of the market . . . For as long as he bends his back and puts up with all of the bosses' snubs, . . . the law of wages obtains.*

*"But things take a different turn the moment that a glimmer of consciousness stirs this worker-potato into life. When, instead off dooming himself to inertia, spinelessness, resignation and passivity, the worker wakes up to his worth as a human being and the spirit of revolt washes over him: when he bestirs himself, energetic, wilful and active . . . [and] once the labour bloc comes to life and bestirs itself . . . then, the laughable equilibrium of the law of wages is undone."*  [Emile Pouget, **Direct Action**, pp. 9-10]

And Marx, indeed, had compared the worker to a commodity, stating that labour power "*is a commodity, neither more nor less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scale.*" [**Selected Works**, p. 72] However, as Castoridias argued, unlike sugar the extraction of the use value of labour power "*is not a technical operation; it is a process of bitter struggle in which half the time, so to speak, the capitalists turn out to be losers.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 248] A fact which Pouget stressed in his critique of the mainstream socialist position:

*"A novel factor has appeared on the labour market: the will of the worker! And this factor, not pertinent when it comes to setting the price of a bushel of potatoes, has a bearing upon the setting of wages; its impact may be large or small, according to the degree of tension of the labour force which is a product of the accord of individual wills beating in unison - but, whether it be strong or weak, there is no denying it.*

*"Thus, worker cohesion conjures up against capitalist might a might capable of standing up to it. The inequality between the two adversaries - which cannot be denied when the exploiter is confronted only by the working man on his own - is redressed in proportion with the degree of cohesion achieved by the labour bloc. From then on, proletarian resistance, be it latent or acute, is an everyday phenomenon: disputes between labour and capital quicken and become more acute. Labour does not always emerge victorious from these partial struggles: however, even when defeated, the struggle workers still reap some benefit: resistance from them has obstructed pressure from the employers and often forced the employer to grant some of the demands put."*  [**Op. Cit.**, p. 10]

The best currents of Autonomist Marxism share this anarchist stress on the power of working people to transform society and to impact on how capitalism operates. Unsurprisingly, most

Autonomist Marxists reject the idea of the vanguard party and instead, like the council communists, stress the need for **autonomist** working class self-organisation and self-activity (hence the name!). They agree with Pouget when he argued that direct action "spells liberation for the masses of humanity", it "puts paid to the age of miracles - miracles from Heaven, miracles from the State - and, in contraposition to hopes vested in 'providence' (no matter what they may be) it announces that it will act upon the maxim: salvation lies within ourselves!" [Op. Cit., p. 3] As such, they draw upon anarchistic ideas and rhetoric (for many, undoubtedly unknowingly) and draw anarchistic conclusions. This can be seen from the works of the leading US Autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver. His excellent essay "*Kropotkin, Self-Valorisation and the Crisis of Marxism*" is by far the best Marxist account of Kropotkin's ideas and shows the similarities between communist-anarchism and Autonomist Marxism. [Anarchist Studies, vol.2 , no. 2, pp. 119-36] Both, he points out, share a "*common perception and sympathy for the power of workers to act autonomously*" regardless of the "*substantial differences*" on other issues. [Reading Capital Politically, p. 15]

As such, the links between the best Marxists and anarchism can be substantial. This means that some Marxists have taken on board many anarchist ideas and have forged a version of Marxism which is basically libertarian in nature. Unfortunately, such forms of Marxism have always been a minority current within it. Most cases have seen the appropriation of anarchist ideas by Marxists simply as part of an attempt to make mainstream, authoritarian Marxism more appealing and such borrowings have been quickly forgotten once power has been seized.

Therefore appropriation of rhetoric and labels should not be confused with similarity of goals and ideas. The list of groupings which have used inappropriate labels to associate their ideas with other, more appealing, ones is lengthy. Content is what counts. If libertarian sounding ideas **are** being raised, the question becomes one of whether they are being used simply to gain influence or whether they signify a change of heart. As Bookchin argued:

*"Ultimately, a line will have to be drawn that, by definition, excludes any project that can tip decentralisation to the side of centralisation, direct democracy to the side of delegated power, libertarian institutions to the side of bureaucracy, and spontaneity to the side of authority. Such a line, like a physical barrier, must irrevocably separate a libertarian zone of theory and practice from the hybridised socialisms that tend to denature it. This zone must build its anti-authoritarian, utopian, and revolutionary commitments into the very recognition it has of itself, in short, into the very way it defines itself. . . . to admit of domination is to cross the line that separates the libertarian zone from the [state] socialist."* [Op. Cit., pp. 223-4]

Unless we know exactly what we aim for, how to get there and who our **real** allies are we will get a nasty surprise once our self-proclaimed "allies" take power. As such, any attempt to appropriate anarchist rhetoric into an authoritarian ideology will simply fail and become little more than a mask obscuring the real aims of the party in question. As history shows.

### H.3.6 Is Marxism the only revolutionary politics which have worked?

Some Marxists will dismiss our arguments, and anarchism, out of hand. This is because anarchism has not lead a "successful" revolution while Marxism has. The fact, they assert,

that there has never been a serious anarchist revolutionary movement, let alone a successful anarchist revolution, in the whole of history proves that Marxism works. For some Marxists, practice determines validity. Whether something is true or not is not decided intellectually in wordy publications and debates, but in reality.

For Anarchists, such arguments simply show the ideological nature of most forms of Marxism. The fact is, of course, that there has been many anarchistic revolutions which, while ultimately defeated, show the validity of anarchist theory (the ones in Spain and in the Ukraine being the most significant). Moreover, there have been serious revolutionary anarchist movements across the world, the majority of them crushed by state repression (usually fascist or communist based). However, this is not the most important issue, which is the fate of these "successful" Marxist movements and revolutions. The fact that there has never been a "Marxist" revolution which has not become a party dictatorship proves the need to critique Marxism.

So, given that Marxists argue that Marxism is **the** revolutionary working class political theory, its actual track record has been appalling. After all, while many Marxist parties have taken part in revolutions and even seized power, the net effect of their "success" have been societies bearing little or no relationship to socialism. Rather, the net effect of these revolutions has been to discredit socialism by associating it with one-party states presiding over state capitalist economies.

Equally, the role of Marxism in the labour movement has also been less than successful. Looking at the first Marxist movement, social democracy, it ended by becoming reformist, betraying socialist ideas by (almost always) supporting their own state during the First World War and going so far as crushing the German revolution and betraying the Italian factory occupations in 1920. Indeed, Trotsky stated that the Bolshevik party was "*the only revolutionary*" section of the Second International, which is a damning indictment of Marxism. [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 248] Just as damning is the fact that neither Lenin or Trotsky noticed it before 1914! In fact, Lenin praised the "*fundamentals of parliamentary tactics*" of German and International Social Democracy, expressing the opinion that they were "*at the same time implacable on questions of principle and always directed to the accomplishment of the final aim*" in his obituary of August Bebel in 1913! [Collected Works, vol. 19, p. 298] For those that way inclined, some amusement can be gathered comparing Engels glowing predictions for these parties and their actual performance (in the case of Spain and Italy, his comments seem particularly ironic).

As regards Bolshevism itself, the one "revolutionary" party in the world, it avoided the fate of its sister parties simply because there no question of applying social democratic tactics within bourgeois institutions as these did not exist in Tsarist Russia. Moreover, the net result of its seizure of power was, first, a party dictatorship and state capitalism under Lenin, then their intensification under Stalin and the creation of a host of Trotskyist sects who spend a considerable amount of time justifying and rationalising the ideology and actions of the Bolsheviks which helped create the Stalinism. Given the fate of Bolshevism in power, Bookchin simply stated the obviously:

*"None of the authoritarian technics of change has provided successful 'paradigms'; unless we are prepared to ignore the harsh fact that the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban 'revolutions' were massive counterrevolutions that blight our entire century."* [The Ecology of Freedom, p. 446]

Clearly, a key myth of Marxism is the idea that it has been a successful movement. In reality, its failures have been consistent and devastating so suggesting it is time to re-evaluate the whole ideology and embrace a revolutionary theory like anarchism. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to argue that every "success" of Marxism has, in fact, proved that the anarchist critique of Marxism was correct. Thus, as Bakunin predicted, the Social-Democratic parties became reformist and the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" became the "*dictatorship over the proletariat*." With "victories" like these, Marxism does not need failures! Thus Murray Bookchin:

*"A theory which is so readily 'vulgarised,' 'betrayed,' or, more sinisterly, institutionalised into bureaucratic power by nearly all its adherents may well be one that lends itself to such 'vulgarisations,' 'betrayals,' and bureaucratic forms as a normal condition of its existence. What may seem to be 'vulgarisations,' 'betrayals,' and bureaucratic manifestations of its tenets in the heated light of doctrinal disputes may prove to be the fulfilment of its tenets in the cold light of historical development."* [Toward an Ecological Society, p. 196]

Hence the overwhelming need to critically evaluate Marxist ideas and history (such as the Russian Revolution - see [section H.6](#)). Unless we honestly discuss and evaluate all aspects of revolutionary ideas, we will never be able to build a positive and constructive revolutionary movement. By seeking the roots of Marxism's problems, we can enrich anarchism by avoiding possible pitfalls and recognising and building upon its strengths (e.g., where anarchists have identified, however incompletely, problems in Marxism which bear on revolutionary ideas, practice and transformation).

If this is done, anarchists are sure that Marxist claims that Marxism is **the** revolutionary theory will be exposed for the baseless rhetoric they are.

### H.3.7 What is wrong with the Marxist theory of the state?

For anarchists, the idea that a state (any state) can be used for socialist ends is simply ridiculous. This is because of the nature of the state as an instrument of minority class rule. As such, it precludes the mass participation required for socialism and would create a new form of class society.

As we discussed in [section B.2](#), the state is defined by certain characteristics (most importantly, the centralisation of power into the hands of a few). Thus, for anarchists, "*the word 'State' . . . should be reserved for those societies with the hierarchical system and centralisation.*" [Peter Kropotkin, **Ethics**, p. 317f] This defining feature of the state has not come about by chance. As Kropotkin argued in his classic history of the state, "*a social institution cannot lend itself to all the desired goals, since, as with every organ, [the state] developed according to the function it performed, in a definite direction and not in all possible directions.*" This means, by "*seeing the State as it has been in history, and as it is in essence today*" the conclusion anarchists "*arrive at is for the abolition of the State.*" Thus the state has "*developed in the history of human societies to prevent the direct association among men [and women] to shackle the development of local and individual initiative, to crush existing liberties, to prevent their new blossoming - all this in order to subject the masses to the will of minorities.*" [**The State: Its Historic Role**, p. 56]

So if the state, as Kropotkin stressed, is defined by "*the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies*" then such a structure has not evolved by chance. Therefore "*the pyramidal organisation which is the essence of the State*" simply "*cannot lend itself to a function opposed to the one for which it was developed in the course of history,*" such as the popular participation from below required by social revolution and socialism. [Op. Cit., p. 10, p. 59 and p. 56] Based on this evolutionary analysis of the state, Kropotkin, like all anarchists, drew the conclusion "*that the State organisation, having been the force to which the minorities resorted for establishing and organising their power over the masses, cannot be the force which will serve to destroy these privileges.*" [Evolution and Environment, p. 82]

This does **not** mean that anarchists dismiss differences between types of state, think the state has not changed over time or refuse to see that different states exist to defend different ruling minorities. Far from it. Anarchists argue that "*[e]very economic phase has a political phase corresponding to it, and it would be impossible to touch private property unless a new mode of political life be found at the same time.*" "A society founded on serfdom," Kropotkin explained, "*is in keeping with absolute monarchy; a society based on the wage system, and the exploitation of the masses by the capitalists finds its political expression in parliamentarianism.*" As such, the state form changes and evolves, but its basic function (defender of minority rule) and structure (delegated power into the hands of a few) remains. Which means that "*a free society regaining possession of the common inheritance must seek, in free groups and free federations of groups, a new organisation, in harmony with the new economic phase of history.*" [The Conquest of Bread, p. 54]

As with any social structure, the state has evolved to ensure that it carries out its function. In other words, the state is centralised because it is an instrument of minority domination and oppression. Insofar as a social system is based on decentralisation of power, popular self-management, mass participation and free federation from below upwards, it is not a state. If a social system is, however, marked by delegated power and centralisation it is a state and cannot be, therefore, a instrument of social liberation. Rather it will become, slowly but surely, "*whatever title it adopts and whatever its origin and organisation may be*" what the state has always been, a instrument for "*oppressing and exploiting the masses, of defending the oppressors and the exploiters.*" [Malatesta, Anarchy, p. 23] Which, for obvious reasons, is why anarchists argue for the destruction of the state by a free federation of self-managed communes and workers' councils (see [section H.1.4](#) for further discussion).

This explains why anarchists reject the Marxist definition and theory of the state. For Marxists, "*the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another.*" While it has been true that, historically, it is "*the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and this acquires the means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class,*" this need not always be the case. The state is "*at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy,*" although it "*cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible*" of it "*until such time as a generation reared in new, free social conditions is able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap heap.*" This new state, often called the "*dictatorship of the proletariat,*" would slowly "*wither away*" (or "*dies out*") as classes disappear and the state "*at last . . . becomes the real representative of the whole of society*" and so "*renders itself unnecessary.*" Engels is at pains to differentiate

this position from that of the anarchists, who demand "*the abolition of the state out of hand.*" [Selected Works, p. 258, pp. 577-8, p. 528 and p. 424]

For anarchists, this argument has deep flaws. Simply put, unlike the anarchist one, this is not an empirically based theory of the state. Rather, we find such a theory mixed up with a metaphysical, non-empirical, a-historic definition which is based not on what the state **is** but rather what it **could** be. Thus the argument that the state "*is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another*" is trying to draw out an abstract essence of the state rather than ground what the state is on empirical evidence and analysis. This perspective, anarchists argue, simply confuses two very different things, namely the state and popular social organisation, with potentially disastrous results. By calling the popular self-organisation required by a social revolution the same name as a hierarchical and centralised body constructed for, and evolved to ensure, minority rule, the door is wide open to confuse popular power with party power, to confuse rule by the representatives of the working class with working class self-management of the revolution and society.

Indeed, at times, Marx seemed to suggest that **any** form of social organisation is a state. At one point he complained that the French mutualists argued that "[e]verything [was] to broken down into small '**groupes**' or '**communes**', which in turn form an 'association', but not a state." [Collected Works, vol. 42, p. 287] Unsurprisingly, then, that Kropotkin noted "*the German school which takes pleasure in confusing State with Society.*" This was a "*confusion*" made by those "*who cannot visualise Society without a concentration of the State.*" Yet this "*is to overlook the fact that Man lived in Societies for thousands of years before the State had been heard of*" and that "*communal life*" had "*been destroyed by the State.*" So "*large numbers of people [have] lived in communes and free federations*" and these were not states as the state "*is only one of the forms assumed by society in the course of history. Why then make no distinction between what is permanent and what is accidental?*" [The State: Its Historic Role, pp. 9-10]

As we discussed in [section H.2.1](#), anarchist opposition to the idea of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" should not be confused with idea that anarchists do not think that a social revolution needs to be defended. Rather, our opposition to the concept rests on the confusion which inevitably occurs when you mix up scientific analysis with metaphysical concepts. By drawing out an a-historic definition of the state, Engels helped ensure that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" became the "*dictatorship over the proletariat*" by implying that centralisation and delegated power into the hands of the few can be considered as an expression of popular power.

To explain why, we need only to study the works of Engels himself. Engels, in his famous account of the **Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State**, defined the state as follows:

*"The state is . . . by no means a power forced on society from without . . . Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is an admission . . . that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms . . . in order that these antagonisms and classes with conflicting economic interests might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict . . . this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state."*  
[Selected Writings, p. 576]

The state has two distinguishing features, firstly (and least importantly) it "divides its subjects according to territory." The second "is the establishment of a **public power** which no longer directly coincides with the population organising itself as an armed force. This special public power is necessary because a self-acting armed organisation of the population has become impossible since the split into classes . . . This public power exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds." Thus "an essential feature of the state is a public power distinct from the mass of the people." [Op. Cit., pp. 576-7 and pp. 535-6]

In this, the Marxist position concurs with the anarchist. Engels discussed the development of numerous ancient societies to prove his point. Talking of Greek society, he argued that it was based on a popular assembly which was "sovereign" plus a council. This social system was not a state because "when every adult male member of the tribe was a warrior, there was as yet no public authority separated from the people that could have been set up against it. Primitive democracy was still in full bloom, and this must remain the point of departure in judging power and the status of the council." Discussing the descent of this society into classes, he argued that this required "an institution that would perpetuate, not only the newly-rising class division of society, but the right of the possessing class to exploit the non-possessing class and the rule of the former over the latter." Unsurprisingly, "this institution arrived. The state was invented." The original communal organs of society were "superseded by real governmental authorities" and the defence of society ("the actual 'people in arms'") was "taken by an armed 'public power' at the service of these authorities and, therefore, also available against the people." With the rise of the state, the communal council was "transformed into a senate." [Op. Cit., pp. 525-6, p. 528 and p. 525]

Thus the state arises specifically to exclude popular self-government, replacing it with minority rule conducted via a centralised, hierarchical top-down structure ("government . . . is the natural protector of capitalism and other exploiters of popular labour." [Bakunin, Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 239]).

This account of the rise of the state is at direct odds with Engels argument that the state is simply an instrument of class rule. For the "dictatorship of the proletariat" to be a state, it would have to constitute a power above society, be different from the people armed, and so be "a public power distinct from the mass of the people." However, Marx and Engels are at pains to stress that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" will not be such a regime. However, how can you have something (namely "a public power distinct from the mass of the people") you consider as "an essential feature" of a state missing in an institution you call the same name? It is a bit like calling a mammal a "new kind of reptile" in spite of the former not being cold-blooded, something you consider as "an essential feature" of the latter!

This contradiction helps explains Engels comments that "[w]e would therefore propose to replace state everywhere by **Gemeinwesen**, a good old German word which can very well convey the meaning of the French word '**commune**'" He even states that the Paris Commune "was no longer a state in the proper sense of the word." However, this comment does not mean that Engels sought to remove any possible confusion on the matter, for he still talked of "the state" as "only a transitional institution which is used in the struggle, in the revolution, to hold down one's adversaries by force . . . so long as the proletariat still uses the state, it does not use it the interests of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries, and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state as such ceases to exist." [Op. Cit., p. 335] Thus the state would still exist and, furthermore, is **not** identified with the working class

as a whole ("*a self-acting armed organisation of the population*"), rather it is an institution standing apart from the "*people armed*" which is used, by the proletariat, to crush its enemies.

(As an aside, we must stress that to state that it only becomes possible to "*speak of freedom*" after the state and classes cease to exist is a serious theoretical error. Firstly, it means to talk about "*freedom*" in the abstract, ignoring the reality of class and hierarchical society. To state the obvious, in class society working class people have their freedom restricted by the state, wage labour and other forms of social hierarchy. The aim of social revolution is the conquest of liberty by the working class by overthrowing hierarchical rule. Freedom for the working class, by definition, means stopping any attempts to restrict that freedom by its adversaries. To state the obvious, it is not a "*restriction*" of the freedom of would-be bosses to resist their attempts to impose their rule! As such, Engels failed to consider revolution from a working class perspective - see [section H.4.7](#) for another example of this flaw. Moreover his comments have been used to justify restrictions on working class freedom, power and political rights by Marxist parties once they have seized power. "*Whatever power the State gains,*" correctly argued Bookchin, "*it always does so at the expense of popular power.* *Conversely, whatever power the people gain, they always acquire at the expense of the State. To legitimate State power, in effect, is to delegitimate popular power.*" [**Remaking Society**, p. 160])

Elsewhere, we have Engels arguing that "*the characteristic attribute of the former state*" is that while society "*had created its own organs to look after its own special interests*" in the course of time "*these organs, at whose head was the state power, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 257] Ignoring the obvious contradiction with his earlier claims that the state and communal organs were different, with the former destroying the latter, we are struck yet again by the idea of the state as being defined as an institution above society. Thus, if the post revolutionary society is marked by "*the state*" being dissolved into society, placed under its control, then it is not a state. To call it a "*new and truly democratic*" form of "*state power*" makes as little sense as calling a motorcar a "*new*" form of bicycle. As such, when Engels argues that the Paris Commune "*was no longer a state in the proper sense of the word*" or that when the proletariat seizes political power it "*abolishes the state as state*" we may be entitled to ask what it is, a state or not a state. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 335 and p. 424] It cannot be both, it cannot be a "*public power distinct from the mass of the people*" **and** "*a self-acting armed organisation of the population.*" If it is the latter, then it does not have what Engels considered as "*an essential feature of the state*" and cannot be considered one. If it is the former, then any claim that such a regime is the rule of the working class is automatically invalidated. That Engels mocked the anarchists for seeking a revolution "*without a provisional government and in the total absence of any state or state-like institution, which are to be destroyed*" we can safely say that it is the former. [**Marx, Engels and Lenin, Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 156]

Given that "*primitive democracy*," as Engels noted, defended itself against its adversaries without such an institution shows that to equate the defence of working class freedom with the state is not only unnecessary, it simply leads to confusion. For this reason anarchists do not confuse the necessary task of defending and organising a social revolution with creating a state. Thus, the problem for Marxism is that the empirical definition of the state collides with the metaphysical, the actual state with its Marxist essence. As Italian Anarchist Camillo Berneri argued: "*'The Proletariat' which seizes the state, bestowing on it the complete ownership of the means of production and destroying itself as proletariat and the state 'as the*

*'state' is a metaphysical fantasy, a political hypostasis of social abstractions."* ["The Abolition and Extinction of the State," pp. 50-1, **Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review**, no. 4, p. 50]

This is no academic point, as we explain in the [next section](#) this confusion has been exploited to justify party power **over** the proletariat. Thus, as Berneri argued, Marxists "*do not propose the armed conquest of the commune by the whole proletariat, but they propose the conquest of the State by the party which imagines it represents the proletariat. The Anarchists allow the use of direct power by the proletariat, but they understand the organ of this power to be formed by the entire corpus of systems of communist administration - corporate organisations [i.e. industrial unions], communal institutions, both regional and national - freely constituted outside and in opposition to all political monopoly by parties and endeavouring to a minimum administrational centralisation.*" Thus "*the Anarchists desire the destruction of the classes by means of a social revolution which eliminates, with the classes, the State.*" ["*Dictatorship of the Proletariat and State Socialism*", pp 51-2, **Op. Cit.**, p. 52] Anarchists are opposed to the state because it is not neutral, it cannot be made to serve our interests. The structures of the state are only necessary when a minority seeks to rule over the majority. We argue that the working class can create our own structures, organised and run from below upwards, to ensure the efficient running of everyday life.

By confusing two radically different things, Marxism ensures that popular power is consumed and destroyed by the state, by a new ruling elite. In the words of Murray Bookchin:

*"Marx, in his analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, has done radical social theory a considerable disservice. The Commune's combination of delegated policy-making with the execution of policy by its own administrators, a feature of the Commune which Marx celebrated, is a major failing of that body. Rousseau quite rightly emphasised that popular power cannot be delegated without being destroyed. One either has a fully empowered popular assembly or power belongs to the State."* ["*Theses on Libertarian Municipalism*", pp. 9-22, **The Anarchist Papers**, Dimitrios Roussopoulos (ed.), p. 14]

If power belongs to the state, then the state is a public body distinct from the population and, therefore, not an instrument of working class power. Rather, as an institution designed to ensure minority rule, it would ensure its position within society and become either the ruling class itself or create a new class which instrument it would be. As we discuss in [section H.3.9](#) the state cannot be considered as a neutral instrument of economic class rule, it has specific interests in itself which can and does mean it can play an oppressive and exploitative role in society independently of an economically dominant class.

Which brings us to the crux of the issue whether this "new" state will, in fact, be unlike any other state that has ever existed. Insofar as this "new" state is based on popular self-management and self-organisation, anarchists argue that such an organisation cannot be called a state as it is **not** based on delegated power. "As long as," as Bookchin stressed, "*the institutions of power consisted of armed workers and peasants as distinguished from a professional bureaucracy, police force, army, and cabal of politicians and judges, they were not a State . . . These institutions, in fact comprised a revolutionary people in arms . . . not a professional apparatus that could be regarded as a State in any meaningful sense of the term.*" ["*Looking Back at Spain*," pp. 53-96, **The Radical Papers**, Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos (ed.), p. 86] This was why Bakunin was at pains to emphasis that a "*federal organisation,*

*from below upward, of workers' associations, groups, communes, districts, and ultimately, regions and nations*" could not be considered as the same as "*centralised states*" and were "*contrary to their essence.*" [Statism and Anarchy, p. 13]

So when Lenin argued in **State and Revolution** that in the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" the "*organ of suppression is now the majority of the population, and not the minority*" and that "*since the majority of the people itself suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' for the suppression [of the bourgeoisie] is no longer necessary*" he is confusing two fundamentally different things. As Engels made clear, such a social system of "*primitive democracy*" is not a state. However, when Lenin argued that "*the more the functions of state power devolve upon the people generally, the less need is there for the existence of this power,*" he was implicitly arguing that there would be, in fact, a "*public power distinct from mass of the people*" and so a state in the normal sense of the word based on delegated power, "*special forces*" separate from the armed people and so on. [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 301]

That such a regime would not "*wither away*" has been proven by history. The state machine does not (indeed, **cannot**) represent the interests of the working classes due to its centralised, hierarchical and elitist nature - all it can do is represent the interests of the party in power, its own bureaucratic needs and privileges and slowly, but surely, remove itself from popular control. This, as anarchists have constantly stressed, is why the state is based on the delegation of power, on hierarchy and centralisation. The state is organised in this way to facilitate minority rule by excluding the mass of people from taking part in the decision making processes within society. If the masses actually did manage society directly, it would be impossible for a minority class to dominate it. Hence the need for a state. Which shows the central fallacy of the Marxist theory of the state, namely it argues that the rule of the proletariat will be conducted by a structure, the state, which is designed to exclude the popular participation such a concept demands!

Considered another way, "*political power*" (the state) is simply the power of minorities to enforce their wills. This means that a social revolution which aims to create socialism cannot use it to further its aims. After all, if the state (i.e. "*political power*") has been created to further minority class rule (as Marxists and anarchists agree) then, surely, this function has determined how the organ which exercises it has developed. Therefore, we would expect organ and function to be related and impossible to separate. So when Marx argued that the conquest of political power had become the great duty of the working class because landlords and capitalists always make use of their political privileges to defend their economic monopolies and enslave labour, he drew the wrong conclusion.

Building on a historically based (and so evolutionary) understanding of the state, anarchists concluded that it was necessary not to seize political power (which could only be exercised by a minority within any state) but rather to destroy it, to dissipate power into the hands of the working class, the majority. By ending the regime of the powerful by destroying their instrument of rule, the power which was concentrated into their hands automatically falls back into the hands of society. Thus, working class power can only be concrete once "*political power*" is shattered and replaced by the social power of the working class based on its own class organisations (such as factory committees, workers' councils, unions, neighbourhood assemblies and so on). As Murray Bookchin put it:

*"the slogan 'Power to the people' can only be put into practice when the power exercised by social elites is dissolved into the people. Each individual can then take*

*control of his [or her] daily life. If 'Power to the people' means nothing more than power to the 'leaders' of the people, then the people remain an undifferentiated, manipulated mass, as powerless after the revolution as they were before." [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. xif]*

In practice, this means that any valid social revolution needs to break the state and **not** replace it with another one. This is because, in order to be a state, any state structure must be based on delegated power, hierarchy and centralisation ("every State, even the most Republican and the most democratic . . . are in essence only machines governing the masses from above" and "[i]f there is a State, there must necessarily be domination, and therefore slavery; a State without slavery, overt or concealed, is unthinkable - and that is why we are enemies of the State." [Bakunin, **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 211 and p. 287]). If power is devolved to the working class then the state no longer exists as its "essential feature" (of delegated power) is absent. What you have is a new form of the "*primitive democracy*" which existed before the rise of the state. While this new, modern, form of self-management will have to defend itself against those seeking to recreate minority power, this does not mean that it becomes a state. After all, the tribes with "*primitive democracy*" had to defend themselves against their adversaries and so that, in itself, does not mean that these communities had a state (see [section H.2.1](#)). Thus defence of a revolution, as anarchists have constantly stressed, does not equate to a state as it fails to address the key issue, namely who has **power** in the system - the masses or their leaders.

This issue is fudged by Marx. When Bakunin, in "*Statism and Anarchy*", asked the question "Will the entire proletariat head the government?", Marx argued in response:

*"Does in a trade union, for instance, the whole union constitute the executive committee? Will all division of labour in a factory disappear and also the various functions arising from it? And will everybody be at the top in Bakunin's construction built from the bottom upwards? There will in fact be no below then. Will all members of the commune also administer the common affairs of the region? In that case there will be no difference between commune and region. 'The Germans [says Bakunin] number nearly 40 million. Will, for example, all 40 million be members of the government?' Certainly, for the thing begins with the self-government of the commune." [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, pp. 150-1]*

As Alan Carter argues, "*this might have seemed to Marx [over] a century ago to be satisfactory rejoinder, but it can hardly do today. In the infancy of the trade unions, which is all Marx knew, the possibility of the executives of a trade union becoming divorced from the ordinary members may not have seemed to him to be a likely outcome. We, however, have behind us a long history of union leaders 'selling out' and being out of touch with their members. Time has ably demonstrated that to reject Bakunin's fears on the basis of the practice of trade union officials constitutes a woeful complacency with regard to power and privilege - a complacency that was born ample fruit in the form of present Marxist parties and 'communist' societies . . . [His] dispute with Bakunin shows quite clearly that Marx did not stress the continued control of the revolution by the mass of the people as a prerequisite for the transcendence of all significant social antagonisms.*" [**Marx: A Radical Critique**, pp. 217-8] Non-anarchists have also noticed the poverty of Marx's response. For example, as David W. Lovell puts it, "*[t]aken as a whole, Marx's comments have dodged the issue. Bakunin is clearly grappling with the problems of Marx's transition period, in particular the*

*problem of leadership, while Marx refuses to discuss the political form of what must be (at least in part) class rule by the proletariat." [From Marx to Lenin, p. 64]*

As we discussed in [section H.3.1](#), Marx's "Address to the Communist League," with its stress on "*the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority*" and that "*the path of revolutionary activity . . . can only proceed with full force from the centre,*" suggests that Bakunin's fears were valid and Marx's answer simply inadequate. [**Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 509] Simply put, if, as Engels argued, "*an essential feature of the state is a public power distinct from the mass of the people,*" then, clearly Marx's argument of 1850 (and others like it) signifies a state in the usual sense of the word, one which has to be "*distinct*" from the mass of the population in order to ensure that the masses are prevented from interfering with their own revolution. This was not, of course, the desire of Marx and Engels but this result flows from their theory of the state and its fundamental flaws. These flaws can be best seen from their repeated assertion that the capitalist democratic state could be captured via universal suffrage and used to introduce socialism (see [section H.3.10](#)) but it equally applies to notions of creating new states based on the centralisation of power favoured by ruling elites since class society began.

As Kropotkin stressed, "*one does not make an historical institution follow in the direction to which one points - that is in the opposite direction to the one it has taken over the centuries.*" To expect this would be a "*a sad and tragic mistake*" simply because "*the old machine, the old organisation, [was] slowly developed in the course of history to crush freedom, to crush the individual, to establish oppression on a legal basis, to create monopolists, to lead minds astray by accustoming them to servitude*". [**The State: Its Historic Role**, pp. 57-8] A social revolution needs new, non-statist, forms of social organisation to succeed:

*"To give full scope to socialism entails rebuilding from top to bottom a society dominated by the narrow individualism of the shopkeeper. It is not as has sometimes been said by those indulging in metaphysical wooliness just a question of giving the worker 'the total product of his labour'; it is a question of completely reshaping all relationships . . . In every street, in every hamlet, in every group of men gathered around a factory or along a section of the railway line, the creative, constructive and organisational spirit must be awakened in order to rebuild life - in the factory, in the village, in the store, in production and in distribution of supplies. All relations between individuals and great centres of population have to be made all over again, from the very day, from the very moment one alters the existing commercial or administrative organisation.*

*"And they expect this immense task, requiring the free expression of popular genius, to be carried out within the framework of the State and the pyramidal organisation which is the essence of the State! They expect the State . . . to become the lever for the accomplishment of this immense transformation. They want to direct the renewal of a society by means of decrees and electoral majorities... How ridiculous!"* [Kropotkin, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 58-9]

Ultimately, the question, of course, is one of power. Does the "*executive committee*" have the fundamental decision making power in society, or does that power lie in the mass assemblies upon which a federal socialist society is built? If the former, we have rule by a few party leaders and the inevitable bureaucratisation of the society and a state in the accepted sense of the word. If the latter, we have a basic structure of a free and equal society and a new

organisation of popular self-management which eliminates the existence of a public power above society. This is not playing with words. It signifies the key issue of social transformation, an issue which Marxism tends to ignore or confuse matters about when discussing. Bookchin clarified what is at stake:

*"To some neo-Marxists who see centralisation and decentralisation merely as difference of degree, the word 'centralisation' may merely be an awkward way of denoting means for co-ordinating the decisions made by decentralised bodies. Marx, it is worth noting, greatly confused this distinction when he praised the Paris Commune as a 'working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.' In point of fact, the consolidation of 'executive and legislative' functions in a single body was regressive. It simply identified the process of policy-making, a function that rightly should belong to the people in assembly, with the technical execution of these policies, a function that should be left to strictly administrative bodies subject to rotation, recall, limitations of tenure . . . Accordingly, the melding of policy formation with administration placed the institutional emphasis of classical [Marxist] socialism on centralised bodies, indeed, by an ironical twist of historical events, bestowing the privilege of formulating policy on the 'higher bodies' of socialist hierarchies and their execution precisely on the more popular 'revolutionary committees' below." [Toward an Ecological Society, pp. 215-6]*

By confusing co-ordination with the state (i.e. with delegation of power), Marxism opens the door wide open to the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" being a state "*in the proper sense*." In fact, not only does Marxism open that door, it even invites the state "*in the proper sense*" in! This can be seen from Engels comment that just as "*each political party sets out to establish its rule in the state, so the German Social-Democratic Workers' Party is striving to establish its rule, the rule of the working class.*" [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 372] By confusing rule by the party "*in the state*" with "*rule of the working class*," Engels is confusing party power and popular power. For the party to "*establish its rule*," the state in the normal sense (i.e. a structure based on the delegation of power) has to be maintained. As such, the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" signifies the delegation of power by the proletariat into the hands of the party and that implies a "*public power distinct from the mass of the people*" and so minority rule. This aspect of Marxism, as we argue in the [next section](#), was developed under the Bolsheviks and became "*the dictatorship of the party*" (i.e. the dictatorship **over** the proletariat):

*"since Marx vigorously opposed Bakunin's efforts to ensure that only libertarian and decentralist means were employed by revolutionaries so as to facilitate the revolution remaining in the hands of the mass of workers, he must accept a fair measure of culpability for the authoritarian outcome of the Russian Revolution . . .*

*"Bakunin was not satisfied with trusting revolutionary leaders to liberate the oppressed . . . The oppressed people had to made aware that the only security against replacing one repressive structure with another was the deliberate retaining of control of the revolution by the whole of the working classes, and not naively trusting it to some vanguard." [Alan Carter, Marx: A Radical Critique pp. 218-9]*

It is for this reason why anarchists are extremely critical of Marxist ideas of social revolution. As Alan Carter argues:

*"It is to argue not against revolution, but against 'revolutionary' praxis employing central authority. It is to argue that any revolution must remain in the hands of the mass of people and that they must be aware of the dangers of allowing power to fall into the hands of a minority in the course of the revolution. Latent within Marxist theory . . . is the tacit condoning of political inequality in the course and aftermath of revolutionary praxis. Only when such inequality is openly and widely rejected can there be any hope of a libertarian communist revolution. The lesson to learn is that we must oppose not revolutionary practice, but authoritarian 'revolutionary' practice. Such authoritarian practice will continue to prevail in revolutionary circles as long as the Marxist theory of the state and the corresponding theory of power remain above criticism within them." [Op. Cit., p. 231]*

In summary, the Marxist theory of the state is simply a-historic and postulates some kind of state "essence" which exists independently of actual states and their role in society. To confuse the organ required by a minority class to execute and maintain its rule and that required by a majority class to manage society is to make a theoretical error of great magnitude. It opens the door to the idea of party power and even party dictatorship. As such, the Marxism of Marx and Engels is confused on the issue of the state. Their comments fluctuate between the anarchist definition of the state (based, as it is, on generalisations from historical examples) and the a-historic definition (based not on historical example but rather derived from a supra-historical analysis). Trying to combine the metaphysical with the scientific, the authoritarian with the libertarian, could only leave their followers with a confused legacy and that is what we find.

Since the death of the founding fathers of Marxism, their followers have diverged into two camps. The majority have embraced the metaphysical and authoritarian concept of the state and proclaimed their support for a "*workers' state*." This is represented by social-democracy and its radical offshoot, Leninism. As we discuss in the [next section](#), this school has used the Marxist conception of the state to allow for rule over the working class by the "*revolutionary*" party. The minority has become increasingly and explicitly anti-state, recognising that the Marxist legacy is contradictory and that for the proletarian to directly manage society then there can be no power above them. To this camp belongs the libertarian Marxists of the council communist, Situationist and other schools of thought which are close to anarchism.

### H.3.8 What is wrong with the Leninist theory of the state?

As discussed in the [last section](#), there is a contradiction at the heart of the Marxist theory of the state. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the state, historically, has always been an instrument of minority rule and is structured to ensure this. On the other, it argues that you can have a state (the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*") which transcends this historical reality to express an abstract essence of the state as an "*instrument of class rule*." This means that Marxism usually confuses two very different concepts, namely the state (a structure based on centralisation and delegated power) and the popular self-management and self-organisation required to create and defend a socialist society.

This confusion between two fundamentally different concepts proved to be disastrous when the Russian Revolution broke out. Confusing party power with working class power, the Bolsheviks aimed to create a "*workers' state*" in which their party would be in power (see [section H.3.3](#)). As the state was an instrument of class rule, it did not matter if the new

"workers' state" was centralised, hierarchical and top-down like the old state as the structure of the state was considered irrelevant in evaluating its role in society. Thus, while Lenin seemed to promise a radical democracy in which the working class would directly manage its own affairs in his **State and Revolution**, in practice he implemented a "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" which was, in fact, "*the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 337] In other words, the vanguard party in the position of head of the state, governing on behalf of the working class which, in turn, meant that the new "workers' state" was fundamentally a state in the usual sense of the word. This quickly lead to a dictatorship **over**, not of, the proletariat (as Bakunin had predicted). This development did not come as a surprise to anarchists, who had long argued that a state is an instrument of minority rule and cannot change its nature. To use the state to affect socialist change is impossible, simply because it is not designed for such a task. As we argued in [section B.2](#), the state is based on centralisation of power explicitly to ensure minority rule and for this reason has to be abolished during a social revolution.

As Voline summarised, there is "*an explicit, irreconcilable contradiction between the very essence of State Socialist power (if it triumphs) and that of the true Social Revolutionary process.*" This was because "**the basis of State Socialism and delegated power is the explicit non-recognition of [the] principles of the Social Revolution. The characteristic traits of Socialist ideology and practice . . . do not belong to the future, but are wholly a part of the bourgeois past . . . Once this model has been applied, the true principles of the Revolution are fatally abandoned. Then follows, inevitably, the rebirth, under another name, of the exploitation of the labouring masses, with all its consequences.**" Thus "*the forward march of the revolutionary masses towards real emancipation, towards the creation of new forms of social life, is incompatible with the very principle of State power . . . the authoritarian principle and the revolutionary principle are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive.*" [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 247 and p. 248]

Ironically, the theoretical lessons Leninists gained from the experience of the Russian Revolution confirm the anarchist analysis that the state structure exists to facilitate minority rule and marginalise and disempower the majority to achieve that rule. This can be seen from the significant revision of the Marxist position which occurred once the Bolshevik party became the ruling party. Simply put, after 1917 leading representatives of Leninism stressed that state power was **not** required to repress resistance by the ex-ruling class as such, but, in fact, was also necessitated by the divisions within the working class. In other words, state power was required because the working class was not able to govern itself and so required a grouping (the party) above it to ensure the success of the revolution and overcome any "wavering" within the masses themselves.

While we have discussed this position in [section H.1.2](#) and so will be repeating ourselves to some degree, it is worth summarising again the arguments put forward to justify this revision. This is because they confirm what anarchists have always argued, namely that the state is an instrument of minority rule and **not** one by which working class people can manage their own affairs directly. As the quotations from leading Leninists make clear, it is **precisely** this feature of the state which recommends it for party (i.e. minority) power. The contradiction at the heart of the Marxist theory of the state we pointed out in the [section H.3.7](#) has been resolved in Leninism. It supports the state precisely because it is "*a public power distinct from the mass of the people,*" rather than an instrument of working class self-management of society.

Needless to say, his latter day followers point to Lenin's apparently democratic, even libertarian, sounding 1917 work, **The State and Revolution** when asked about the Leninist theory of the state. As our discussion in [section H.1.7](#) proved, the ideas expounded in his pamphlet were rarely, if at all, applied in practice by the Bolsheviks. Moreover, it was written before the seizure of power. In order to see the validity of his argument we must compare it to his and his fellow Bolshevik leaders opinions once the revolution had "succeeded." What lessons did they generalise from their experiences and how did these lessons relate to **State and Revolution**?

The change can be seen from Trotsky, who argued quite explicitly that "*the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard*" and that "*the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity.*" Only with "*support of the vanguard by the class*" can there be the "*conquest of power*" and it was in "*this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard.*" Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the "*vanguard*" which takes power - "*a revolutionary party, even after seizing power . . . is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.*" Thus state power is required to **govern the masses**, who cannot exercise power themselves. As Trotsky put it, "[t]hose who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the Bolshevik leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat." [**Writings 1936-37**, p. 490, p. 488 and p. 495]

Logically, though, this places the party in a privileged position. So what happens if the working class no longer supports the vanguard? Who takes priority? Unsurprisingly, in both theory and practice, the party is expected to rule over the masses. This idea that state power was required due to the limitations within the working class is reiterated a few years later in 1939. Moreover, the whole rationale for party dictatorship came from the fundamental rationale for democracy, namely that any government should reflect the changing opinions of the masses:

*"The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves . . . if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself."* ["**The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism**", pp. 53-66, **Their Morals and Ours**, p. 59]

Needless to say, **by definition** everyone is "*backward*" when compared to the "*vanguard of the proletariat*." Moreover, as it is this "*vanguard*" which is "*armed with the resources of the state*" and **not** the proletariat as a whole we are left with one obvious conclusion, namely party dictatorship rather than working class democracy. How Trotsky's position is compatible with the idea of the working class as the "*ruling class*" is not explained. However, it fits in well with the anarchist analysis of the state as an instrument designed to ensure minority rule.

Thus the possibility of party dictatorship exists if popular support fades. Which is, significantly, precisely what **had** happened when Lenin and Trotsky were in power. In fact, these arguments built upon other, equally elitist statement which had been expressed by Trotsky when he held the reins of power. In 1920, for example, he argued that while the

Bolsheviks have "more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of the party," in fact "it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party." This, just to state the obvious, was his argument seventeen years later. "In this 'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the working class," Trotsky added, "there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class." [Terrorism and Communism, p. 109] In early 1921, he argued again for Party dictatorship at the Tenth Party Congress:

*"The Workers' Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They place the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy."* [quoted by Samuel Farber, Before Stalinism, p. 209]

The similarities with his arguments of 1939 are obvious. Unsurprisingly, he maintained this position in the intervening years. He stated in 1922 that "we maintain the dictatorship of our party!" [The First Five Years of the Communist International, vol. 2, p. 255] The next year saw him arguing that "[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party." He stressed that "[o]ur party is the ruling party" and that "[t]o allow any changes whatever in this field" meant "bring[ing] into question all the achievements of the revolution and its future." He indicated the fate of those who did question the party's position: "Whoever makes an attempt on the party's leading role will, I hope, be unanimously dumped by all of us on the other side of the barricade." [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 158 and p. 160]

By 1927, when Trotsky was in the process of being "dumped" on the "other side of the barricade" by the ruling bureaucracy, he still argued for "the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party." It was stressed that the "dictatorship of the proletariat [sic!] demands as its very core a single proletarian party." [The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926-7), p. 395 and p. 441] As we noted in [section H.1.2](#), ten years later, he was still explicitly arguing for the "revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party".

Thus, for Trotsky over a twenty year period, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was fundamentally a "dictatorship of the party." While the working class may be allowed some level of democracy, the rule of the party was repeatedly given precedence. While the party may be placed into power by a mass revolution, once there the party would maintain its position of power and dismiss attempts by the working class to replace it as "wavering" or "vacillation" due to the "insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity." In other words, the party dictatorship was required to protect working class people from themselves, their tendency to change their minds based on changing circumstances, evaluating the results of past decisions, debates between different political ideas and positions, make their own decisions, reject what is in their best interests (as determined by the

party), and so on. Thus the underlying rationale for democracy (namely that it reflects the changing will of the voters, their "*passing moods*" so to speak) is used to justify party dictatorship!

The importance of party power **over** the working class was not limited to Trotsky. It was considered of general validity by all leading Bolsheviks and, moreover, quickly became mainstream Bolshevik ideology. In March 1923, for example, the Central Committee of the Communist Party in a statement issued to mark the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Bolshevik Party. This statement summarised the lessons gained from the Russian revolution. It stated that "*the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat.*" Vacillations, of course, are expressed by workers' democracy. Little wonder the statement rejects it: "*The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party.*" ["*To the Workers of the USSR*" in G. Zinoviev, **History of the Bolshevik Party**, p. 213 and p. 214]

Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks were simply following Lenin's lead, who had admitted at the end of 1920 that while "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*" was "*inevitable*" in the "*transition of socialism*," it is "*not exercised by an organisation which takes in all industrial workers.*" The reason "*is given in the theses of the Second Congress of the Communist International on the role of political parties*" (more on which later). This means that "*the Party, shall we say, absorbs the vanguard of the proletariat, and this vanguard exercises the dictatorship of the proletariat.*" This was required because "*in all capitalist countries . . . the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts*" that it "*can be exercised only by a vanguard . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 20 and p. 21] For Lenin, "*revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 42, p. 170] Needless to say, Lenin failed to mention this aspect of his system in **The State and Revolution** (a failure usually repeated by his followers). It is, however, a striking confirmation of Bakunin's comments "*the State cannot be sure of its own self-preservation without an armed force to defend it against its own internal enemies, against the discontent of its own people.*" [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 265]

Looking at the lessons leading leaders of Leninism gained from the experience of the Russian Revolution, we have to admit that the Leninist "*workers' state*" will not be, in fact, a "*new*" kind of state, a "*semi-state*," or, to quote Lenin, a "*new state*" which "*is no longer a state in the proper sense of the word.*" If, as Lenin argued in early 1917, the state "*in the proper sense of the term is domination over the people by contingents of armed men divorced from the people,*" then Bolshevism in power quickly saw the need for a state "*in the proper sense.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 24, p. 85] While this state "*in the proper sense*" had existed from the start of Bolshevik rule, it was only from early 1919 onwards (at the latest) that the leaders of Bolshevism had openly brought what they said into line with what they did. It was only by being a "*state in the proper sense*" could the Bolshevik party rule and exercise "*the dictatorship of the party*" over the "*wavering*" working class.

So when Lenin stated that "*Marxism differs from anarchism in that it recognises the need for a state for the purpose of the transition to socialism,*" anarchists agree. [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 24, p. 85] Insofar as "Marxism" aims for, to quote Lenin, the party to "*take state power into [its]*

*own hands*," to become "*the governing party*" and considers one of its key tasks for "*our Party to capture political power*" and to "*administer*" a country, then we can safely say that the state needed is a state "*in the proper sense*," based on the centralisation and delegation of power into the hands of a few (see our discussion of Leninism as "***socialism from above***" in [section H.3.3](#) for details).

This recreation of the state "*in the proper sense*" did not come about by chance or simply because of the "*will to power*" of the leaders of Bolshevism. Rather, there are strong institutional pressures at work within any state structure (even a so-called "*semi-state*") to turn it back into a "*proper*" state. We discuss this in more detail in [section H.3.9](#). However, we should not ignore that many of the roots of Bolshevik tyranny can be found in the contradictions of the Marxist theory of the state. As noted in the [last section](#), for Engels, the seizure of power by the party meant that the working class was in power. The Leninist tradition builds on this confusion between party and class power. It is clear that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" is, in fact, rule by the party. In Lenin's words:

*"Engels speaks of a government that is required for the domination of a class . . . Applied to the proletariat, it consequently means a government that is required for the domination of the proletariat, i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat for the effectuation of the socialist revolution."* [Op. Cit., vol. 8, p. 279]

The role of the working class in this state was also indicated, as "*only a revolutionary dictatorship supported by the vast majority of the people can be at all durable.*" [Op. Cit., p. 291] In other words the "*revolutionary government*" has the power, not the working class in whose name it governs. In 1921 he made this explicit: "*To govern you need an army of steeled revolutionary Communists. We have it, and it is called the Party.*" The "*Party is the leader, the vanguard of the proletariat, which rules directly.*" For Lenin, as "*long as we, the Party's Central Committee and the whole Party, continue to run things, that is govern we shall never - we cannot - dispense with . . . removals, transfers, appointments, dismissals, etc.*" of workers, officials and party members from above. [Op. Cit., vol. 32, p. 62, p. 98 and p. 99] Unsurprisingly, these powers were used by Lenin, and then Stalin, to destroy opposition (although the latter applied coercive measures **within** the party which Lenin only applied to non-party opponents).

So much for "*workers' power*," "*socialism from below*" and other such rhetoric.

This vision of "*socialism*" being rooted in party power over the working class was the basis of the Communist International's resolution of the role of the party. This resolution is, therefore, important and worth discussing. It argues that the Communist Party "*is part of the working class*," namely its "*most advanced, most class-conscious, and therefore most revolutionary part.*" It is "*distinguished from the working class as a whole in that it grasps the whole historic path of the working class in its entirety and at every bend in that road endeavours to defend not the interests of individual groups or occupations but the interests of the working class as a whole.*" [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, vol. 1, p. 191] However, in response it can be argued that this simply means the "*interests of the party*" as only it can understand what "*the interests of the working class as a whole*" actually are. Thus we have the possibility of the party substituting its will for that of the working class simply because of what Leninists term the "*uneven development*" of the working class. As Alan Carter argues, these "*conceptions of revolutionary organisation maintain political and ideological domination by retaining supervisory roles and notions of*

*privileged access to knowledge . . . the term 'class consciousness' is employed to facilitate such domination over the workers. It is not what the workers think, but what the party leaders think they ought to think that constitutes the revolutionary consciousness imputed to the workers." The ideological basis for a new class structure is created as the "Leninist revolutionary praxis . . . is carried forward to post-revolutionary institutions,"* [Marx: A Radical Critique, p. 175]

The resolution stresses that before the revolution, the party "*will encompass . . . only a minority of the workers.*" Even after the "*seizure of power,*" it will still "*not be able to unite them all into its ranks organisationally.*" It is only after the "*final defeat of the bourgeois order*" will "*all or almost all workers begin to join*" it. Thus the party is a **minority** of the working class. The resolution then goes on to state that "*[e]very class struggle is a political struggle. This struggle, which inevitably becomes transformed into civil war, has as its goal the conquest of political power. Political power cannot be seized, organised, and directed other than by some kind of political party.*" [Op. Cit., p. 192, p. 193] And as the party is a "*part*" of the working class which cannot "*unite*" all workers "*into its ranks,*" this means that political power can only be "*seized, organised, and directed*" by a **minority**.

Thus we have minority rule, with the party (or more correctly its leaders) exercising political power. The idea that the party "*must dissolve into the councils, that the councils can replace the Communist Party*" is "*fundamentally wrong and reactionary.*" This is because, to "*enable the soviets to fulfil their historic tasks, there must . . . be a strong Communist Party, one that does not simply 'adapt' to the soviets but is able to make them renounce 'adaptation' to the bourgeoisie.*" [Op. Cit., p. 196] Thus rather than the workers' councils exercising power, their role is simply that of allowing the Communist Party to seize political power.

As we indicated in [section H.3.4](#), the underlying assumption behind this resolution was made clear by Zinoviev during his introductory speech to the congress meeting which finally agreed the resolution: the dictatorship of the party **was** the dictatorship of the proletariat. Little wonder that Bertrand Russell, on his return from Lenin's Russia in 1920, wrote that:

*"Friends of Russia here [in Britain] think of the dictatorship of the proletariat as merely a new form of representative government, in which only working men and women have votes, and the constituencies are partly occupational, not geographical. They think that 'proletariat' means 'proletariat,' but 'dictatorship' does not quite mean 'dictatorship.' This is the opposite of the truth. When a Russian Communist speak of a dictatorship, he means the word literally, but when he speaks of the proletariat, he means the word in a Pickwickian sense. He means the 'class-conscious' part of the proletariat, i.e. the Communist Party. He includes people by no means proletarian (such as Lenin and Tchicherin) who have the right opinions, and he excludes such wage-earners as have not the right opinions, whom he classifies as lackeys of the bourgeoisie."* [The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism, pp. 26-27]

Significantly, Russell pointed, like Lenin, to the Comintern resolution on the role of the Communist Party. In addition, he noted the reason why this party dictatorship was required: "*No conceivable system of free elections would give majorities to the Communists, either in the town or country.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 40-1]

Nor are followers of Bolshevism shy in repeating its elitist conclusions. Founder and leader of the British SWP, Tony Cliff, for example, showed his lack of commitment to working

class democracy when he opined that the "*actual level of democracy, as well as centralism, [during a revolution] depends on three basic factors: 1. the strength of the proletariat; 2. the material and cultural legacy left to it by the old regime; and 3. the strength of capitalist resistance. The level of democracy feasible must be in direct proportion to the first two factors, and in inverse proportion to the third. The captain of an ocean liner can allow football to be played on his vessel; on a tiny raft in a stormy sea the level of tolerance is far lower.*" [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 179] That Cliff compares working class democracy to football says it all. Rather than seeing it as the core gain of a revolution, he relegates it to the level of a **game**, which may or may not be "*tolerated*"! And need we speculate who the paternalistic "captain" in charge of the ship of the state would be?

Replacing Cliff's revealing analogies we get the following: "*The party in charge of a workers' state can allow democracy when the capitalist class is not resisting; when it is resisting strongly, the level of tolerance is far lower.*" So, democracy will be "*tolerated*" in the extremely unlikely situation that the capitalist class will not resist a revolution! That the party has no right to "*tolerate*" democracy or not is not even entertained by Cliff, its right to negate the basic rights of the working class is taken as a given. Clearly the key factor is that the party is in power. It **may** "*tolerate*" democracy, but ultimately his analogy shows that Bolshevism considers it as an added extra whose (lack of) existence in no way determines the nature of the "*workers' state*" (unless, of course, he is analysing Stalin's regime rather than Lenin's then it becomes of critical importance!). Perhaps, therefore, we may add another "*basic factor*" to Cliff's three; namely "*4. the strength of working class support for the party.*" The level of democracy feasible must be in direct proportion to this factor, as the Bolsheviks made clear. As long as the workers vote for the party, then democracy is wonderful. If they do not, then their "*wavering*" and "*passing moods*" cannot be "*tolerated*" and democracy is replaced by the dictatorship of the party. Which is no democracy at all.

Obviously, then, if, as Engels argued, "*an essential feature of the state is a public power distinct from the mass of the people*" then the regime advocated by Bolshevism is not a "*semi-state*" but, in fact, a normal state. Trotsky and Lenin are equally clear that said state exists to ensure that the "*mass of the people*" do not participate in public power, which is exercised by a minority, the party (or, more correctly, the leaders of the party). One of the key aims of this new state is to repress the "*backward*" or "*wavering*" sections of the working class (although, by definition, all sections of the working class are "*backward*" in relation to the "*vanguard*"). Hence the need for a "*public power distinct from the people*" (as the suppression of the strike wave and Kronstadt in 1921 shows, elite troops are always needed to stop the army siding with their fellow workers). And as proven by Trotsky's comments after he was squeezed out of power, this perspective was **not** considered as a product of "*exceptional circumstances*." Rather it was considered a basic lesson of the revolution, a position which was applicable to all future revolutions. In this, Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks concurred.

The irony (and tragedy) of all this should not be lost. In his 1905 diatribe against anarchism, Stalin had denied that Marxists aimed for party dictatorship. He stressed that there was "*a dictatorship of the minority, the dictatorship of a small group . . . which is directed against the people . . . Marxists are the enemies of such a dictatorship, and they fight such a dictatorship far more stubbornly and self-sacrificingly than do our noisy Anarchists.*" The practice of Bolshevism and the ideological revisions it generated easily refutes Stalin's claims. The practice of Bolshevism showed that his claim that "*[at] the head*" of the "*dictatorship of the proletarian majority . . . stand the masses*" is in sharp contradiction with

Bolshevik support for "revolutionary" governments. Either you have (to use Stalin's expression) "*the dictatorship of the streets, of the masses, a dictatorship directed against all oppressors*" or you have party power **in the name of the street, of the masses.** [Collected Works, vol. 1, p. 371-2] The fundamental flaw in Leninism is that it confuses the two and so lays the ground for the very result anarchists predicted and Stalin denied.

While anarchists are well aware of the need to defend a revolution (see [section H.2.1](#)), we do not make the mistake of equating this with a state. Ultimately, the state cannot be used as an instrument of liberation - it is not designed for it. Which, incidentally, is why we have not discussed the impact of the Russian Civil War on the development of Bolshevik ideology. Simply put, the "*workers' state*" is proposed, by Leninists, as the means to defend a revolution. As such, you cannot blame what it is meant to be designed to withstand (counter-revolution and civil war) for its "*degeneration*." If the "*workers' state*" cannot handle what its advocates claim it exists for, then its time to look for an alternative and dump the concept in the dustbin of history.

In summary, Bolshevism is based on a substantial revision of the Marxist theory of the state. While Marx and Engels were at pains to stress the accountability of their new state to the population under it, Leninism has made a virtue of the fact that the state has evolved to exclude that mass participation in order to ensure minority rule. Leninism has done so explicitly to allow the party to overcome the "*wavering*" of the working class, the very class it claims is the "*ruling class*" under socialism! In doing this, the Leninist tradition exploited the confused nature of the state theory of traditional Marxism. The Leninist theory of the state is flawed simply because it is based on creating a "*state in the proper sense of the word*," with a public power distinct from the mass of the people. This was the major lesson gained by the leading Bolsheviks (including Lenin and Trotsky) from the Russian Revolution and has its roots in the common Marxist error of confusing party power with working class power. So when Leninists point to Lenin's **State and Revolution** as the definitive Leninist theory of the state, anarchists simply point to the lessons Lenin himself gained from actually conducting a revolution. Once we do, the slippery slope to the Leninist solution to the contradictions inherit in the Marxist theory of the state can be seen, understood and combated.

### H.3.9 Is the state simply an agent of economic power?

As we discussed in [section H.3.7](#), the Marxist theory of the state confuses an empirical analysis of the state with a metaphysical one. While Engels is aware that the state developed to ensure minority class rule and, as befits its task, evolved specific characteristics to execute that role, he also raised the idea that the state ("*as a rule*") is "*the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class*" and "*through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class*." Thus the state can be considered, in essence, as "*nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another*." "*At a certain stage of economic development*", Engels stressed, "*which was necessarily bound up with the split in society into classes, the state became a necessity owing to this split.*" [Selected Works, pp. 577-8, p. 579 and p. 258] For Lenin, this was "*the basic idea of Marxism on the question of the historical role and meaning of the state*," namely that "*the state is an organ of class rule, the organ for the oppression of one class by another.*" [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 273 and p. 274]

The clear implication is that the state is simply an instrument, without special interests of its own. If this is the case, the use of a state by the proletariat is unproblematic (and so the

confusion between working class self-organisation and the state we have discussed in various sections above is irrelevant). This argument can lead to simplistic conclusions, such as once a "revolutionary" government is in power in a "workers state" we need not worry about abuses of power or even civil liberties (this position was commonplace in Bolshevik ranks during the Russian Civil War, for example). It also is at the heart of Trotsky's contortions with regards to Stalinism, refusing to see the state bureaucracy as a new ruling class simply because the state, by definition, could not play such a role.

For anarchists, this position is a fundamental weakness of Marxism, a sign that the mainstream Marxist position significantly misunderstands the nature of the state and the needs of social revolution. However, we must stress that anarchists would agree that the state generally does serve the interests of the economically dominant classes. Bakunin, for example, argued that the State "*is authority, domination, and forced, organised by the property-owning and so-called enlightened classes against the masses.*" He saw the social revolution as destroying capitalism and the state at the same time, that is "*to overturn the State's domination, and that of the privileged classes whom it solely represents.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 140] However, anarchists do not reduce our analysis and understanding of the state to this simplistic Marxist level. While being well aware that the state is the means of ensuring the domination of an economic elite, as we discussed in [section B.2.5](#), anarchists recognise that the state machine also has interests of its own. The state, for anarchists, is the delegation of power into the hands of a few. This creates, by its very nature, a privileged position for those at the top of the hierarchy:

*"A government [or state], that is a group of people entrusted with making the laws and empowered to use the collective force to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class and cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will instinctively seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to its special interests. Having been put in a privileged position, the government is already at odds with the people whose strength it disposes of."* [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 36]

The Bolshevik regime during the Russia revolution proved the validity of this analysis. The Bolsheviks seized power in the name of the soviets yet soon marginalised, gerrymandered and disbanded them to remain in power while imposing a vision of socialism (more correctly, state capitalism) at odds with popular aspirations.

Why this would be the case is not hard to discover. Given that the state is a highly centralised, top-down structure it is unsurprising that it develops around itself a privileged class, a bureaucracy, around it. The inequality in power implied by the state is a source of privilege and oppression independent of property and economic class. Those in charge of the state's institutions would aim to protect (and expand) their area of operation, ensuring that they select individuals who share their perspectives and who they can pass on their positions. By controlling the flow of information, of personnel and resources, the members of the state's higher circles can ensure its, and their own, survival and prosperity. As such, politicians who are elected are at a disadvantage. The state is the permanent collection of institutions that have entrenched power structures and interests. The politicians come and go while the power in the state lies in its institutions due to their permanence. It is to be expected that such institutions would have their own interests and would pursue them whenever they can.

This would not fundamentally change in a new "workers' state" as it is, like all states, based on the delegation and centralisation of power into a few hands. Any "workers' government" would need a new apparatus to enforce its laws and decrees. It would need effective means of gathering and collating information. It would thus create "*an entirely new ladder of administration to extend its rule and make itself obeyed.*" While a social revolution needs mass participation, the state limits initiative to the few who are in power and "*it will be impossible for one or even a number of individuals to elaborate the social forms*" required, which "*can only be the collective work of the masses . . . Any kind of external authority will merely be an obstacle, a hindrance to the organic work that has to be accomplished; it will be no better than a source of discord and of hatreds.*" [Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 169 and pp. 176-7]

Rather than "withering away," any "workers' state" would tend to grow in terms of administration and so the government creates around itself a class of bureaucrats whose position is different from the rest of society. This would apply to production as well. Being unable to manage everything, the state would have to re-introduce hierarchical management in order to ensure its orders are met and that a suitable surplus is extracted from the workers to feed the needs of the state machine. By creating an economically powerful class which it can rely on to discipline the workforce, it would simply recreate capitalism anew in the form of "*state capitalism*" (this is precisely what happened during the Russian Revolution). To enforce its will onto the people it claims to represent, specialised bodies of armed people (police, army) would be required and soon created. All of which is to be expected, as state socialism "*entrusts to a few the management of social life and [so] leads to the exploitation and oppression of the masses by the few.*" [Malatesta, **Op. Cit.**, p. 47]

This process takes time. However, the tendency for government to escape from popular control and to generate privileged and powerful institutions around it can be seen in all revolutions, including the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution. In the former, the Communal Council was "*largely ignored . . . after it was installed. The insurrection, the actual management of the city's affairs and finally the fighting against the Versaillese, were undertaken mainly by popular clubs, the neighbourhood vigilance committees, and the battalions of the National Guard. Had the Paris Commune (the Municipal Council) survived, it is extremely doubtful that it could have avoided conflict with these loosely formed street and militia formations. Indeed, by the end of April, some six weeks after the insurrection, the Commune constituted an 'all-powerful' Committee of Public Safety, a body redolent with memories of the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror, which suppressed not only the right in the Great [French] Revolution of a century earlier, but also the left.*" [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 90] A minority of council members (essentially those active in the International) stated that "*the Paris Commune has surrendered its authority to a dictatorship*" and it was "*hiding behind a dictatorship that the electorate have not authorised us to accept or to recognise.*" [**The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left**, Eugene Schukkind (ed.), p. 187] The Commune was crushed before this process could fully unfold, but the omens were there (although it would have undoubtedly been hindered by the local scale of the institutions involved). As we discuss in [section H.6](#), a similar process of a "revolutionary" government escaping from popular control occurred right from the start of the Russian Revolution. The fact the Bolshevik regime lasted longer and was more centralised (and covered a larger area) ensured that this process developed fully, with the "revolutionary" government creating around itself the institutions (the bureaucracy) which finally subjected the politicians and party leaders to its influence and then domination.

Simply put, the vision of the state as merely an instrument of class rule blinds its supporters to the dangers of **political** inequality in terms of power, the dangers inherent in giving a small group of people power over everyone else. The state has certain properties **because it is a state** and one of these is that it creates a bureaucratic class around it due to its centralised, hierarchical nature. Within capitalism, the state bureaucracy is (generally) under the control of the capitalist class. However, to generalise from this specific case is wrong as the state bureaucracy is a class in itself - and so trying to abolish classes without abolishing the state is doomed to failure:

*"The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class: the sacerdotal class, the nobility, the bourgeoisie - and finally, when all the other classes have exhausted themselves, the class of the bureaucracy enters upon the stage and then the State falls, or rises, if you please to the position of a machine."* [Bakunin, **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 208]

Thus the state cannot simply be considered as an instrument of rule by economic classes. It can be quite an effective parasitical force in its own right, as both anthropological and historical evidence suggest. The former raises the possibility that the state arose before economic classes and that its roots are in inequalities in power (i.e. hierarchy) within society, not inequalities of wealth. The latter points to examples of societies in which the state was not, in fact, an instrument of (economic) class rule but rather pursued an interest of its own.

As regards anthropology, Michael Taylor summarises that the *"evidence does not give [the Marxist] proposition [that the rise of economic classes caused the creation of the state] a great deal of support. Much of the evidence which has been offered in support of it shows only that the primary states, not long after their emergence, were economically stratified. But this is of course consistent also with the simultaneous rise . . . of political and economic stratification, or with the prior development of the state - i.e. of political stratification - and the creation of economic stratification by the ruling class."* [**Community, Anarchy and Liberty**, p. 132] He quotes Elman Service on this:

*"In all of the archaic civilisations and historically known chiefdoms and primitive states the 'stratification' was . . . mainly of two classes, the governors and the governed - political strata, not strata of ownership groups."* [quoted by Taylor, **Op. Cit.**, p. 133]

Taylor argues that it the *"weakening of community and the development of gross inequalities are the concomitants and consequences of state formation."* He points to the *"germ of state formation"* being in the informal social hierarchies which exist in tribal societies. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 133 and p. 134] Thus the state is not, initially, a product of economic classes but rather an independent development based on inequalities of social power. Harold Barclay, an anarchist who has studied anthropological evidence on this matter, concurs:

*"In Marxist theory power derives primarily, if not exclusively, from control of the means of production and distribution of wealth, that is, from economic factors. Yet, it is evident that power derived from knowledge - and usually 'religious' style knowledge - is often highly significant, at least in the social dynamics of small societies. . . Economic factors are hardly the only source of power. Indeed, we see this in modern society as well, where the capitalist owner does not wield total power. Rather technicians and other specialists command it as well, not because of their economic*

*wealth, but because of their knowledge.*" [quoted by Alan Carter, **Marx: A Radical Critique**, p. 191]

If, as Bookchin summarises, "*hierarchies precede classes*" then trying to use a hierarchical structure like the state to abolish them is simply wishful thinking.

As regards more recent human history, there have been numerous examples of the state existing without being an instrument of (economic) class rule. Rather, the state **was** the ruling class. While the most obvious example is the Stalinist regimes where the state bureaucracy ruled over a state capitalist economy, there have been plenty of others, as Murray Bookchin pointed out:

*"Each State is not necessarily an institutionalised system of violence in the interests of a specific ruling class, as Marxism would have us believe. There are many examples of States that were the 'ruling class' and whose own interests existed quite apart from - even in antagonism to - privileged, presumably 'ruling' classes in a given society. The ancient world bears witness to distinctly capitalistic classes, often highly privileged and exploitative, that were bilked by the State, circumscribed by it, and ultimately devoured by it - which is in part why a capitalist society never emerged out of the ancient world. Nor did the State 'represent' other class interests, such as landed nobles, merchants, craftsmen, and the like. The Ptolemaic State in Hellenistic Egypt was an interest in its own right and 'represented' no other interest than its own. The same is true of the Aztec and the Inca States until they were replaced by Spanish invaders. Under the Emperor Domitian, the Roman State became the principal 'interest' in the empire, superseding the interests of even the landed aristocracy which held such primacy in Mediterranean society. . . .*

*"Near-Eastern State, like the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Persian, were virtually extended households of individual monarchs . . . Pharaohs, kings, and emperors nominally held the land (often co-jointly with the priesthood) in the trust of the deities, who were either embodied in the monarch or were represented by him. The empires of Asian and North African kings were 'households' and the population was seen as 'servants of the palace' . . .*

*"These 'states,' in effect, were not simply engines of exploitation or control in the interests of a privileged 'class.' . . . The Egyptian State was very real but it 'represented' nothing other than itself."* [**Remaking Society**, pp. 67-8]

Bakunin pointed to Turkish Serbia, where economically dominant classes "do not even exist - there is only a bureaucratic class. Thus, the Serbian state will crush the Serbian people for the sole purpose of enabling Serbian bureaucrats to live a fatter life." [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 54] Leninist Tony Cliff, in his attempt to prove that Stalinist Russia was state capitalist and its bureaucracy a ruling class, pointed to various societies which "had deep class differentiation, based not on private property but on state property. Such systems existed in Pharaonic Egypt, Moslem Egypt, Iraq, Persia and India." He discusses the example of Arab feudalism in more detail, where "the feudal lord had no permanent domain of his own, but a member of a class which collectively controlled the land and had the right to appropriate rent." This was "ownership of the land by the state" rather than by individuals. [**State Capitalism in Russia**, pp. 316-8] As such, the idea that the state is simply an instrument of class rule seems unsupportable. As Gaston Leval argued, "the State, by its

*nature, tends to have a life of its own.*" [quoted by Sam Dolgoff, **A Critique of Marxism**, p. 10]

Marx's "*implicit theory of the state - a theory which, in reducing political power to the realisation of the interests of the dominant economic classes, precludes any concern with the potentially authoritarian and oppressive outcome of authoritarian and centralised revolutionary methods . . . This danger (namely, the dismissal of warranted fears concerning political power) is latent in the central features of Marx's approach to politics.*" [Alan Carter, **Op. Cit.**, p. 219] To summarise the obvious conclusion:

*"By focusing too much attention on the economic structure of society and insufficient attention on the problems of political power, Marx has left a legacy we would done better not to inherit. The perceived need for authoritarian and centralised revolutionary organisation is sanctioned by Marx's theory because his theoretical subordination of political power to economic classes apparently renders post-revolutionary political power unproblematic."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 231]

Many factors contributed to Stalinism, including Marxism's defective theory of the state. In stressing that socialism meant nationalising property, it lead to state management which, in turn, expropriated the working class as a vast managerial bureaucracy was required to run it. Moreover, Marxism disguised this new ruling class as it argues that the state 'represents' a class and had no interests of itself. Thus we have Trotsky's utter inability to understand Stalinism and his insane formula that the proletariat remained the ruling class under Stalin (or, for that matter, under himself and Lenin)! Simply put, by arguing that the state was an instrument of class rule, Marxism ensured it presented a false theory of social change and could not analysis its resulting class rule when the inevitable consequences of this approach was implemented.

However, there is more to Marxism than its dominant theory of the state. Given this blindness of orthodox Marxism to this issue, it seems ironic that one of the people responsible for it also provides anarchists with evidence to back up our argument that the state is not simply an instrument of class rule but rather has interests of its own. Thus we find Engels arguing that proletariat, "*in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy,*" would have "*to safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment.*" [**Selected Works**, p. 257] Yet, if the state was simply an instrument of class rule such precautions would not be necessary. Engels comments show an awareness that the state can have interests of its own, that it is not simply a machine of class rule.

Aware of the obvious contradiction, Engels argued that the state "*is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class which, through the medium of the state, becomes the politically dominant class . . . By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other, so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both.*" He pointed to the "*absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*", which held the balance between the nobility and the bourgeoisie against one another as well as "*the Bonapartism of the First, and still more of the Second French Empire.*" It should be noted that, elsewhere, Engels was more precise on how long the state was, in fact, controlled by the bourgeoisie, namely two years: "*In France, where the bourgeoisie as such, as a class in its entirety, held power for only two years, 1849 and 1850, under the republic, it was able to continue its*

*social existence only by abdicating its political power to Louis Bonaparte and the army."*" [Op. Cit., pp. 577-8 and p. 238] So, in terms of French history, Engels argued that "by way of exception" accounted for over 250 hundred years, the 17th and 18th centuries and most of the 19th, bar a two year period! Even if we are generous and argue that the 1830 revolution placed one section of the bourgeoisie (finance capital) into political power, we are still left with over 200 hundred years of state "independence" from classes! Given this, it would be fair to suggest that the "exception" should be when it is an instrument of class rule, not when it is not!

This was no isolated case. In Prussia "*members of the bourgeoisie have a majority in the Chamber . . . But where is their power over the state? . . . the mass of the bourgeoisie . . . does not want to rule.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 236-7] And so, in Germany, there exists "*alongside the basic condition of the old absolute monarchy - an equilibrium between the landowner aristocracy and the bourgeoisie - the basic condition of modern Bonapartism - an equilibrium between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.*" This meant that "*both in the old absolute monarchy and in the modern Bonapartist monarchy the real government power lies in the hands of a special caste of army officers and state officials*" and so the "*independence of this case, which appears to occupy a position outside and, so to speak, above society, gives the state the semblance of independence in relation to society.*" However, this did not stop Engels asserting that the "*state is nothing but the organised collective power of the exploiting classes, the landlords and the capitalists as against the exploited classes, the peasants and the workers. What the individual capitalists . . . do not want, their state also does not want.*" [Collected Works, vol. 23, p. 363 and p. 362]

So, according to Engels, the executive of the state, like the state itself, can become independent from classes if the opposing classes were balanced. This analysis, it must be pointed out, was an improvement on the earliest assertions of Marx and Engels on the state. In the 1840s, it was a case of the "*independence of the state is only found nowadays in those countries where the estates have not yet completely developed into classes . . . where consequently no section of the population can achieve dominance over the others.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 5, p. 90] For Engels, "*[f]rom the moment the state administration and legislature fall under the control of the bourgeoisie, the independence of the bureaucracy ceases to exist.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 6, p. 88] It must, therefore, have come as a surprise for Marx and Engels when the state and its bureaucracy appeared to become independent in France under Napoleon III.

Talking of which, it should be noted that, initially for Marx, under Bonapartism "*the state power is not suspended in mid air. Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small-holding [Parzellen] peasants.*" The Bonaparte "who dispersed the bourgeois parliament is the chosen of the peasantry." However, this class is "*incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power . . . The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself.*" Yet Marx himself admits that this regime experienced "*peasant risings in half of France*", organised "*raids on the peasants by the army*" and the "*mass incarceration and transportation of peasants.*" A strange form of class rule, when the class represented is oppressed by the regime! Rest assured, though, the "*Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant.*" Then Marx, without comment, pronounced Bonaparte to be "*the representative of the*

*lumpenproletariat to which he himself, his entourage, his government and his army belong."* [Selected Works, p. 170, p. 171 and p. 176]

It would be fair to say that Marx's analysis is somewhat confused and seems an ad hoc explanation to the fact that in a modern society the state appeared to become independent of the economically dominant class. Yet if a regime is systematically oppressing a class then it is fair to conclude that is **not** representing that class in any way. Bonaparte's power did not, in other words, rest on the peasantry. Rather, like fascism, it was a means by which the bourgeoisie could break the power of the working class and secure its own class position against possible social revolution. As Bakunin argued, it was a "*despotic imperial system*" which the bourgeois "*themselves founded out of fear of the Social Revolution.*" [The Basic Bakunin, p. 63] Thus the abolition of bourgeois rule was more apparent than real:

*"As soon as the people took equality and liberty seriously, the bourgeoisie . . . retreated into reaction . . . They began by suppressing universal suffrage . . . The fear of Social Revolution . . . hurled this downfallen class . . . into the arms of the dictatorship of Napoleon III . . . We should not think that the Bourgeois Gentlemen were too inconvenienced . . . [Those who] applied themselves earnestly and exclusively to the great concern of the bourgeoisie, the exploitation of the people . . . were well protected and powerfully supported . . . All went well, according to the desires of the bourgeoisie." [Op. Cit., pp. 62-3]*

Somewhat ironically, then, a key example used by Marxists for the "independence" of the state is no such thing. Bonapartism did not represent a "balance" between the proletariat and bourgeoisie but rather the most naked form of state rule required in the fact of working class revolt. It was a counter-revolutionary regime which reflected a defeat for the working class, not a "balance" between it and the capitalist class.

Marx's confusions arose from his belief that, for the bourgeoisie, the parliamentary republic "*was the unavoidable condition of their common rule, the sole form of state in which their general class interest subjected itself at the same time both the claims of their particular factions and all the remaining classes of society.*" [Selected Works, pp. 152-3] The abolition of the republic, the replacement of the government, was, for him, the end of the political rule of the bourgeoisie as he argued that "*the industrial bourgeoisie applauds with servile bravos the coup d'État of December 2, the annihilation of parliament, the downfall of its own rule, the dictatorship of Bonaparte.*" He repeated this identification: "*Passing of the parliamentary regime and of bourgeois rule. Victory of Bonaparte.*" [Selected Writings, pp. 164-5 and p. 166] Political rule was equated to which party held power and so, logically, universal suffrage was "*the equivalent of political power for the working class . . . where the proletariat forms the large majority of the population.*" Its "*inevitable result* would be "**the political supremacy of the working class.**" [Collected Works, vol. 11, pp. 335-6] This was, of course, simply wrong (on both counts) as he, himself, seemed to became aware of two decades later.

In 1871 he argued that "*the State power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.*" This meant that "*in view of the threatened upheaval of the proletariat, [the bourgeoisie] now used that State power mercilessly and ostentatiously as the national war-engine of capital against labour*" and so were "*bound not only to invest the executive with continually increased powers of repression, but at the same time to divest their*

*own parliamentary stronghold . . . of all its own means of defence against the Executive. The Executive, in the person of Louis Bonaparte, turned them out.*" Marx now admitted that this regime only "professed to rest upon the peasantry" while, "[i]n reality, it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation." However, "[u]nder its sway, bourgeois society, freed from political cares, attained a development unexpected even by itself." [Selected Works, p. 285, p. 286, pp. 286-7 and p. 287]

Yet capitalists often do well under regimes which suppress the basic liberties of the working class and so the bourgeoisie remained the ruling class and the state remained its organ. In other words, there is no "balance" between classes under Bonapartism even if the political regime is not subject to electoral control by the bourgeoisie and has more independence to pursue its own agenda.

This is not the only confirmation of the anarchist critique of the Marxist theory of the state which can be found in Marxism itself. Marx, at times, also admitted the possibility of the state **not** being an instrument of (economic) class rule. For example, he mentioned the so-called "*Asiatic Mode of Production*" in which "*there are no private landowners*" but rather "*the state . . . which confronts*" the peasants "*directly as simultaneously landowner and sovereign, rent and tax coincide . . . Here the state is the supreme landlord. Sovereignty here is landed property concentrated on a national scale.*" [Capital, vol. 3, p. 927] Thus "*the State [is] the real landlord*" in the "*Asiatic system*" [Collected Works, vol. 12, p. 215] In other words, the ruling class could be a state bureaucracy and so be independent of economic classes. Unfortunately this analysis remained woefully undeveloped and no conclusions were drawn from these few comments, perhaps unsurprisingly as it undermines the claim that the state is merely the instrument of the economically dominant class. It also, of course, has applicability to state socialism and certain conclusions could be reached that suggested it, as Bakunin warned, would be a new form of class rule.

The state bureaucracy as the ruling class can be seen in Soviet Russia (and the other so-called "socialist" regimes such as China and Cuba). As libertarian socialist Ante Ciliga put it, "*the manner in which Lenin organised industry had handed it over entirely into the hands of the bureaucracy,*" and so the workers "*became once more the wage-earning manpower in other people's factories. Of socialism there remained in Russia no more than the word.*" [The Russian Enigma, p. 280 and p. 286] Capitalism became state capitalism under Lenin and Trotsky and so the state, as Bakunin predicted and feared, became the new ruling class under Marxism (see [section H.3.14](#) for more discussion of this).

The confusions of the Marxist theory of the state ensured that Trotsky, for example, failed to recognise the obvious, namely that the Stalinist state bureaucracy was a ruling class. Rather, it was the "*new ruling caste*", or "*the ruling stratum*". While admitting, at one stage, that the "*transfer of the factories to the State changed the situation of the workers only juridically*" Trotsky then ignored the obvious conclusion that this has left the working class as an exploited class under a (new) form of capitalism to assert that the "*nature*" of Stalinist Russia was "*a proletarian State*" because of its "*nationalisation*" of the means of life (which "*constitute the basis of the Soviet social structure*"). He admitted that the "*Soviet Bureaucracy has expropriated the proletariat politically*" but has done so "*in order by methods of its own to defend the social conquests*" of the October Revolution. He did not ponder too deeply the implications of admitting that the "*means of production belong to the State. But the State, so to speak, 'belongs' to the bureaucracy.*" [The Revolution Betrayed,

p. 93, p. 136, p. 228, p. 235 and p. 236] If that is so, only ideology can stop the obvious confusion being drawn, namely that the state bureaucracy was the ruling class. But that is precisely what happened with Trotsky's confusion expressing itself thusly:

*"In no other regime has a bureaucracy ever achieved such a degree of independence from the dominating class . . . it is something more than a bureaucracy. It is in the full sense of the word the sole privileged and commanding stratum in the Soviet society."* [Op. Cit., p. 235]

By this, Trotsky suggested that the working class was the "*dominating class*" under Stalinism! In fact, the bureaucracy "*continues to preserve State property only to the extent it fears the proletariat*" while, at the same time, the bureaucracy has "*become [society's] lord*" and "*the Soviet state has acquired a totalitarian-bureaucratic character*"! This nonsense is understandable, given the unwillingness to draw the obvious conclusion from the fact that the bureaucracy was "*compelled to defend State property as the source of its power and its income. In this aspect of its activity it still remains a weapon of proletarian dictatorship.*" [Op. Cit., p. 112, p. 107, p. 238 and p. 236] By commanding nationalised property, the bureaucracy, like private capitalists, could exploit the labour of the working class and did. That the state owned the means of production did not stop this being a form of class system.

It is simply nonsense to claim, as Trotsky did, that the "*anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.*" [Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34, p. 125] How could the proletariat be the "*ruling class*" if it were under the heel of a totalitarian dictatorship? State ownership of property was precisely the means by which the bureaucracy enforced its control over production and so the source of its economic power and privileges. To state the obvious, if the working class does not control the property it is claimed to own then someone else does. The economic relationship thus generated is a hierarchical one, in which the working class is an oppressed class.

Significantly, Trotsky combated those of his followers who drew the same conclusions as had anarchists and libertarian Marxists while he and Lenin held the reigns of power. Perhaps this ideological blindness is understandable, given Trotsky's key role in creating the bureaucracy in the first place. So Trotsky did criticise, if in a confused manner, the Stalinist regime for its "*injustice, oppression, differential consumption, and so on, even if he had supported them when he himself was in the elite.*" [Neil C. Fernandez, Capitalism and Class Struggle in the USSR, p. 180]. Then there is the awkward conclusion that if the bureaucracy were a ruling class under Stalin then Russia was also state capitalist under Lenin and Trotsky for the economic relations were identical in both (this obvious conclusion haunts those, like the British SWP, who maintain that Stalinism was State Capitalist but not Bolshevism - see [section H.3.13](#)). Suffice to say, if the state itself can be the "economically dominant class" then the state cannot be a mere instrument of an economic class.

Moreover, Engels also presented another analysis of the state which suggested that it arose **before** economic classes appeared. In 1886 he wrote of how society "*creates for itself an organ for the safeguarding of its common interests against internal and external attacks. This organ is the state power. Hardly come into being, this organ makes itself independent vis-À-vis society: and, indeed, the more so, the more it becomes the organ of a particular class, the more it directly enforces the supremacy of that class.*" "Society", he argued four years later, "*gives rise to certain common function which it cannot dispense with. The persons appointed*

*for this purpose form a new branch of the division of labour **within society**. This gives them particular interests, distinct, too, from the interests of those who empowered them; they make themselves independent of the latter and - the state is in being."* [Op. Cit., p. 617 and pp. 685-6] In this schema, the independence of the state comes **first** and is then captured by rising economically powerful class.

Regardless of when and how the state arises, the key thing is that Engels recognised that the state was "*endowed with relative independence.*" Rather than being a simple expression of economic classes and their interests, this "*new independent power, while having in the main to follow the movement of production, reacts in its turn, by virtue of its inherent relative independence - that is, the relative independence once transferred to it and gradually further developed - upon the conditions and course of production. It is the interaction of two unequal forces: on the one hand, the economic movement, on the other, the new political power, which strives for as much independence as possible, and which, having once been established, is endowed with a movement of its own.*" There were three types of "*reaction of the state power upon economic development.*" The state can act "*in the same direction*" and then it is "*more rapid*" or it can "*oppose*" it and "*can do great damage to the economic development.*" Finally, it can "*prevent the economic development proceeding along certain lines, and prescribe other lines.*" Finally he stated "*why do we fight for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if political power is economically impotent? Force (that is, state power) is also an economic power!*" [Op. Cit., p. 686 and p. 689]

Conversely, anarchists reply, why fight for "*the political dictatorship of the proletariat*" when you yourself admit that the state can become "*independent*" of the classes you claim it represents? Particularly when you **increase** its potential for becoming independent by centralising it even more and giving it economic powers to complement its political ones!

So the Marxist theory of the state is that is an instrument of class rule - except when it is not. Its origins lie in the rise of class antagonisms - except when it does not. It arises after the break up of society into classes - except when it does not. Which means, of course, the state is **not** just an instrument of class rule and, correspondingly, the anarchist critique is confirmed. This explains why the analysis of the "*Asiatic Mode of Production*" is so woefully underdeveloped in Marx and Engels as well as the confused and contradictory attempt to understand Bonapartism.

To summarise, if the state can become "*independent*" of economic classes or even exist without an economically dominant class, then that implies that it is no mere machine, no mere "*instrument*" of class rule. It implies the anarchist argument that the state has interests of its own, generated by its essential features and so, therefore, cannot be used by a majority class as part of its struggle for liberation is correct. Simply put, Anarchists have long "*realised - feared - that any State structure, whether or not socialist or based on universal suffrage, has a certain independence from society, and so may serve the interests of those within State institutions rather than the people as a whole or the proletariat.*" [Brian Morris, Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom, p. 134] Thus "*the state certainly has interests of its own . . . [,] acts to protect [them] . . . and protects the interests of the bourgeoisie when these interests happen to coincide with its own, as, indeed, they usually do.*" [Carter, Op. Cit., p. 226]

As Mark Leier quips, Marxism "*has usually - save when battling anarchists - argued that the state has some 'relative autonomy' and is not a direct, simple reflex of a given economic*

*system.*" [**Bakunin: The Constructive Passion**, p. 275] The reason why the more sophisticated Marxist analysis of the state is forgotten when it comes to attacking anarchism should be obvious - it undermines both the Marxist critique of anarchism and its own theory of the state. Ironically, arguments and warnings about the "*independence*" of the state by Marxists imply that the state has interests of its own and cannot be considered simply as an instrument of class rule. They suggest that the anarchist analysis of the state is correct, namely that any structure based on delegated power, centralisation and hierarchy must, inevitably, have a privileged class in charge of it, a class whose position enables it to not only exploit and oppress the rest of society but also to effectively escape from popular control and accountability. This is no accident. The state is structured to enforce minority rule and exclude the majority.

### **H.3.10 Has Marxism always supported the idea of workers' councils?**

One of the most widespread myths associated with Marxism is the idea that Marxism has consistently aimed to smash the current (bourgeois) state and replace it by a "*workers' state*" based on working class organisations created during a revolution.

This myth is sometimes expressed by those who should know better (i.e. Marxists). According to John Rees (of the British Socialist Workers Party) it has been a "*cornerstone of revolutionary theory*" that "*the soviet is a superior form of democracy because it unifies political and economic power.*" This "*cornerstone*" has, apparently, existed "*since Marx's writings on the Paris Commune.*" ["*In Defence of October,*", pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 25] In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, as Marx's writings on the Paris Commune prove beyond doubt.

The Paris Commune, as Marx himself noted, was "*formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town.*" [**Selected Works**, p. 287] As Marx made clear, it was definitely **not** based on delegates from workplaces and so could **not** unify political and economic power. Indeed, to state that the Paris Commune was a soviet is simply a joke, as is the claim that Marxists supported soviets as revolutionary organs to smash and replace the state from 1871. In fact Marxists did not subscribe to this "*cornerstone of revolutionary theory*" until 1917 when Lenin argued that the Soviets would be the best means of ensuring a Bolshevik government. Which explains why Lenin's use of the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*" and call for the destruction of the bourgeois state came as such a shock to his fellow Marxists. Unsurprisingly, given the long legacy of anarchist calls to smash the state and their vision of a socialist society built from below by workers councils, many Marxists called Lenin an anarchist! Therefore, the idea that Marxists have always supported workers councils' is untrue and any attempt to push this support back to 1871 simply a farcical.

Not all Marxists are as ignorant of their political tradition as Rees. As his fellow party member Chris Harman recognised, "*[e]ven the 1905 [Russian] revolution gave only the most embryonic expression of how a workers' state would in fact be organised. The fundamental forms of workers' power - the soviets (workers' councils) - were not recognised.*" It was "*[n]ot until the February revolution [of 1917 that] soviets became central in Lenin's writings and thought.*" [**Party and Class**, p. 18 and p. 19] Before then, Marxists had held the position, to quote Karl Kautsky from 1909 (who is, in turn, quoting his own words from 1893), that the

democratic republic "was the particular form of government in which alone socialism can be realised." He added, after the Russian Revolution, that "not a single Marxist revolutionary repudiated me, neither Rosa Luxemburg nor Klara Zetkin, neither Lenin nor Trotsky." [The Road to Power, p. 34 and p. xlviii]

Lenin himself, even after Social Democracy supported their respective states in the First World War and before his return to Russia, still argued that Kautsky's work contained "*a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times*" and "*it was most advantageous to the German Social-Democrats (in the sense of the promise they held out), and moreover came from the pen of the most eminent writer of the Second International . . . Social-Democracy . . . wants conquest of political power by the proletariat, the dictatorship of the proletariat.*" [Collected Works, vol. 21, p. 94] There was no hint that Marxism stood for anything other than seizing power in a republic, as expounded by the likes of Kautsky.

Before continuing it should be stressed that Harman's summary is correct only if we are talking about the Marxist movement. Looking at the wider revolutionary movement, two groups definitely recognised the importance of the soviets as a form of working class power and as the framework of a socialist society. These were the anarchists and the Social-Revolutionary Maximalists, both of whom "*espoused views that corresponded almost word for word with Lenin's April 1917 program of 'All power to the soviets.'*" The "*aims of the revolutionary far left in 1905*" Lenin "*combined in his call for soviet power [in 1917], when he apparently assimilated the anarchist program to secure the support of the masses for the Bolsheviks.*" [Oskar Anweiler, The Soviets, p. 94 and p. 96]

So before 1917, when Lenin claimed to have discovered what had eluded all the previous followers of Marx and Engels (including himself!), it was only anarchists (or those close to them such as the SR-Maximalists) who argued that the future socialist society would be structurally based around the organs working class people themselves created in the process of the class struggle and revolution. For example, the syndicalists "*regarded the soviets . . . as admirable versions of the bourses du travail, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers regardless of specific political affiliation, the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised 'from below' . . . with the aim of bringing down the old regime.*" The anarchists of Khleb i Volia "*also likened the 1905 Petersburg Soviet - as a non-party mass organisation - to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871.*" [Paul Avrich, The Russian Anarchists, pp. 80-1] In 1907, it was concluded that the revolution required "*the proclamation in villages and towns of workers' communes with soviets of workers' deputies . . . at their head.*" [quoted by Alexandre Skirda, Facing the Enemy, p. 77] These ideas can be traced back to Bakunin, so, ironically, the idea of the superiority of workers' councils has existed from around the time of the Paris Commune, but only in anarchist theory.

So, if Marxists did not support workers' councils until 1917, what did Marxists argue should be the framework of a socialist society before this date? To discover this, we must look to Marx and Engels. Once we do, we discover that their works suggest that their vision of socialist transformation was fundamentally based on the bourgeois state, suitably modified and democratised to achieve this task. As such, rather than present the true account of the Marxist theory of the state Lenin interpreted various inexact and ambiguous statements by Marx and Engels (particularly from Marx's defence of the Paris Commune) to justify his own actions in 1917. Whether his 1917 revision of Marxism in favour of workers' councils as the means to socialism is in keeping with the spirit of Marx is another matter of course. For the

**Socialist Party of Great Britain** and its sister parties, Lenin violated both the letter **and** the spirit of Marx and they stress his arguments in favour of utilising universal suffrage to introduce socialism (indeed, their analysis of Marx and critique of Lenin is substantially the same as the one presented here). For the council communists, who embraced the idea of workers' councils but broke with the Bolsheviks over the issue of whether the councils or the party had power, Lenin's analysis, while flawed in parts, is in the general spirit of Marx and they stress the need to smash the state and replace it with workers' councils. In this, they express the best in Marx. When faced with the Paris Commune and its libertarian influences he embraced it, distancing himself (for a while at least) with many of his previous ideas.

So what was the original (orthodox) Marxist position? It can be seen from Lenin who, as late December 1916 argued that "*Socialists are in favour of utilising the present state and its institutions in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class, maintaining also that the state should be used for a specific form of transition from capitalism to socialism.*" Lenin attacked Bukharin for "*erroneously ascribing this [the anarchist] view to the socialist*" when he had stated socialists wanted to "*abolish*" the state or "*blow it up.*" He called this "*transitional form*" the dictatorship of the proletariat, "*which is also a state.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 23, p. 165] In other words, the socialist party would aim to seize power within the existing republican state and, after making suitable modifications to it, use it to create socialism.

That this position was the orthodox one is hardly surprising, given the actual comments of both Marx and Engels. For example Engels argued in April 1883 while he and Marx saw "*the gradual dissolution and ultimate disappearance of that political organisation called the State*" as "*one of the final results of the future revolution,*" they "*at the same time . . . have always held that . . . the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organised political force of the State and with its aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and re-organise society.*" The idea that the proletariat needs to "*possess*" the existing state is made clear when he notes that the anarchists "*reverse the matter*" by advocating that the revolution "*has to begin by abolishing the political organisation of the State.*" For Marxists "*the only organisation the victorious working class finds ready-made for use, is that of the State. It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy that at such a moment, would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the working class can exert its newly conquered power.*" [our emphasis, **Op. Cit.**, vol. 47, p. 10]

Obviously the only institution which the working class "*finds ready-made for use*" is the democratic (i.e., bourgeois) state, although, as Engels stressed, it "*may require adaptation.*" In Engels' 1871 introduction to Marx's "*The Civil War in France*", this analysis is repeated when Engels asserted that the state "*is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another*" and that it is "*at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible.*" [**Selected Works**, p. 258]

If the proletariat creates a **new** state to replace the bourgeois one, then how can it be "*ready-made for use*" and "*an evil inherited*" by it? If, as Lenin argued, Marx and Engels thought that the working class had to smash the bourgeois state and replace it with a new one, why would it have "*to lop off at once as much as possible*" from the state it had just "*inherited*"?

Three years later, Engels made his position clear: "With respect to the proletariat the republic differs from the monarchy only in that it is the **ready-for-use** form for the future rule of the proletariat." He went on to state that the French socialists "are at an advantage compared to us in already having it" and warned against "baseless" illusions such as seeking to "entrust socialist tasks to it while it is dominated by the bourgeoisie." [Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 296] This was, significantly, simply repeating Engels 1891 argument from his critique of the draft of the Erfurt program of the German Social Democrats:

*"If one thing is certain it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown."* [Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 227]

Clearly Engels does not speak of a "commune-republic" or anything close to a soviet republic, as expressed in Bakunin's work or the libertarian wing of the First International with their ideas of a "trade-union republic" or a free federation of workers' associations. Clearly and explicitly he speaks of the democratic republic, the current state ("an evil inherited by the proletariat") which is to be seized and transformed.

Unsurprisingly, when Lenin came to quote this passage in **State and Revolution** he immediately tried to obscure its meaning. "Engels," he wrote, "repeated here in a particularly striking form the fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx's work, namely, that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat." [The Lenin Anthology, p. 360] However, obviously Engels did nothing of the kind. He did not speak of the political form which "is the nearest approach" to the dictatorship, rather he wrote only of "the specific form" of the dictatorship, the "only" form in which "our Party" can come to power. Hal Draper, likewise, denied that Engels meant what he clearly wrote, arguing that he **really** meant the Paris Commune. "Because of the expression 'great French revolution,'" Draper asserted, "the assumption has often been made that Engels meant the French Revolution of 1789; but the idea that he, or anyone else, could view 1789 (or 1793) as a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is too absurd to entertain." [The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' from Marx to Lenin, p. 37fn]

Yet, contextually, no evidence exists to support such a claim and what does disputes it - Engels discusses French history and makes no mention of the Commune but **does** mention the republic of 1792 to 1799 (significantly, Lenin makes no attempt to suggest that Engels meant the Paris Commune or anything else bar a democratic republic). In fact, Engels goes on to argue that "[f]rom 1792 to 1799 each French department, each commune, enjoyed complete self-government on the American model, and this is what we too must have. How self-government is to be organised and how we can manage without a bureaucracy has been shown to us by America and the first French Republic." Significantly, Engels was explicitly discussing the need for a "republican party programme", commenting that it would be impossible for "our best people to become ministers" under an Emperor and arguing that, in Germany at the time, they could not call for a republic and had to raise the "**demand for the concentration of all political power in the hands of the people's representatives.**" Engels stressed that "the proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic" with "self-government" meaning "officials elected by universal suffrage". [Op. Cit., pp. 227-9]

Clearly, the "*assumption*" Draper denounced makes more sense than his own or Lenin's. This is particularly the case when it is clear that both Marx and Engels viewed the French

Republic under the Jacobins as a situation where the proletariat held political power (although, like Marx with the Paris Commune, they do not use the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" to describe it). Engels wrote of "*the rule of the Mountain party*" as being "*the short time when the proletariat was at the helm of the state in the French Revolution*" and "*from May 31, 1793 to July 26, 1794 . . . not a single bourgeois dared show his face in the whole of France.*" Marx, similarly, wrote of this period as one in which "*the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie*" but due to the "*material conditions*" its acts were "*in service*" of the bourgeois revolution. The "*bloody action of the people*" only "*prepared the way for*" the bourgeoisie by destroying feudalism, something which the bourgeoisie was not capable of. [Op. Cit., vol. 6, p. 373, p. 5 and p. 319]

Apparently Engels did **not** consider it "*too absurd to entertain*" that the French Republic of 1793 was "*a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'*" and, ironically, Draper's "*anyone else*" turned out to be Marx! Moreover, this was well known in Marxist circles long before Draper made his assertion. Julius Martov (for example) after quoting Marx on this issue summarised that, for Marx and Engels, the "*Reign of Terror in France was the momentary domination of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat over all the possessing classes, including the authentic bourgeoisie.*" [The State and Socialist Revolution, p. 51]

Similarly, Lenin quoted Engels on the proletariat seizing "*state power*" and nationalising the means of production, an act by which it "*abolishes itself as proletariat*" **and** "*abolishes the state as state.*" Significantly, it is **Lenin** who has to write that "*Engels speaks here of the proletarian revolution 'abolishing' the bourgeois state, while the words about the state withering away refer to the remnants of the proletariat state after the socialist revolution.*" Yet Engels himself makes no such differentiation and talks purely of "*the state*" and it "*becom[ing] the real representative of the whole of society*" by "*taking possession of the means of production in the name of society.*" Perhaps Lenin was right and Engels really meant two different states but, sadly, he failed to make that point explicitly, so allowing Marxism, to use Lenin's words, to be subjected to "*the crudest distortion*" by its followers, "*prune[d]*" and "*reduc[ed] . . . to opportunism.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 320-2]

Then there are Engels 1887 comments that in the USA the workers "*next step towards their deliverance*" was "*the formation of a political workingmen's party, with a platform of its own, and the conquest of the Capitol and the White House for its goal.*" This new party "*like all political parties everywhere . . . aspires to the conquest of political power.*" Engels then discusses the "*electoral battle*" going on in America. [Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 435 and p. 437] Significantly, 40 years previously in 1847, Engels had argued that the revolution "*will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct . . . dominance of the proletariat*" where "*the proletarians are already a majority of the people.*" He noted that "*a democratic constitution has been introduced*" in America. [Op. Cit., vol. 6, p. 350 and p. 356] The continuity is significant, particularly as these identical arguments come before and after the Paris Commune of 1871.

This was no isolated statement. Engels had argued along the same lines (and, likewise, echoed early statements) as regards Britain in 1881, "*where the industrial and agricultural working class forms the immense majority of the people, democracy means the dominion of the working class, neither more nor less. Let, then, that working class prepare itself for the task in store for it - the ruling of this great Empire . . . And the best way to do this is to use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess . . . to send to Parliament men of their own order.*" In case this was not clear enough, he lamented that "[e]verywhere

*the labourer struggles for political power, for direct representation of his class in the legislature - everywhere but in Great Britain.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 24, p. 405] For Engels:

*"In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power, in order to become enabled to change existing laws in conformity with their own interests and requirements. Thus the working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People's Charter [which demanded universal suffrage and yearly general elections], which was to give it that political power."* [Op. Cit., p. 386]

The 1st of May, 1893, saw Engels argue that the task of the British working class was not only to pursue economic struggles "but above all in winning political rights, parliament, through the working class organised into an independent party" (significantly, the original manuscript stated "but in winning parliament, the political power"). He went on to state that the 1892 general election saw the workers give a "taste of their power, hitherto unexerted." [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 395] This, significantly, is in line with his 1870 comment that in Britain "the bourgeoisie could only get its real representative . . . into government only by extension of the franchise, whose consequences are bound to put an end to all bourgeois rule."

[Selected Works, p. 238]

Marx seems to see voting for a government as being the same as political power as the "fundamental contradiction" of a democracy under capitalism is that the classes "whose social slavery the constitution is to perpetuate" it "puts in possession of political power through universal suffrage." [Collected Works, vol. 10, p. 79] For Engels in 1847, "democracy has as its necessary consequence the political rule of the proletariat." Universal suffrage would "make political power pass from the middle class to the working class" and so "the democratic movement" is "striving for the political domination of the proletariat." [Op. Cit., vol. 7, p. 299, p. 440 and p. 368] As noted in [section H.3.9](#), Marx concluded that Bonaparte's coup ended the political power of the bourgeoisie and, for Engels, "the whole bourgeoisie ruled, but for three years only" during the Second French Republic of 1848-51. Significantly, during the previous regime of Louis-Philippe (1830-48) "a very small portion of the bourgeois ruled the kingdom" as "by far the larger part were excluded from the suffrage by high [property] qualifications." [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 297]

All of which, of course, fits into Marx's account of the Paris Commune where, as noted above, the Commune "was formed of the municipal councillors" who had been "chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town" in the municipal elections held on March 26th, 1871. Once voted into office, the Commune then smashed the state machine inherited by it, recognising that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." The "first decree of the Commune . . . was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people." Thus the Commune lops off one of the "ubiquitous organs" associated with the "centralised State power" once it had inherited the state via elections. [Selected Works, p. 287, p. 285, p. 287 and p. 285] Indeed, this is precisely what **was** meant, as confirmed by Engels in a letter written in 1884 clarifying what Marx meant:

*"It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its*

*own purposes: whereas all bourgeois republicans since 1848 inveighed against this machinery so long as they were in the opposition, but once they were in the government they took it over without altering it and used it partly against the reaction but still more against the proletariat." [Collected Works, vol. 47, p. 74]*

Interestingly, in the second outline of the **Civil War in France**, Marx used words almost identical to Engels latter explanation:

*"But the proletariat cannot, as the ruling classes and their different rival fractions have done in the successive hours of their triumph, simply lay hold on the existent State body and wield this ready-made agency for their own purpose. The first condition for the holding of political power, is to transform its working machinery and destroy it as an instrument of class rule." [our emphasis, Collected Works, vol. 22, p. 533]*

It is, of course, true that Marx expressed in his defence of the Commune the opinion that new "*Communal Constitution*" was to become a "*reality by the destruction of the State power*" yet he immediately argues that "*the merely repressive organs of the old government power were to be amputated*" and "*its legitimate functions were to be wrested from*" it and "*restored to the responsible agents of society.*" [**Selected Works**, pp. 288-9] This corresponds to Engels arguments about removing aspects from the state inherited by the proletariat and signifies the "*destruction*" of the state machinery (its bureaucratic-military aspects) rather than the republic itself.

In other words, Lenin was right to state that "*Marx's idea is that the working class must break up, smash the 'ready-made state machinery,' and not confine itself to merely laying hold of it.*" This was never denied by thinkers like Karl Kautsky, rather they stressed that for Marx and Engels universal suffrage was the means by which political power would be seized (at least in a republic) while violent revolution would be the means to create a republic and to defend it against attempts to restore the old order. As Engels put it in 1886, Marx had drawn "*the conclusion that, at least in Europe, England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means. He certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without a 'pro-slavery rebellion,' to this peaceful and legal revolution.*" [*"Preface to the English edition"* in Marx, **Capital**, vol. 1, p. 113] Thus Kautsky stressed that the abolition of the standing army was "*absolutely necessary if the state is to be able to carry out significant social reforms*" once the party of the proletariat was in a position to "*control legislation.*" This would mean "*the most complete democracy, a militia system*" after, echoing the **Communist Manifesto**, "*the conquest of democracy*" had been achieved. [**The Road to Power**, p. 69, p. 70 and p. 72]

Essentially, then, Lenin was utilising a confusion between smashing the state and smashing the state machine once the workers' party had achieved a majority within a democratic republic. In other words, Lenin was wrong to assert that "*this lesson . . . had not only been completely ignored, but positively distorted by the prevailing, Kautskyite, 'interpretation' of Marxism.*" As we have proved "*the false notion that universal suffrage 'in the present-day state' is really capable of revealing the will of the majority of the working people and of securing its realisation*" was **not** invented by the "*petty-bourgeois democrats*" nor "*the social-chauvinists and opportunists.*" It can be found repeatedly in the works of Engels and Marx themselves and so "*Engels's perfectly clear, concise and concrete statement is distorted*

*at every step*" not only "*at every step in the propaganda and agitation of the 'official' (i.e., opportunist) socialist parties*" but also by Engels himself! [Op. Cit. p. 336 and pp. 319-20]

Significantly, we find Marx recounting in 1852 how the "*executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its wide-ranging and ingenious state machinery . . . sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system which it had helped to hasten.*" After 1848, "*in its struggle against the revolution, the parliamentary republic found itself compelled to strengthen, along with the repressive, the resources and centralisation of governmental power. All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it. The parties that contended in turn for domination regarded the possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victor.*" However, "*under the absolute monarchy, during the first Revolution, under Napoleon, bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Under the Restoration, under Louis Philippe, under the parliamentary republic, it was the instrument of the ruling class, however much it strove for power of its own.*" It was "[o]nly under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent." [Selected Works, pp. 169-70]

This analysis is repeated in **The Civil War in France**, except the expression "*the State power*" is used as an equivalent to the "*state machinery*." Again, the state machine/power is portrayed as coming into existence **before** the republic: "*The centralised state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature . . . originates from the days of absolute monarchy.*" Again, the "*bourgeois republicans . . . took the state power*" and used it to repress the working class. Again, Marx called for "*the destruction of the state power*" and noted that the Commune abolished the standing army, the privileged role of the clergy, and so on. The Commune's "*very existence presupposed the non-existence of monarchy, which, in Europe at least, is the normal encumbrance and indispensable cloak of class rule. It supplied the republic with the basis of really democratic institutions.*" [Op. Cit. p. 285, p. 286, p. 288 and p. 290]

Obviously, then, what the socialist revolution had to smash existed **before** the republican state was created and was an inheritance of pre-bourgeois rule (even if the bourgeoisie utilised it for its own ends). How this machine was to be smashed was left unspecified but given that it was not identical to the "*parliamentary republic*" Marx's arguments cannot be taken as evidence that the democratic state needed to be smashed or destroyed rather than seized by means of universal suffrage (and reformed appropriately, by "*smashing*" the "*state machinery*" as well as including recall of representatives and the combining of administrative and legislative tasks into their hands). Clearly, Lenin's attempt to equate the "*parliamentary republic*" with the "*state machinery*" cannot be supported in Marx's account. At best, it could be argued that it is the spirit of Marx's analysis, perhaps bringing it up to date. However, this was **not** Lenin's position (he maintained that social democracy had hidden Marx's clear call to smash the bourgeois democratic state).

Unsurprisingly, Lenin does not discuss the numerous quotes by Marx and Engels on this matter which clearly contradict his thesis. Nor mention that in 1871, a few months after the Commune, Marx argued that in Britain, "*the way to show [i.e., manifest] political power lies open to the working class. Insurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more swiftly and surely do the work.*" [Collected Works, vol. 22, p. 602] The following year, saw him suggest that America could join it as "*the workers can achieve their aims by peaceful means*" there as well [Op. Cit., vol. 23, p. 255] How if Marx **had** concluded that the capitalist state had to be destroyed rather than captured and refashioned then he quickly

changed his mind! In fact, during the Commune itself, in April 1871, Marx had written to his friend Ludwig Kugelman "[i]f you look at the last chapter of my **Eighteenth Brumaire** you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another, but to break it, and that is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party [sic!] comrades in Paris are attempting." [Op. Cit., vol. 44, p. 131] As noted above, Marx explicitly noted that the bureaucratic military machine predated the republic and was, in effect, inherited by it.

Lenin did note that Marx "restricts his conclusion to the Continent" on the issue of smashing the state machine, but does not list an obvious factor, that the UK approximated universal suffrage, in why this was the case (thus Lenin did not note that Engels, in 1891, added "democratic republics like France" to the list of states where "the old society may peacefully evolve into the new." [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 226]). In 1917, Lenin argued, "this restriction" was "no longer valid" as both Britain and America had "completely sunk into the all-European filthy, bloody morass of bureaucratic-military institutions." [Op. Cit., pp. 336-7] Subsequently, he repeated this claim in his polemic against Karl Kautsky, stating that notions that reforming the state were now out of date because of "the existence of **militarism** and a **bureaucracy**" which "were **non-existent** in Britain and America" in the 1870s. He pointed to how "the most democratic and republican bourgeoisie in America . . . deal with workers on strike" as further proof of his position. [Collected Works, vol. 28, p. 238 and p. 244] However, this does not impact on the question of whether universal suffrage could be utilised in order to be in a position to smash this state machine or not. Equally, Lenin failed to acknowledge the violent repression of strikes in the 1870s and 1880s in America (such as the Great Upheaval of 1877 or the crushing of the 8 hour day movement after the Haymarket police riot of 1886). As Martov argued correctly:

*"The theoretic possibility [of peaceful reform] has not revealed itself in reality. But the sole fact that he admitted such a possibility shows us clearly Marx's opinion, leaving no room for arbitrary interpretation. What Marx designated as the 'destruction of the State machine' . . . was the destruction of the **military and bureaucratic apparatus** that the bourgeois democracy had inherited from the monarchy and perfected in the process of consolidating the rule of the bourgeois class. There is nothing in Marx's reasoning that even suggests the destruction of the **State organisation as such** and the replacement of the State during the revolutionary period, that is during the dictatorship of the proletariat, with a social bond formed on a principle opposed to that of the State. Marx and Engels foresaw such a substitution only at the end of a process of 'a progressive withering away' of the State and all the functions of social **coercion**. They foresaw this atrophy of the State and the functions of social coercion to be the result of the prolonged existence of the socialist regime."* [Op. Cit., p. 31]

It should also be remembered that Marx's comments on smashing the state machine were made in response to developments in France, a regime that Marx and Engels viewed as **not** being purely bourgeois. Marx notes in his account of the Commune how, in France, "[p]eculiar historical circumstances" had "prevented the classical development . . . of the bourgeois form of government." [Selected Works, p. 289] For Engels, Proudhon "confuses the French Bureaucratic government with the normal state of a bourgeoisie that rules both itself and the proletariat." [Collected Works, vol. 11, p. 548] In the 1870s, Marx considered Holland, Britain and the USA to have "the genuine capitalist state." [Op. Cit., vol. 24, p.

499] Significantly, it was precisely these states in which Marx had previously stated a peaceful revolution could occur:

*"We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means. That being the true, we must admit that in most countries on the continent it is force which must be the lever of our revolution; it is force which will have to be resorted to for a time in order to establish the rule of the workers."* [Op. Cit., vol. 23, p. 255]

Interestingly, in 1886, Engels expanded on Marx's speculation as regards Holland and confirmed it. Holland, he argued, as well as "*a residue of local and provincial self-government*" also had "*an absence of any real bureaucracy in the French or Prussian sense*" because, alone in Western Europe, it did not have an "*absolute monarchy*" between the 16th and 18th century. This meant that "*only a few changes will have to be made to establish that free self-government by the working [people] which will necessarily be our best tool in the organisation of the mode of production.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 47, pp. 397-8] Few would argue that smashing the state and its replacement with a new workers' one would really constitute a "*few changes*"! However, Engels position does fit in with the notion that the "*state machine*" to be smashed is a legacy of absolute monarchy rather than the state structure of a bourgeois democratic republic. It also shows the nature of a Marxist revolution in a republic, in a "*genuine capitalist state*" of the type Marx and Engels expected to be the result of the first stage of any revolt.

The source of Lenin's restatement of the Marxist theory of the state which came as such a shock to so many Marxists can be found in the nature of the Paris Commune. After all, the major influence in terms of "*political vision*" of the Commune was anarchism. The "*rough sketch of national organisation which the Commune had no time to develop*" which Marx praises but does not quote was written by a follower of Proudhon. [Selected Works, p. 288] It expounded a clearly **federalist** and "bottom-up" organisational structure. It clearly implied "*the destruction of the State power*" rather than seeking to "*inherit*" it. Based on this libertarian revolt, it is unsurprising that Marx's defence of it took on a libertarian twist. As noted by Bakunin, who argued that its "*general effect was so striking that the Marxists themselves, who saw their ideas upset by the uprising, found themselves compelled to take their hats off to it. They went further, and proclaimed that its programme and purpose were their own, in face of the simplest logic . . . This was a truly farcical change of costume, but they were bound to make it, for fear of being overtaken and left behind in the wave of feeling which the rising produced throughout the world.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 261]

The nature of **The Civil War in France** and the circumstances in which it was written explains why. Marx, while publicly opposing any kind of revolt before hand, did support the Commune once it began. His essay is primarily a propaganda piece in defence of it and is, fundamentally, reporting on what the Commune actually did and advocated. Thus, as well as reporting the Communal Constitution's vision of a federation of communes, we find Marx noting, also without comment, that Commune decreed "*the surrender to associations of workmen, under reserve of compensation, of all closed workshops and factories.*" [Op. Cit., p. 294] While Engels, at times, suggested that this could be a possible policy for a socialist government, it is fair to say that few Marxists consider Marx's reporting of this particular

aspect of the Commune as being a key aspect of his ideology. As Marx's account reports on the facts of the Commune it could hardly **not** reflect the libertarian ideas which were so strong in both it and the French sections of the International - ideas he had spent much time and energy opposing. Moreover, given the frenzy of abuse the Communards were subject to it by the bourgeoisie, it was unlikely that Marx would have aided the reaction by being overly critical. Equally, given how positively the Commune had been received in working class and radical circles Marx would have been keen to gain maximum benefit from it for both the International and his own ideology and influence. This would also have ensured that Marx kept his criticisms quiet, particularly as he was writing on behalf of an organisation which was not Marxist and included various different socialist tendencies.

This means that to fully understand Marx and Engels, we need to look at **all** their writings, before and after the Paris Commune. It is, therefore, significant that **immediately** after the Commune Marx stated that workers could achieve socialism by utilising existing democratic states **and** that the labour movement should take part in political action and send workers to Parliament. There is no mention of a federation of communes in these proposals and they reflect ideas both he and Engels had expressed since the 1840s. Ten years after the Commune, Marx stated that it was "*merely an uprising of one city in exceptional circumstances.* [Collected Works, vol. 46, p. 66] Similarly, a mere 3 years after the Commune, Engels argued that the key thing in Britain was "*to form anew a strong workers' party with a definite programme, and the best political programme they could wish for was the People's Charter.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 23, p. 614] The Commune was not mentioned and, significantly, Marx had previously defined this programme in 1855 as being "*to increase and extend the omnipotence of Parliament by elevating it to peopleâ€™s power. They [the Chartist] are not breaking up parliamentarism but are raising it to a higher power.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 14, p. 243]

As such, Marx's defence of the Commune should not mean ignoring the whole body of his and Engels work, nor should Marx's conclusion that the "*state machinery*" must be smashed in a successful revolution be considered to be in contradiction with his comments on utilising the existing democratic republic. It does, however, suggest that Marx's reporting of the Proudhon-influenced ideas of the Communards cannot be taken as a definitive account of his ideas on social transformation.

The fact that Marx did not mention anything about abolishing the existing state and replacing it with a new one in his contribution to the "*Program of the French Workers Party*" in 1880 is significant. It said that the "*collective appropriation*" of the means of production "*can only proceed from a revolutionary action of the class of producers - the proletariat - organised in an independent political party.*" This would be "*pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal including universal suffrage which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 24, p. 340] There is nothing about overthrowing the existing state and replacing it with a new state, rather the obvious conclusion which is to be drawn is that universal suffrage was the tool by which the workers would achieve socialism. It does fit in, however, with Marx's repeated comments that universal suffrage was the equivalent of political power for the working class where the proletariat was the majority of the population. Or, indeed, Engels numerous similar comments. It explains the repeated suggestion by Marx that there were countries like America and Britain "*where the workers can achieve their aims by peaceful means.*" There is Engels:

*"One can imagine that the old society could peacefully grow into the new in countries where all power is concentrated in the people's representatives, where one can constitutionally do as one pleases as soon as a majority of the people give their support; in democratic republics like France and America, in monarchies such as England, where the dynasty is powerless against the popular will. But in Germany, where the government is virtually all-powerful and the Reichstag and other representative bodies are without real power, to proclaim likewise in Germany . . . is to accept the fig leaf of absolutism and to bind oneself to it."* [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 226]

This, significantly, repeats Marx's comments in an unpublished article from 1878 on the Reichstag debates on the anti-socialist laws where, in part, he suggested that *"[i]f in England . . . or the United States, the working class were to gain a majority in Parliament or Congress, they could by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development . . . However, the 'peaceful' movement might be transformed into a 'forcible' one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs; if . . . they are put down by force, it is as rebels against 'lawful' force."* [Op. Cit., vol. 24, p. 248] Sadly, he never finished and published it but it is in line with many of his public pronouncements on this subject.

Marx also excluded countries on the European mainland (with the possible exception of Holland) from his suggestions of peaceful reform. In those countries, presumably, the first stage of the revolution would be, as stressed in the **Communist Manifesto**, creating a fully democratic republic ("to win the battle for democracy" - see [section H.1.1](#)). As Engels put it, *"the first and direct result of the revolution with regard to the form can and must be nothing but the bourgeois republic. But this will be here only a brief transitional period . . . The bourgeois republic . . . will enable us to win over the great masses of the workers to revolutionary socialism . . . Only them can we successfully take over."* The "proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic" for it is *"the sole political form in which the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie can be fought to a finish."* [Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 265, p. 283 and p. 294] As he summarised:

*"Marx and I, for forty years, repeated ad nauseam that for us the democratic republic is the only political form in which the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class can first be universalised and then culminate in the decisive victory of the proletariat."* [Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 271]

It is for these reasons that orthodox Marxism up until 1917 held the position that the socialist revolution would be commenced by seizing the existing state (usually by the ballot box, or by insurrection if that was impossible). Martov in his discussion of Lenin's "discovery" of the "real" Marxist theory on the state (in **State and Revolution**) stressed that the idea that the state should be smashed by the workers who would then *"transplant into the structure of society the forms of their own combat organisations"* was a libertarian idea, alien to Marx and Engels. While acknowledging that *"in our time, working people take to 'the idea of the soviets' after knowing them as combat organisations formed in the process of the class struggle at a sharp revolutionary stage,"* he distanced Marx and Engels quite successfully from such a position. [Op. Cit., p. 42] As such, he makes a valid contribution to Marxism and presents a necessary counter-argument to Lenin's claims (at which point, we are sure, nine out of ten Leninists will dismiss our argument regardless of how well it explains

apparent contradictions in Marx and Engels or how much evidence can be presented in support of it!).

This position should not be confused with a totally reformist position, as social-democracy became. Marx and Engels were well aware that a revolution would be needed to create and defend a republic. Engels, for example, noted "*how totally mistaken is the belief that a republic, and not only a republic, but also a communist society, can be established in a cosy, peaceful way.*" Thus violent revolution was required to create a republic - Marx and Engels were revolutionaries, after all. Within a republic, both recognised that insurrection would be required to defend democratic government against attempts by the capitalist class to maintain its economic position. Universal suffrage was, to quote Engels, "*a splendid weapon*" which, while "*slower and more boring than the call to revolution*", was "*ten times more sure and what is even better, it indicates with the most perfect accuracy the day when a call to armed revolution has to be made.*" This was because it was "*even ten to one that universal suffrage, intelligently used by the workers, will drive the rulers to overthrow legality, that is, to put us in the most favourable position to make revolution.*" "*The big mistake*", Engels argued, was "*to think that the revolution is something that can be made overnight. As a matter of fact it is a process of development of the masses that takes several years even under conditions accelerating this process.*" Thus it was a case of, "*as a revolutionary, any means which leads to the goal is suitable, including the most violent and the most pacific.*" [Marx and Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 283, p. 189, p. 265 and p. 274] However, over time and as social democratic parties and universal suffrage spread, the emphasis did change from insurrection (the **Communist Manifesto**'s "*violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie*") to Engels last pronouncement that "*the conditions of struggle had essentially changed. Rebellion in the old style, street fighting with barricades . . . , was to a considerable extent obsolete.*" [Selected Works, p. 45 and pp. 653-4]

Obviously, neither Marx nor Engels (unlike Bakunin, significantly) saw the rise of reformism which usually made this need for the ruling class to "*overthrow legality*" redundant. Nor, for that matter, did they see the effect of economic power in controlling workers parties once in office. Sure, armed coups have taken place to overthrow even slightly reformist governments but, thanks to the use of "*political action*", the working class was in no position to "*make revolution*" in response. Not, of course, that these have been required in most republics as utilising Marxist methods have made many radical parties so reformist that the capitalists can easily tolerate their taking office or can utilise economic and bureaucratic pressures to control them.

So far from arguing, as Lenin suggested, for the destruction of the capitalist state, Marx and Engels consistently advocated the use of universal suffrage to gain control over the state, control which then would be used to smash or shatter the "*state machine*." Revolution would be required to create a republic and to defend it against reaction, but the key was the utilisation of political action to take political power within a democratic state. The closest that Marx or Engels came to advocating workers councils was in 1850 when Marx suggested that the German workers "*establish their own revolutionary workers' governments*" alongside of the "*new official governments*". These could be of two forms, either of "*municipal committees and municipal councils*" or "*workers' clubs or workers' committees*." There is no mention of how these would be organised but their aim would be to supervise and threaten the official governments "*by authorities backed by the whole mass of the workers.*" These clubs would be "*centralised*". In addition, "*workers candidates are [to be] put up alongside of the bourgeois-democratic candidates*" to "*preserve their independence*". (although this

"independence" meant taking part in bourgeois institutions so that "*the demands of the workers must everywhere be governed by the concessions and measures of the democrats.*"). [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 507, p. 508 and p. 510] So while these "workers' committees" could, in theory, be elected from the workplace Marx made no mention of this possibility (talk of "municipal councils" suggests that such a possibility was alien to him). It also should be noted that Marx was echoing Proudhon who, the year before, had argued that the clubs "*had to be organised. The organisation of popular societies was the fulcrum of democracy, the corner-stone of the republican order.*" [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 48] So, as with the soviets, even the idea of workers' clubs as a means of ensuring mass participation was first raised by anarchists (although, of course, inspired by working class self-organisation during the 1848 French revolution).

All this may seem a bit academic to many. Does it matter? After all, most Marxists today subscribe to some variation of Lenin's position and so, in some aspects, what Marx and Engels really thought is irrelevant. Indeed, it is possible that Marx faced with workers' councils, as he was with the Commune, would have embraced them (perhaps not, as he was dismissive of similar ideas expressed in the libertarian wing of the First International). After all, the Mensheviks used Marx's 1850s arguments to support their activities in the soviets in 1905 (while the Bolsheviks expressed hostility to both the policy and the soviets) and, of course, there is nothing in them to exclude such a position. What is important is that the idea that Marxists have always subscribed to the idea that a social revolution would be based on the workers' own combat organisations (be they unions, soviets or whatever) is a relatively new one to the ideology. If, as John Rees asserts, "*the socialist revolution must counterpose the soviet to parliament . . . precisely because it needs an organ which combines economic power - the power to strike and take control of the workplaces - with an insurrectionary bid for political power*" and "*breaking the old state*" then the ironic thing is that it was Bakunin, not Marx, who advocated such a position. [Op. Cit., p. 25] Given this, the shock which met Lenin's arguments in 1917 can be easily understood.

Rather than being rooted in the Marxist vision of revolution, as it has been in anarchism since at least the 1860s, workers councils have played, rhetoric aside, the role of fig-leaf for party power (libertarian Marxism being a notable exception). They have been embraced by its Leninist wing purely as a means of ensuring party power. Rather than being seen as the most important gain of a revolution as they allow mass participation, workers' councils have been seen, and used, simply as a means by which the party can seize power. Once this is achieved, the soviets can be marginalised and ignored without affecting the "proletarian" nature of the revolution in the eyes of the party:

*"while it is true that Lenin recognised the different functions and democratic raison d'être for both the soviets and his party, in the last analysis it was the party that was more important than the soviets. In other words, the party was the final repository of working-class sovereignty. Thus, Lenin did not seem to have been reflected on or have been particularly perturbed by the decline of the soviets after 1918."* [Samuel Farber, Before Stalinism, p. 212]

This perspective can be traced back to the lack of interest Marx and Engels expressed in the forms which a proletarian revolution would take, as exemplified by Engels comments on having to "*lop off*" aspects of the state "*inherited*" by the working class. The idea that the organisations people create in their struggle for freedom may help determine the outcome of the revolution is missing. Rather, the idea that any structure can be appropriated and (after

suitable modification) used to rebuild society is clear. This cannot but flow from the flawed Marxist theory of the state we discussed in [section H.3.7](#). If, as Marx and Engels argued, the state is simply an instrument of class rule then it becomes unproblematic to utilise the existing republican state or create a new form of state complete with representative structures. The Marxist perspective, moreover, cannot help take emphasis away from the mass working class organisations required to rebuild society in a socialist manner and place it on the group who will "*inherit*" the state and "*lop off*" its negative aspects, namely the party and the leaders in charge of both it and the new "workers' state."

This focus towards the party became, under Lenin (and the Bolsheviks in general) a purely instrumental perspective on workers' councils and other organisations. They were of use purely in so far as they allowed the Bolshevik party to take power (indeed Lenin constantly identified workers' power and soviet power with Bolshevik power and as Martin Buber noted, for Lenin "***All power to the Soviets!***" meant, at bottom, "***All power to the Party through the Soviets!***"). It can, therefore, be argued that his book **State and Revolution** was a means to use Marx and Engels to support his new found idea of the soviets as being the basis of creating a Bolshevik government rather than a principled defence of workers' councils as the framework of a socialist revolution. We discuss this issue in the [next section](#).

### H.3.11 Does Marxism aim to give power to workers organisations?

The short answer depends on which branch of Marxism you mean.

If you are talking about libertarian Marxists such as council communists, Situationists and so on, then the answer is a resounding "yes." Like anarchists, these Marxists see a social revolution as being based on working class self-management and, indeed, criticised (and broke with) Bolshevism precisely on this question. Some Marxists, like the **Socialist Party of Great Britain**, stay true to Marx and Engels and argue for using the ballot box (see [last section](#)) although this not exclude utilising such organs once political power is seized by those means. However, if we look at the mainstream Marxist tradition (namely Leninism), the answer has to be an empathic "no."

As we noted in [section H.1.4](#), anarchists have long argued that the organisations created by the working class in struggle would be the initial framework of a free society. These organs, created to resist capitalism and the state, would be the means to overthrow both as well as extending and defending the revolution (such bodies have included the "soviets" and "factory committees" of the Russian Revolution, the collectives in the Spanish revolution, popular assemblies of the 2001 Argentine revolt against neo-liberalism and the French Revolution, revolutionary unions and so on). Thus working class self-management is at the core of the anarchist vision and so we stress the importance (and autonomy) of working class organisations in the revolutionary movement and the revolution itself. Anarchists work within such bodies at the base, in the mass assemblies, and do not seek to replace their power with that of their own organisation (see [section J.3.6](#)).

Leninists, in contrast, have a different perspective on such bodies. Rather than placing them at the heart of the revolution, Leninism views them purely in instrumental terms - namely, as a means of achieving party power. Writing in 1907, Lenin argued that "*Social-Democratic Party organisations may, in case of necessity, participate in inter-party Soviets of Workers'*

*Delegates . . . and in congresses . . . of these organisations, and may organise such institutions, provided this is done on strict Party lines for the purpose of developing and strengthening the Social-Democratic Labour Party", that is "utilise" such organs "for the purpose of developing the Social-Democratic movement." Significantly, given the fate of the soviets post-1917, Lenin noted that the party "must bear in mind that if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous."* [Collected Works, vol. 12, pp. 143-4] Thus the means by which working class can manage their own affairs would become "superfluous" once the party was in power. How the working class could be considered the "ruling class" in such a society is hard to understand.

As Oscar Anweiler summarises in his account of the soviets during the two Russian Revolutions:

*"The drawback of the new 'soviet democracy' hailed by Lenin in 1906 is that he could envisage the soviets only as controlled organisations; for him they were instruments by which the party controlled the working masses, rather than true forms of a workers democracy. The basic contradiction of the Bolshevik soviet system - which purports to be a democracy of all working people but in reality recognises only the rule of one party - is already contained in Lenin's interpretation of the soviets during the first Russian revolution."* [The Soviets, p. 85]

Thirteen years later, Lenin repeated this same vision of party power as the goal of revolution in his infamous diatribe against "Left-wing" Communism (i.e. those Marxists close to anarchism) as we noted in [section H.3.3](#). The Bolsheviks had, by this stage, explicitly argued for party dictatorship and considered it a truism that the whole proletariat could not rule nor could the proletarian dictatorship be exercised by a mass working class organisation. Therefore, rather than seeing revolution being based upon the empowerment of working class organisation and the socialist society being based on this, Leninists see workers organisations in purely instrumental terms as the means of achieving a Leninist government:

*"With all the idealised glorification of the soviets as a new, higher, and more democratic type of state, Lenin's principal aim was revolutionary-strategic rather than social-structural . . . The slogan of the soviets was primarily tactical in nature; the soviets were in theory organs of mass democracy, but in practice tools for the Bolshevik Party. In 1917 Lenin outlined his transitional utopia without naming the definitive factor: the party. To understand the soviets' true place in Bolshevism, it is not enough, therefore, to accept the idealised picture in Lenin's state theory. Only an examination of the actual give-and-take between Bolsheviks and soviets during the revolution allows a correct understanding of their relationship."* [Oscar Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 160-1]

Simply out, Leninism confuses the party power and workers' power. An example of this "confusion" can be found in most Leninist works. For example, John Rees argues that *"the essence of the Bolsheviks' strategy . . . was to take power from the Provisional government and put it in the hands of popular organs of working class power - a point later made explicit by Trotsky in his **Lessons of October**."* ["In Defence of October", pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 73] However, in reality Lenin had always been clear that the essence of the Bolsheviks' strategy was the taking of power by the Bolshevik party **itself**. He explicitly argued for Bolshevik power during 1917, considering the soviets as the best means of

achieving this. He constantly equated Bolshevik rule with working class rule. Once in power, this identification did not change. As such, rather than argue for power to be placed into "*the hands of popular organs of working class power*" Lenin argued this only insofar as he was sure that these organs would then **immediately** pass that power into the hands of a Bolshevik government.

This explains his turn against the soviets after July 1917 when he considered it impossible for the Bolsheviks to gain a majority in them. It can be seen when the Bolshevik party's Central Committee opposed the idea of a coalition government immediately after the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October 1917. As it explained, "*a purely Bolshevik government*" was "*impossible to refuse*" since "*a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . handed power over to this government.*" [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, pp. 127-8] A mere ten days after the October Revolution the Left Social Revolutionaries charged that the Bolshevik government was ignoring the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets, established by the second Congress of Soviets as the supreme organ in society. Lenin dismissed their charges, stating that "*the new power could not take into account, in its activity, all the rigmarole which would set it on the road of the meticulous observation of all the formalities.*" [quoted by Frederick I. Kaplan, **Bolshevik Ideology and the Ethics of Soviet Labour**, p. 124] Clearly, the soviets did not have "*All Power*," they promptly handed it over to a Bolshevik government (and Lenin implies that he was not bound in any way to the supreme organ of the soviets in whose name he ruled). All of which places Rees' assertions into the proper context and shows that the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*" is used by Leninists in a radically different way than most people would understand by it! It also explains why soviets were disbanded if the opposition won majorities in them in early 1918 (see [section H.6.1](#)). The Bolsheviks only supported "*Soviet power*" when the soviets were Bolshevik. As was recognised by leading left-Menshevik Julius Martov, who argued that the Bolsheviks loved Soviets only when they were "*in the hands of the Bolshevik party.*" [quoted by Israel Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 174] Which explains Lenin's comment that "[*o*]nly the development of this war [*Kornilov's counter-revolutionary rebellion in August 1917*] can bring us to power but we must speak of this as little as possible in our agitation (remembering very well that even tomorrow events may put us in power and then we will not let it go)." [quoted by Neil Harding, **Leninism**, p. 253]

All this can be confirmed, unsurprisingly enough, by looking at the essay Rees references. When studying Trotsky's work we find the same instrumentalist approach to the question of the "*popular organs of working class power*." Yes, there is some discussion on whether soviets or "*some form of organisation*" like factory committees could become "*organs of state power*" but this is always within the context of party power. This is stated quite clearly by Trotsky in his essay when he argued that the "*essential aspect*" of Bolshevism was the "*training, tempering, and organisation of the proletarian vanguard as enables the latter to seize power, arms in hand.*" [**Lessons of October**, p. 167 and p. 127] As such, the vanguard seizes power, **not** "*popular organs of working class power*." Indeed, the idea that the working class can seize power itself is raised and dismissed:

*"But the events have proved that without a party capable of directing the proletarian revolution, the revolution itself is rendered impossible. The proletariat cannot seize power by a spontaneous uprising . . . there is nothing else that can serve the proletariat as a substitute for its own party."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 117]

Hence soviets were not considered as the "*essence*" of Bolshevism, rather the "*fundamental instrument of proletarian revolution is the party.*" Popular organs are seen purely in instrumental terms, with such organs of "workers' power" discussed in terms of the strategy and program of the party not in terms of the value that such organs have as forms of working class self-management of society. Why should he, when "*the task of the Communist party is the conquest of power for the purpose of reconstructing society?*" [Op. Cit., p. 118 and p. 174]

This can be clearly seen from Trotsky's discussion of the "October Revolution" of 1917 in **Lessons of October**. Commenting on the Bolshevik Party conference of April 1917, he stated that the "*whole of . . . [the] Conference was devoted to the following fundamental question: Are we heading toward the conquest of power in the name of the socialist revolution or are we helping (anybody and everybody) to complete the democratic revolution? . . . Lenin's position was this: . . . the capture of the soviet majority; the overthrow of the Provisional Government; the seizure of power through the soviets.*" [Op. Cit., p. 134] Note, **through** the soviets not **by** the soviets, thus showing that the Party would hold the real power, not the soviets of workers' delegates. This is confirmed when Trotsky stated that "*to prepare the insurrection and to carry it out under cover of preparing for the Second Soviet Congress and under the slogan of defending it, was of inestimable advantage to us*" and that it was "*one thing to prepare an armed insurrection under the naked slogan of the seizure of power by the party, and quite another thing to prepare and then carry out an insurrection under the slogan of defending the rights of the Congress of Soviets.*" The Soviet Congress just provided "*the legal cover*" for the Bolshevik plans. [Op. Cit., p. 134, p. 158 and p. 161]

Thus we have the "*seizure of power through the soviets*" with "*an armed insurrection*" for "*the seizure of power by the party*" being hidden by "*the slogan*" ("*the legal cover*") of defending the Soviets! Hardly a case of placing power in the hands of working class organisations. Trotsky **did** note that in 1917 the "*soviet had to either disappear entirely or take real power into their hands.*" However, he immediately added that "*they could take power . . . only as the dictatorship of the proletariat directed by a single party.*" [Op. Cit., p. 126] Clearly, the "*single party*" has the real power, **not** the soviets an unsurprisingly the rule of "*a single party*" also amounted to the soviets effectively disappearing as they quickly became mere ciphers it. Soon the "*direction*" by "*a single party*" became the dictatorship of that party **over** the soviets, which (it should be noted) Trotsky defended wholeheartedly when he wrote **Lessons of October** (and, indeed, into the 1930s).

This cannot be considered as a one-off. Trotsky repeated this analysis in his **History of the Russian Revolution**, when he stated that the "*question, what mass organisations were to serve the party for leadership in the insurrection, did not permit an a priori, much less a categorical, answer.*" Thus the "*mass organisations*" serve the party, not vice versa. This instrumentalist perspective can be seen when Trotsky noted that when "*the Bolsheviks got a majority in the Petrograd Soviet, and afterward a number of others,*" the "*phrase 'Power to the Soviets' was not, therefore, again removed from the order of the day, but received a new meaning: All power to the Bolshevik soviets.*" This meant that the "*party was launched on the road of armed insurrection through the soviets and in the name of the soviets.*" As he put it in his discussion of the July days in 1917, the army "*was far from ready to raise an insurrection in order to give power to the Bolshevik Party*" and so "*the state of popular consciousness . . . made impossible the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in July.*" [vol. 2, p. 303, p. 307, p. 78 and p. 81] So much for "*all power to the Soviets!*"! He even quotes Lenin: "*The Bolsheviks*

*have no right to await the Congress of Soviets. They ought to seize the power right now."* Ultimately, the "Central Committee adopted the motion of Lenin as the only thinkable one: to form a government of the Bolsheviks only." [vol. 3, pp. 131-2 and p. 299]

So where does this leave the assertion that the Bolsheviks aimed to put power into the hands of working class organisations? Clearly, Rees' summary of both Trotsky's essay and the "essence" of Bolshevism leave a lot to be desired. As can be seen, the "essence" of Trotsky's essay and of Bolshevism is the importance of party power, not workers' power (as recognised by another member of the SWP: "*The masses needed to be profoundly convinced that there was no alternative to Bolshevik power.*" [Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 265]). Trotsky even provided us with an analogy which effectively and simply refutes Rees' claims. "*Just as the blacksmith cannot seize the red hot iron in his naked hand,*" Trotsky asserted, "*so the proletariat cannot directly seize power; it has to have an organisation accommodated to this task.*" While paying lip service to the soviets as the organisation "*by means of which the proletariat can both overthrow the old power and replace it,*" he added that "*the soviets by themselves do not settle the question*" as they may "*serve different goals according to the programme and leadership. The soviets receive their programme from the party . . . the revolutionary party represents the brain of the class. The problem of conquering the power can be solved only by a definite combination of party with soviets.*" [**The History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 3, pp. 160-1 and p. 163]

Thus the key organisation was the party, **not** the mass organisations of the working class. Indeed, Trotsky was quite explicit that such organisations could only become the state form of the proletariat under the party dictatorship. Significantly, Trotsky fails to indicate what would happen when these two powers clash. Certainly Trotsky's role in the Russian revolution tells us that the power of the party was more important to him than democratic control by workers through mass bodies and as we have shown in [section H.3.8](#), Trotsky explicitly argued that a state was required to overcome the "*wavering*" in the working class which could be expressed by democratic decision making.

Given this legacy of viewing workers' organisations in purely instrumental terms, the opinion of Martov (the leading left-Menshevik during the Russian Revolution) seems appropriate. He argued that "*[a]t the moment when the revolutionary masses expressed their emancipation from the centuries old yoke of the old State by forming 'autonomous republics of Kronstadt' and trying Anarchist experiments such as 'workers' control,' etc. - at that moment, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest peasantry' (said to be incarnated in the real dictatorship of the opposed 'true' interpreters of the proletariat and the poorest peasantry: the chosen of Bolshevik Communism) could only consolidate itself by first dressing itself in such Anarchist and anti-State ideology.*" [**The State and Socialist Revolution**, p. 47] As can be seen, Martov had a point. As the text used as evidence that the Bolsheviks aimed to give power to workers organisations shows, this was **not** an aim of the Bolshevik party. Rather, such workers organs were seen purely as a means to the end of party power.

In contrast, anarchists argue for direct working class self-management of society. When we argue that working class organisations must be the framework of a free society we mean it. We do not equate party power with working class power or think that "*All power to the Soviets*" is possible if they immediately delegate that power to the leaders of the party. This is for obvious reasons:

*"If the revolutionary means are out of their hands, if they are in the hands of a techno-bureaucratic elite, then such an elite will be in a position to direct to their own benefit not only the course of the revolution, but the future society as well. If the proletariat are to ensure that an elite will not control the future society, they must prevent them from controlling the course of the revolution." [Alan Carter, Marx: A Radical Critique, p. 165]*

Thus the slogan "*All power to the Soviets*" for anarchists means exactly that - organs for the working class to run society directly, based on mandated, recallable delegates. This slogan fitted perfectly with our ideas, as anarchists had been arguing since the 1860's that such workers' councils were both a weapon of class struggle against capitalism and the framework of the future libertarian society. For the Bolshevik tradition, that slogan simply means that a Bolshevik government will be formed over and above the soviets. The difference is important, *"for the Anarchists declared, if 'power' really should belong to the soviets, it could not belong to the Bolshevik party, and if it should belong to that Party, as the Bolsheviks envisaged, it could not belong to the soviets."* [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 213] Reducing the soviets to simply executing the decrees of the central (Bolshevik) government and having their All-Russian Congress be able to recall the government (i.e. those with **real** power) does not equal "*all power*," quite the reverse - the soviets will simply be a fig-leaf for party power.

In summary, rather than aim to place power into the hands of workers' organisations, most Marxists do not. Their aim is to place power into the hands of the party. Workers' organisations are simply means to this end and, as the Bolshevik regime showed, if they clash with that goal, they will be simply be disbanded. However, we must stress that not all Marxist tendencies subscribe to this. The council communists, for example, broke with the Bolsheviks precisely over this issue, the difference between party and class power.

### H.3.12 Is big business the precondition for socialism?

A key idea in most forms of Marxism is that the evolution of capitalism itself will create the preconditions for socialism. This is because capitalism tends to result in big business and, correspondingly, increased numbers of workers subject to the "*socialised*" production process within the workplace. The conflict between the socialised means of production and their private ownership is at the heart of the Marxist case for socialism:

*"Then came the concentration of the means of production and of the producers in large workshops and manufactories, their transformation into actual socialised means of production and socialised producers. But the socialised producers and means of production and their products were still treated, after this change, just as they had been before . . . the owner of the instruments of labour . . . appropriated to himself . . . exclusively the product of the **labour of others**. Thus, the products now produced socially were not appropriated by those who actually set in motion the means of production and actually produced the commodities, but by the **capitalists** . . . The mode of production is subjected to this [individual or private] form of appropriation, although it abolishes the conditions upon which the latter rests.*

*"This contradiction, which gives to the new mode of production its capitalistic character, contains the germ of the whole of the social antagonisms of today."* [Engels, Marx-Engels Reader, pp. 703-4]

It is the business cycle of capitalism which show this contradiction between socialised production and capitalist appropriation the best. Indeed, the *"fact that the socialised organisation of production within the factory has developed so far that it has become incompatible with the anarchy of production in society, which exists side by side with and dominates it, is brought home to the capitalists themselves by the violent concentration of capital that occurs during crises."* The pressures of socialised production results in capitalists merging their properties *"in a particular branch of industry in a particular country"* into *"a trust, a union for the purpose of regulating production."* In this way, *"the production of capitalistic society capitulates to the production upon a definite plan of the invading socialistic society."* This *"transformation"* can take the form of *"joint-stock companies and trusts, or into state ownership."* The later does not change the *"capitalist relation"* although it does have *"concealed within it"* the *"technical conditions that form the elements of that solution."* This *"shows itself the way to accomplishing this revolution. The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into state property."* [Op. Cit., p. 709, p. 710, p. 711, p. 712 and p. 713]

Thus the centralisation and concentration of production into bigger and bigger units, into big business, is seen as the evidence of the need for socialism. It provides the objective grounding for socialism, and, in fact, this analysis is what makes Marxism *"scientific socialism."* This process explains how human society develops through time:

*"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness . . . At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces come in conflict with the existing relations of production or - what is but a legal expression for the same thing - with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed."* [Marx, Op. Cit., pp. 4-5]

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that socialism will come about due to tendencies inherent within the development of capitalism. The *"socialisation"* implied by collective labour within a firm grows steadily as capitalist companies grow larger and larger. The objective need for socialism is therefore created and so, for most Marxists, *"big is beautiful."* Indeed, some Leninists have invented terminology to describe this, which can be traced back to at least as far as Bolshevik (and Left Oppositionist) Evgeny Preobrazhensky (although his perspective, like most Leninist ones, has deep roots in the Social Democratic orthodoxy of the Second International). Preobrazhensky, as well as expounding the need for *"primitive socialist accumulation"* to build up Soviet Russia's industry, also discussed *"the contradiction of the law of planning and the law of value."* [Hillel Ticktin, *"Leon Trotsky and the Social Forces Leading to Bureaucracy, 1923-29"*, pp. 45-64, The Ideas of Leon

**Trotsky**, Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox (eds.), p. 45] Thus Marxists in this tradition (like Hillel Ticktin) argue that the increased size of capital means that more and more of the economy is subject to the despotism of the owners and managers of capital and so the "*anarchy*" of the market is slowly replaced with the conscious planning of resources. Marxists sometimes call this the "*objective socialisation of labour*" (to use Ernest Mandel's term). Thus there is a tendency for Marxists to see the increased size and power of big business as providing objective evidence for socialism, which will bring these socialistic tendencies within capitalism to full light and full development. Needless to say, most will argue that socialism, while developing planning fully, will replace the autocratic and hierarchical planning of big business with democratic, society-wide planning.

This position, for anarchists, has certain problems associated with it. One key drawback, as we discuss in the [next section](#), is it focuses attention away from the internal organisation within the workplace onto ownership and links between economic units. It ends up confusing capitalism with the market relations between firms rather than identifying it with its essence, wage slavery. This meant that many Marxists consider that the basis of a socialist economy was guaranteed once property was nationalised. This perspective tends to dismiss as irrelevant the way production is managed. The anarchist critique that this simply replaced a multitude of bosses with one, the state, was (and is) ignored. Rather than seeing socialism as being dependent on workers' management of production, this position ends up seeing socialism as being dependent on organisational links between workplaces, as exemplified by big business under capitalism. Thus the "*relations of production*" which matter are **not** those associated with wage labour but rather those associated with the market. This can be seen from the famous comment in **The Manifesto of the Communist Party** that the bourgeoisie "*cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.*" [Marx and Engels, **Op. Cit.**, p. 476] But the one relation of production it **cannot** revolutionise is the one generated by the wage labour at the heart of capitalism, the hierarchical relations at the point of production. As such, it is clear that by "*relations of production*" Marx and Engels meant something else than wage slavery, namely, the internal organisation of what they term "*socialised production*."

Capitalism is, in general, as dynamic as Marx and Engels stressed. It transforms the means of production, the structure of industry and the links between workplaces constantly. Yet it only modifies the form of the organisation of labour, not its content. No matter how it transforms machinery and the internal structure of companies, the workers are still wage slaves. At best, it simply transforms much of the hierarchy which governs the workforce into hired managers. This does not transform the fundamental social relationship of capitalism, however and so the "*relations of production*" which prefigure socialism are, precisely, those associated with the "*socialisation of the labour process*" which occurs **within** capitalism and are no way antagonistic to it.

This mirrors Marx's famous prediction that the capitalist mode of production produces "*the centralisation of capitals*" as one capitalist "*always strikes down many others.*" This leads to "*the further socialisation of labour and the further transformation of the soil and other means of production into socially exploited and therefore communal means of production takes on a new form.*" Thus capitalist progress itself objectively produces the necessity for socialism as it socialises the production process and produces a working class "*constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. The monopolisation of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production . .*

*. The centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated." [Capital, vol. 1, pp. 928-9]* Note, it is not the workers who organise themselves but rather they are "organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production." Even in his most libertarian work, "*The Civil War in France*", this perspective can be found. He, rightly, praised attempts by the Communards to set up co-operatives (although distinctly failed to mention Proudhon's obvious influence) but then went on to argue that the working class had "*no ready-made utopias to introduce*" and that "*to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies*" they simply had "*to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.*" [**Marx-Engels Reader**, pp. 635-6]

Then we have Marx, in his polemic against Proudhon, arguing that social relations "*are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 6, p. 166] On the face of it, this had better **not** be true. After all, the aim of socialism is to expropriate the property of the industrial capitalist. If the social relationships **are** dependent on the productive forces then, clearly, socialism is impossible as it will have to be based, initially, on the legacy of capitalism. Fortunately, the way a workplace is managed is not predetermined by the technological base of society. As is obvious, a steam-mill can be operated by a co-operative, so making the industrial capitalist redundant. That a given technological basis (or productive forces) can produce many different social and political systems can easily be seen from history. Murray Bookchin gives one example:

*"Technics . . . does not fully or even adequately account for the institutional differences between a fairly democratic federation such as the Iroquois and a highly despotic empire such as the Inca. From a strictly instrumental viewpoint, the two structures were supported by almost identical 'tool kits.' Both engaged in horticultural practices that were organised around primitive implements and wooden hoes. Their weaving and metalworking techniques were very similar . . . At the community level, Iroquois and Inca populations were immensely similar . . .*

*"Yet at the political level of social life, a democratic confederal structure of five woodland tribes obviously differs decisively from a centralised, despotic structure of mountain Indian chiefdoms. The former, a highly libertarian confederation . . . The latter, a massively authoritarian state . . . Communal management of resources and produce among the Iroquois tribes occurred at the clan level. By contrast, Inca resources were largely state-owned, and much of the empire's produce was simply confiscation . . . and their redistribution from central and local storehouses. The Iroquois worked together freely . . . the Inca peasantry provided corvee labour to a patently exploitative priesthood and state apparatus under a nearly industrial system of management."* [**The Ecology of Freedom**, pp. 331-2]

Marx's claim that a given technological level implies a specific social structure is wrong. However, it does suggest that our comments that, for Marx and Engels, the new "*social relationships*" which develop under capitalism which imply socialism are relations between

workplaces, **not** those between individuals and so classes are correct. The implications of this position became clear during the Russian revolution.

Later Marxists built upon this "scientific" groundwork. Lenin, for example, argued that "*the difference between a socialist revolution and a bourgeois revolution is that in the latter case there are ready made forms of capitalist relationships; Soviet power [in Russia] does not inherit such ready made relationships, if we leave out of account the most developed forms of capitalism, which, strictly speaking, extended to a small top layer of industry and hardly touched agriculture.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 90] Thus, for Lenin, "socialist" relationships are generated within big business, relationships "socialism" would "inherit" and universalise. As such, his comments fit in with the analysis of Marx and Engels we have presented above. However, his comments also reveal that Lenin had no idea that socialism meant the transformation of the relations of production, i.e. workers managing their own activity. This, undoubtedly, explains the systematic undermining of the factory committee movement by the Bolsheviks in favour of state control (see Maurice Brinton's classic account of this process, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**).

The idea that socialism involved simply taking over the state and nationalising the "*objectively socialised*" means of production can be seen in both mainstream social-democracy and its Leninist child. Rudolf Hilferding argued that capitalism was evolving into a highly centralised economy, run by big banks and big firms. All that was required to turn this into socialism would be its nationalisation:

*"Once finance capital has brought the most important branches of production under its control, it is enough for society, through its conscious executive organ - the state conquered by the working class - to seize finance capital in order to gain immediate control of these branches of production . . . taking possession of six large Berlin banks would . . . greatly facilitate the initial phases of socialist policy during the transition period, when capitalist accounting might still prove useful."* [**Finance Capital**, pp. 367-8]

Lenin basically disagreed with this only in-so-far as the party of the proletariat would take power via revolution rather than by election ("*the state conquered by the working class*" equals the election of a socialist party). Lenin took it for granted that the difference between Marxists and anarchists is that "*the former stand for centralised, large-scale communist production, while the latter stand for disconnected small production.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 23, p. 325] The obvious implication of this is that anarchist views "*express, not the future of bourgeois society, which is striving with irresistible force towards the socialisation of labour, but the present and even the past of that society, the domination of blind chance over the scattered and isolated small producer.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 10, p. 73]

Lenin applied this perspective during the Russian Revolution. For example, he argued in 1917 that his immediate aim was for a "*state capitalist*" economy, this being a necessary stage to socialism. As he put it, "*socialism is merely the next step forward from state-capitalist monopoly . . . socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 25, p. 358] The Bolshevik road to "socialism" ran through the terrain of state capitalism and, in fact, simply built upon its institutionalised means of allocating recourses and structuring industry. As Lenin put it, "*the modern state possesses an apparatus which has extremely close connections with the banks and syndicates [i.e., trusts], an apparatus which*

*performs an enormous amount of accounting and registration work . . . This apparatus must not, and should not, be smashed. It must be wrestled from the control of the capitalists," it "must be subordinated to the proletarian Soviets" and "it must be expanded, made more comprehensive, and nation-wide." This meant that the Bolsheviks would "not invent the organisational form of work, but take it ready-made from capitalism" and "borrow the best models furnished by the advanced countries."* [Op. Cit., vol. 26, pp. 105-6 and p. 110]

The institutional framework of capitalism would be utilised as the principal (almost exclusive) instruments of "socialist" transformation. "**Without big banks Socialism would be impossible,**" argued Lenin, as they *"are the 'state apparatus' which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready-made from capitalism; our task here is merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. A single State Bank, the biggest of the big . . . will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus. This will be country-wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods."* While this is *"not fully a state apparatus under capitalism,"* it *"will be so with us, under socialism."* For Lenin, building socialism was easy. This *"nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus"* would be created *"at one stroke, by a single decree."* [Op. Cit., p. 106] Once in power, the Bolsheviks implemented this vision of socialism being built upon the institutions created by monopoly capitalism. Moreover, Lenin quickly started to advocate and implement the most sophisticated capitalist methods of organising labour, including *"one-man management"* of production, piece-rates and Taylorism (*"scientific management"*). This was not done accidentally or because no alternative existed (as we discuss in [section H.6.2](#), workers were organising federations of factory committees which could have been, as anarchists argued at the time, the basis of a genuine socialist economy).

As Gustav Landauer commented, when mainstream Marxists *"call the capitalist factory system a social production . . . we know the real implications of their socialist forms of labour."* [For Socialism, p. 70] As can be seen, this glorification of large-scale, state-capitalist structures can be traced back to Marx and Engels, while Lenin's support for capitalist production techniques can be explained by mainstream Marxism's lack of focus on the social relationships at the point of production.

For anarchists, the idea that socialism can be built on the framework provided to us by capitalism is simply ridiculous. Capitalism has developed industry and technology to further the ends of those with power, namely capitalists and managers. Why should they use that power to develop technology and industrial structures which lead to workers' self-management and power rather than technologies and structures which enhance their own position vis-À-vis their workers and society as a whole? As such, technological and industrial development is not "neutral" or just the "application of science." They are shaped by class struggle and class interest and cannot be used for different ends. Simply put, socialism will need to develop **new** forms of economic organisation based on socialist principles. The concept that monopoly capitalism paves the way for socialist society is rooted in the false assumption that the forms of social organisation accompanying capital concentration are identical with the socialisation of production, that the structures associated with collective labour under capitalism are the same as those required under socialism is achieve **genuine** socialisation. This false assumption, as can be seen, goes back to Engels and was shared by both Social Democracy and Leninism despite their other differences.

While anarchists are inspired by a vision of a non-capitalist, decentralised, diverse society based on appropriate technology and appropriate scale, mainstream Marxism is not. Rather, it sees the problem with capitalism is that its institutions are not centralised and big enough. As Alexander Berkman correctly argues:

*"The role of industrial decentralisation in the revolution is unfortunately too little appreciated. . . Most people are still in the thraldom of the Marxian dogma that centralisation is 'more efficient and economical.' They close their eyes to the fact that the alleged 'economy' is achieved at the cost of the workers' limb and life, that the 'efficiency' degrades him to a mere industrial cog, deadens his soul, kills his body. Furthermore, in a system of centralisation the administration of industry becomes constantly merged in fewer hands, producing a powerful bureaucracy of industrial overlords. It would indeed be the sheerest irony if the revolution were to aim at such a result. It would mean the creation of a new master class." [What is Anarchism?, p. 229]*

That mainstream Marxism is soaked in capitalist ideology can be seen from Lenin's comments that when "*the separate establishments are amalgamated into a single syndicate, this economy [of production] can attain tremendous proportions, as economic science teaches us.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 25, p. 344] Yes, **capitalist** economic science, based on **capitalist** definitions of efficiency and economy and on **capitalist** criteria! That Bolshevism bases itself on centralised, large scale industry because it is more "efficient" and "economic" suggests nothing less than that its "socialism" will be based on the same priorities of capitalism. This can be seen from Lenin's idea that Russia had to learn from the advanced capitalist countries, that there was only one way to develop production and that was by adopting capitalist methods of "rationalisation" and management. Thus, for Lenin in early 1918 "*our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not to shrink from adopting dictorial methods to hasten the copying of it.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 340] In the words of Luigi Fabbri:

*"Marxist communists, especially Russian ones, are beguiled by the distant mirage of big industry in the West or America and mistake for a system of production what is only a typically capitalist means of speculation, a means of exercising oppression all the more securely; and they do not appreciate that that sort of centralisation, far from fulfilling the real needs of production, is, on the contrary, precisely what restricts it, obstructs it and applies a brake to it in the interests of capital.*

*"Whenever [they] talk about 'necessity of production' they make no distinction between those necessities upon which hinge the procurement of a greater quantity and higher quality of products - this being all that matters from the social and communist point of view - and the necessities inherent in the bourgeois regime, the capitalists' necessity to make more profit even should it mean producing less to do so. If capitalism tends to centralise its operations, it does so not for the sake of production, but only for the sake of making and accumulating more money."* ["Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism", pp. 13-49, **The Poverty of Statism**, Albert Meltzer (ed.), pp. 21-22]

Efficiency, in other words, does not exist independently of a given society or economy. What is considered "efficient" under capitalism may be the worse form of inefficiency in a free society. The idea that socialism may have **different** priorities, need **different** methods of

organising production, have **different** visions of how an economy was structured than capitalism, is absent in mainstream Marxism. Lenin thought that the institutions of bourgeois economic power, industrial structure and capitalist technology and techniques could be "captured" and used for other ends. Ultimately, though, capitalist means and organisations can only generate capitalist ends. It is significant that the "*one-man management,*" piece-work, Taylorism, etc. advocated and implemented under Lenin are usually listed by his followers as evils of Stalinism and as proof of its anti-socialist nature.

Equally, it can be argued that part of the reason why large capitalist firms can "plan" production on a large scale is because they reduce the decision making criteria to a few variables, the most significant being profit and loss. That such simplification of input data may result in decisions which harm people and the environment goes without a saying. *"The lack of context and particularity,"* James C. Scott correctly notes, *"is not an oversight; it is the necessary first premise of any large-scale planning exercise. To the degree that the subjects can be treated as standardised units, the power of resolution in the planning exercise is enhanced. Questions posed within these strict confines can have definitive, quantitative answers. The same logic applies to the transformation of the natural world. Questions about the volume of commercial wood or the yield of wheat in bushels permit more precise calculations than questions about, say, the quality of the soil, the versatility and taste of the grain, or the well-being of the community. The discipline of economics achieves its formidable resolving power by transforming what might otherwise be considered qualitative matters into quantitative issues with a single metric and, as it were, a bottom line: profit or loss."* [Seeing like a State, p. 346] Whether a socialist society could factor in all the important inputs which capitalism ignores within an even more centralised planning structure is an important question. It is extremely doubtful that there could be a positive answer to it. This does not mean, we just stress, that anarchists argue exclusively for "small-scale" production as many Marxists, like Lenin, assert (as we prove in [section I.3.8](#), anarchists have always argued for **appropriate** levels of production and scale). It is simply to raise the possibility of what works under capitalism may be undesirable from a perspective which values people and planet instead of power and profit.

As should be obvious, anarchism is based on critical evaluation of technology and industrial structure, rejecting the whole capitalist notion of "progress" which has always been part of justifying the inhumanities of the status quo. Just because something is rewarded by capitalism it does not mean that it makes sense from a human or ecological perspective. This informs our vision of a free society and the current struggle. We have long argued that that capitalist methods cannot be used for socialist ends. In our battle to democratise and socialise the workplace, in our awareness of the importance of collective initiatives by the direct producers in transforming their work situation, we show that factories are not merely sites of production, but also of reproduction - the reproduction of a certain structure of social relations based on the division between those who give orders and those who take them, between those who direct and those who execute.

It goes without saying that anarchists recognise that a social revolution will have to start with the industry and technology which is left to it by capitalism and that this will have to be expropriated by the working class (this expropriation will, of course, involve transforming it and, in all likelihood, rejecting of numerous technologies, techniques and practices considered as "efficient" under capitalism). This is **not** the issue. The issue is who expropriates it and what happens to it next. For anarchists, the means of life are expropriated directly by society, for most Marxists they are expropriated by the state. For anarchists, such

expropriation is based workers' self-management and so the fundamental capitalist "*relation of production*" (wage labour) is abolished. For most Marxists, state ownership of production is considered sufficient to ensure the end of capitalism (with, if we are lucky, some form of "*workers' control*" over those state officials who do management production - see [section H.3.14](#)).

In contrast to the mainstream Marxist vision of socialism being based around the institutions inherited from capitalism, anarchists have raised the idea that the "*free commune*" would be the "*medium in which the ideas of modern Socialism may come to realisation.*" These "*communes would federate*" into wider groupings. Labour unions (or other working class organs created in the class struggle such as factory committees) were "*not only an instrument for the improvement of the conditions of labour, but also . . . an organisation which might . . . take into its hands the management of production.*" Large labour associations would "*come into existence for the inter-communal service[s].*" Such communes and workers' organisations as the basis of "*Socialist forms of life could find a much easier realisation*" than the "*seizure of all industrial property by the State, and the State organisation of agriculture and industry.*" Thus railway networks "*could be much better handled by a Federated Union of railway employees, than by a State organisation.*" Combined with co-operation "*both for production and for distribution, both in industry and agriculture,*" workers' self-management of production would create "*samples of the bricks*" of the future society ("*even samples of some of its rooms*"). [Kropotkin, **The Conquest of Bread**, pp. 21-23]

This means that anarchists also root our arguments for socialism in a scientific analysis of tendencies within capitalism. However, in opposition to the analysis of mainstream Marxism which focuses on the objective tendencies within capitalist development, anarchists emphasize the **oppositional** nature of socialism to capitalism. Both the "*law of value*" and the "*law of planning*" are tendencies **within** capitalism, that is aspects of capitalism. Anarchists encourage class struggle, the direct conflict of working class people against the workings of all capitalism's "laws". This struggle produces **mutual aid** and the awareness that we can care best for our own welfare if we **unite** with others - what we can loosely term the "*law of co-operation*" or "*law of mutual aid*". This law, in contrast to the Marxian "*law of planning*" is based on working class subjectively and develops within society only in **opposition** to capitalism. As such, it provides the necessary understanding of where socialism will come from, from **below**, in the spontaneous self-activity of the oppressed fighting for their freedom. This means that the basic structures of socialism will be the organs created by working class people in their struggles against exploitation and oppression (see [section I.2.3](#) for more details). Gustav Landauer's basic insight is correct (if his means were not totally so) when he wrote that "*Socialism will not grow out of capitalism but away from it*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 140] In other words, tendencies **opposed** to capitalism rather than ones which are part and parcel of it.

Anarchism's recognition of the importance of these tendencies towards mutual aid within capitalism is a key to understanding what anarchists do in the here and now, as will be discussed in [section J](#). In addition, it also laid the foundation of understanding the nature of an anarchist society and what creates the framework of such a society in the here and now. Anarchists do not abstractly place a better society (anarchy) against the current, oppressive one. Instead, we analyze what tendencies exist within current society and encourage those which empower and liberate people. Based on these tendencies, anarchists propose a society which develops them to their logical conclusion. Therefore an anarchist society is created not through the developments within capitalism, but in social struggle against it.

### H.3.13 Why is state socialism just state capitalism?

For anarchists, the idea that socialism can be achieved via state ownership is simply ridiculous. For reasons which will become abundantly clear, anarchists argue that any such "*socialist*" system would simply be a form of "*state capitalism*." Such a regime would not fundamentally change the position of the working class, whose members would simply be wage slaves to the state bureaucracy rather than to the capitalist class. Marxism would, as Kropotkin predicted, be "*the worship of the State, of authority and of State Socialism, which is in reality nothing but State capitalism.*" [quoted by Ruth Kinna, "*Kropotkin's theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context*", pp. 259-283, **International Review of Social History**, No. 40, p. 262]

However, before beginning our discussion of why anarchists think this we need to clarify our terminology. This is because the expression "*state capitalism*" has three distinct, if related, meanings in socialist (particularly Marxist) thought. Firstly, "*state capitalism*" was/is used to describe the current system of big business subject to extensive state control (particularly if, as in war, the capitalist state accrues **extensive** powers over industry). Secondly, it was used by Lenin to describe his immediate aims after the October Revolution, namely a regime in which the capitalists would remain but would be subject to a system of state control inherited by the new "*proletarian*" state from the old capitalist one. The third use of the term is to signify a regime in which the state **replaces** the capitalist class **totally** via nationalisation of the means of production. In such a regime, the state would own, manage and accumulate capital rather than individual capitalists.

Anarchists are opposed to all three systems described by the term "*state capitalism*." Here we concentrate on the third definition, arguing that state socialism would be better described as "*state capitalism*" as state ownership of the means of life does not get to the heart of capitalism, namely wage labour. Rather it simply replaces private bosses with the state and changes the form of property (from private to state property) rather than getting rid of it.

The idea that socialism simply equals state ownership (nationalisation) is easy to find in the works of Marxism. The **Communist Manifesto**, for example, states that the "*proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production into the hands of the State.*" This meant the "*[c]entralisation of credit in the hands of the State, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly,*" the "*[c]entralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State,*" "*[e]xtension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State*" and the "*[e]stablishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.*" [Marx and Engels, **Selected Works**, pp. 52-3] Thus "*feudal estates . . . mines, pits, and so forth, would become property of the state*" as well as "*[a]ll means of transport,*" with "*the running of large-scale industry and the railways by the state.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 7, p. 3, p. 4 and p. 299]

Engels repeats this formula thirty-two years later in **Socialism: Utopian and Scientific** by asserting that capitalism itself "*forces on more and more the transformation of the vast means of production, already socialised, into state property. The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into state property.*" Socialism is **not** equated with state ownership of productive forces by a capitalist state, "*but concealed within it are the technical conditions that form the elements of that solution*" to the social problem. It simply "*shows itself the way to accomplishing this revolution. The proletariat seizes political power and*

*turns the means of production into state property.*" Thus state ownership after the proletariat seizes power is the basis of socialism, when by this "first act" of the revolution the state "*really constitutes itself as the representative of the whole of society.*" [Marx-Engels Reader, p. 713, p. 712 and p. 713]

What is significant from these programmatic statements on the first steps of socialism is the total non-discussion of what is happening at the point of production, the non-discussion of the social relations in the workplace. Rather we are subjected to discussion of "*the contradiction between socialised production and capitalist appropriation*" and claims that while there is "*socialised organisation of production within the factory,*" this has become "*incompatible with the anarchy of production in society.*" The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that "socialism" will inherit, without change, the "*socialised*" workplace of capitalism and that the fundamental change is that of ownership: "*The proletariat seized the public power, and by means of this transforms the socialised means of production . . . into public property. By this act, the proletariat frees the means of production from the character of capital they have thus far borne.*" [Engels, **Op. Cit.**, p. 709 and p. 717]

That the Marxist movement came to see state ownership rather than workers' management of production as the key issue is hardly surprising. Thus we find leading Social-Democrats arguing that socialism basically meant the state, under Social-Democratic control of course, acquiring the means of production and nationalising them. Rudolf Hilferding presented what was Marxist orthodoxy at the time when he argued that in "*a communist society*" production "*is consciously determined by the social central organ,*" which would decide "*what is to be produced and how much, where and by whom.*" While this information is determined by the market forces under capitalism, in socialism it "*is given to the members of the socialist society by their authorities . . . we must derive the undisturbed progress of the socialist economy from the laws, ordinances and regulations of socialist authorities.*" [quoted by Nikolai Bukharin, **Economy Theory of the Leisure Class**, p. 157] The Bolsheviks inherited this concept of "socialism" and implemented it, with terrible results.

This vision of society in which the lives of the population are controlled by "*authorities*" in a "*social central organ*" which tells the workers what to do, while in line with the **Communist Manifesto**, seems less than appealing. It also shows why state socialism is not socialism at all. Thus George Barrett:

*"If instead of the present capitalist class there were a set of officials appointed by the Government and set in a position to control our factories, it would bring about no revolutionary change. The officials would have to be paid, and we may depend that, in their privileged positions, they would expect good remuneration. The politicians would have to be paid, and we already know their tastes. You would, in fact, have a non-productive class dictating to the producers the conditions upon which they were allowed to use the means of production. As this is exactly what is wrong with the present system of society, we can see that State control would be no remedy, while it would bring with it a host of new troubles . . . under a governmental system of society, whether it is the capitalism of today or a more a perfected Government control of the Socialist State, the essential relationship between the governed and the governing, the worker and the controller, will be the same; and this relationship so long as it lasts can be maintained only by the bloody brutality of the policeman's bludgeon and the soldier's rifle."* [The Anarchist Revolution, pp. 8-9]

The key to seeing why state socialism is simply state capitalism can be found in the lack of change in the social relationships at the point of production. The workers are still wage slaves, employed by the state and subject to its orders. As Lenin stressed in **State and Revolution**, under Marxist Socialism "*[a]ll citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state . . . All citizens become employees and workers of a single country-wide state 'syndicate' . . . The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labour and pay.*" [Collected Works, vol. 25, pp. 473-4] Given that Engels had argued, against anarchism, that a factory required subordination, authority, lack of freedom and "*a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation,*" Lenin's idea of turning the world into one big factory takes on an extremely frightening nature. [Marx-Engels Reader, p. 731] A reality which one anarchist described in 1923 as being the case in Lenin's Russia:

*"The nationalisation of industry, removing the workers from the hands of individual capitalists, delivered them to the yet more rapacious hands of a single, ever-present capitalist boss, the State. The relations between the workers and this new boss are the same as earlier relations between labour and capital, with the sole difference that the Communist boss, the State, not only exploits the workers, but also punishes them himself . . . Wage labour has remained what it was before, except that it has taken on the character of an obligation to the State . . . It is clear that in all this we are dealing with a simple substitution of State capitalism for private capitalism."* [Peter Arshinov, **History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 71]

All of which makes Bakunin's comments seem justified (as well as stunningly accurate):

*"Labour financed by the State - such is the fundamental principle of authoritarian Communism, of State Socialism. The State, having become the sole proprietor . . . will have become sole capitalist, banker, money-lender, organiser, director of all national work, and the distributor of its profits."* [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 293]

Such a system, based on those countries "*where modern capitalist development has reached its highest point of development*" would see "*the gradual or violent expropriation of the present landlords and capitalists, or of the appropriation of all land and capital by the State. In order to be able to carry out its great economic and social mission, this State will have to be very far-reaching, very powerful and highly centralised. It will administer and supervise agriculture by means of its appointed managers, who will command armies of rural workers organised and disciplined for that purpose. At the same time, it will set up a single bank on the ruins of all existing banks.*" Such a system, Bakunin correctly predicted, would be "*a barracks regime for the proletariat, in which a standardised mass of men and women workers would wake, sleep, work and live by rote; a regime of privilege for the able and the clever.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 258 and p. 259]

Proudhon, likewise was well aware that state ownership did not mean the end of private property, rather it meant a change in who ordered the working class about. "*We do not want,*" he stated, "*to see the State confiscate the mines, canals and railways; that would be to add to monarchy, and more wage slavery. We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers' associations*" which would be the start of a "*vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic social Republic.*" He contrasted workers' associations run by and for their members to those

*"subsidiised, commanded and directed by the State,"* which would crush *"all liberty and all wealth, precisely as the great limited companies are doing."* [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 62 and p. 105]

Simply put, if workers did not directly manage their own work then it matters little who formally owns the workplaces in which they toil. As Maurice Brinton argued, libertarian socialists *"hold that the 'relations of production' - the relations which individuals or groups enter into with one another in the process of producing wealth - are the essential foundations of any society. A certain pattern of relations of production is the common denominator of all class societies. This pattern is one in which the producer does not dominate the means of production but on the contrary both is 'separated from them' and from the products of his [or her] own labour. In all class societies the producer is in a position of subordination to those who manage the productive process. Workers' management of production - implying as it does the total domination of the producer over the productive process - is not for us a marginal matter. It is the core of our politics. It is the only means whereby authoritarian (order-giving, order-taking) relations in production can be transcended and a free, communist or anarchist, society introduced."* He went on to note that *"the means of production may change hands (passing for instance from private hands into those of a bureaucracy, collectively owning them) without this revolutionising the relations of production. Under such circumstances - and whatever the formal status of property - the society is still a class society for production is still managed by an agency other than the producers themselves. Property relations, in other words, do not necessarily reflect the relations of production. They may serve to mask them - and in fact they often have."* [The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, pp. vii-vii]

As such, for anarchists (and libertarian Marxists) the idea that state ownership of the means of life (the land, workplaces, factories, etc.) is the basis of socialism is simply wrong. Therefore, *"Anarchism cannot look upon the coming revolution as a mere substitution . . . of the State as the universal capitalist for the present capitalists."* [Kropotkin, Evolution and Environment, p. 106] Given that the *"State organisation having always been . . . the instrument for establishing monopolies in favour of the ruling minorities, [it] cannot be made to work for the destruction of these monopolies. The anarchists consider, therefore, that to hand over to the State all the main sources of economic life - the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on - as also the management of all the main branches of industry . . . would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism."* [Kropotkin, Anarchism, p. 286] Needless to say, a society which was not democratic in the workplace would not remain democratic politically either. Either democracy would become as formal as it is within any capitalist republic or it would be replaced by dictatorship. So, without a firm base in the direct management of production, any "socialist" society would see working class social power (*"political power"*) and liberty wither and die, just like a flower ripped out of the soil.

Unsurprisingly, given all this, we discover throughout history the co-existence of private and state property. Indeed, the nationalisation of key services and industries has been implemented under all kinds of capitalist governments and within all kinds of capitalist states (which proves the non-socialist nature of state ownership). Moreover, anarchists can point to specific events where the capitalist class has used nationalisation to undermine revolutionary gains by the working class. The best example by far is in the Spanish Revolution, when the Catalan government used nationalisation against the wave of spontaneous, anarchist inspired, collectivisation which had placed most of industry into the direct hands of the workers. The

government, under the guise of legalising the gains of the workers, placed them under state ownership to stop their development, ensure hierarchical control and so class society. A similar process occurred during the Russian Revolution under the Bolsheviks. Significantly, "many managers, at least those who remained, appear to have preferred nationalisation (state control) to workers' control and co-operated with Bolshevik commissars to introduce it. Their motives are not too difficult to understand . . . The issue of who runs the plants - who makes decisions - is, and probably always will be, the crucial question for managers in any industrial relations system." [Jay B. Sorenson, **The Life and Death of Soviet Trade Unionism**, pp. 67-8] As we discuss in the [next section](#), the managers and capitalists were not the only ones who disliked "workers' control," the Bolsheviks did so as well, and they ensured that it was marginalised within a centralised system of state control based on nationalisation.

As such, anarchists think that a utterly false dichotomy has been built up in discussions of socialism, one which has served the interests of both capitalists and state bureaucrats. This dichotomy is simply that the economic choices available to humanity are "private" ownership of productive means (capitalism), or state ownership of productive means (usually defined as "socialism"). In this manner, capitalist nations used the Soviet Union, and continue to use autocracies like North Korea, China, and Cuba as examples of the evils of "public" ownership of productive assets. While the hostility of the capitalist class to such regimes is often used by Leninists as a rationale to defend them (as "*degenerated workers' states*", to use the Trotskyist term) this is a radically false conclusion. As one anarchist argued in 1940 against Trotsky (who first raised this notion):

*"Expropriation of the capitalist class is naturally terrifying to 'the bourgeoisie of the whole world,' but that does not prove anything about a workers' state . . . In Stalinist Russia expropriation is carried out . . . by, and ultimately for the benefit of, the bureaucracy, not by the workers at all. The bourgeoisie are afraid of expropriation, of power passing out of their hands, whoever seizes it from them. They will defend their property against any class or clique. The fact that they are indignant [about Stalinism] proves their fear - it tells us nothing at all about the agents inspiring that fear."* [J.H., *"The Fourth International"*, pp. 37-43, **The Left and World War II**, Vernon Richards (ed.), pp. 41-2]

Anarchists see little distinction between "private" ownership of the means of life and "state" ownership. This is because the state is a highly centralised structure specifically designed to exclude mass participation and so, therefore, necessarily composed of a ruling administrative body. As such, the "public" cannot actually "own" the property the state claims to hold in its name. The ownership and thus control of the productive means is then in the hands of a ruling elite, the state administration (i.e. bureaucracy). The "*means of wealth production*" are "*owned by the state which represents, as always, a privileged class - the bureaucracy*." The workers "*do not either individually or collectively own anything, and so, as elsewhere, are compelled to sell their labour power to the employer, in this case the state.*" [*"USSR - The Anarchist Position"*, pp. 21-24, **Op. Cit.**, p. 23] Thus, the means of production and land of a state "socialist" regime are **not** publicly owned - rather, they are owned by a bureaucratic elite, **in the name of the people**, a subtle but important distinction. As one Chinese anarchist put it:

*"Marxian socialism advocates the centralisation not only of political power but also of capital. The centralisation of political power is dangerous enough in itself; add to*

*that the placing of all sources of wealth in the hands of the government, and the so-called state socialism becomes merely state capitalism, with the state as the owner of the means of production and the workers as its labourers, who hand over the value produced by their labour. The bureaucrats are the masters, the workers their slaves. Even though they advocate a state of the dictatorship of workers, the rulers are bureaucrats who do not labour, while workers are the sole producers. Therefore, the suffering of workers under state socialism is no different from that under private capitalism." [Ou Shengbai, quoted by Arif Dirlik, **Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution**, p. 224]*

In this fashion, decisions about the allocation and use of the productive assets are not made by the people themselves, but by the administration, by economic planners. Similarly, in "private" capitalist economies, economic decisions are made by a coterie of managers. In both cases the managers make decisions which reflect their own interests and the interests of the owners (be it shareholders or the state bureaucracy) and **not** the workers involved or society as a whole. In both cases, economic decision-making is top-down in nature, made by an elite of administrators - bureaucrats in the state socialist economy, capitalists or managers in the "private" capitalist economy. The much-lauded distinction of capitalism is that unlike the monolithic, centralised state socialist bureaucracy it has a **choice** of bosses (and choosing a master is not freedom). And given the similarities in the relations of production between capitalism and state "socialism," the obvious inequalities in wealth in so-called "socialist" states are easily explained. The relations of production and the relations of distribution are inter-linked and so inequality in terms of power in production means inequality in control of the social product, which will be reflected in inequality in terms of wealth. The mode of distributing the social product is inseparable from the mode of production and its social relationships. Which shows the fundamentally confused nature of Trotsky's attempts to denounce the Stalinist regime's privileges as "bourgeois" while defending its "socialist" economic base (see Cornelius Castoriadis, *"The Relations of Production in Russia"*, pp. 107-158, **Political and Social Writings**, vol. 1).

In other words, private property exists if some individuals (or groups) control/own things which are used by other people. This means, unsurprising, that state ownership is just a form of property rather than the negation of it. If you have a highly centralised structure (as the state is) which plans and decides about all things within production, then this central administrative would be the real owner because it has the exclusive right to decide how things are used, **not** those using them. The existence of this central administrative strata excludes the abolition of property, replacing socialism or communism with state owned "property," i.e. **state** capitalism. As such, state ownership does **not** end wage labour and, therefore, social inequalities in terms of wealth and access to resources. Workers are still order-takers under state ownership (whose bureaucrats control the product of their labour and determine who gets what). The only difference between workers under private property and state property is the person telling them what to do. Simply put, the capitalist or company appointed manager is replaced by a state appointed one.

As anarcho-syndicalist Tom Brown stressed, when "*the many control the means whereby they live, they will do so by abolishing private ownership and establishing common ownership of the means of production, with workers' control of industry.*" However, this is "*not to be confused with nationalisation and state control*" as "*ownership is, in theory, said to be vested in the people*" but, in fact "*control is in the hands of a small class of bureaucrats.*" Then "*common ownership does not exist, but the labour market and wage labour go on, the worker*

*remaining a wage slave to State capitalism.*" Simply put, common ownership "demands common control. This is possible only in a condition of industrial democracy by workers' control." [Syndicalism, p. 94] In summary:

*"Nationalisation is not Socialisation, but State Capitalism . . . Socialisation . . . is not State ownership, but the common, social ownership of the means of production, and social ownership implies control by the producers, not by new bosses. It implies Workers' Control of Industry - and that is Syndicalism."* [Op. Cit., p. 111]

However, many Marxists (in particular Leninists) state they are in favour of both state ownership **and** "workers' control." As we discuss in more depth in [next section](#), while they mean the same thing as anarchists do by the first term, they have a radically different meaning for the second (it is for this reason modern-day anarchists generally use the term "*workers' self-management*"). To anarchist ears, the combination of nationalisation (state ownership) and "*workers' control*" (and even more so, self-management) simply expresses political confusion, a mishmash of contradictory ideas which simply hides the reality that state ownership, by its very nature, precludes workers' control. As such, anarchists reject such contradictory rhetoric in favour of "*socialisation*" and "*workers' self-management of production*." History shows that nationalisation will always undermine workers' control at the point of production and such rhetoric always paves the way for state capitalism.

Therefore, anarchists are against both nationalisation **and** privatisation, recognising both as forms of capitalism, of wage slavery. We believe in genuine public ownership of productive assets, rather than corporate/private or state/bureaucratic control. Only in this manner can the public address their own economic needs. Thus, we see a third way that is distinct from the popular "either/or" options forwarded by capitalists and state socialists, a way that is entirely more democratic. This is workers' self-management of production, based on social ownership of the means of life by federations of self-managed syndicates and communes.

Finally, it should be mentioned that some Leninists do have an analysis of Stalinism as "state capitalist," most noticeably the British SWP. According to the creator of this theory, Tony Cliff, Stalinism had to be considered a class system because "*[i]f the state is the repository of the means of production and the workers do not control it, they do not own the means of production, i.e., they are not the ruling class.*" Which is fine, as far as it goes (anarchists would stress the social relations **within** production as part of our criteria for what counts as socialism). The problems start to accumulate when Cliff tries to explain why Stalinism was (state) capitalist.

For Cliff, internally the USSR could be viewed as one big factory and the division of labour driven by bureaucratic decree. Only when Stalinism was "*viewed within the international economy the basic features of capitalism can be discerned.*" Thus it is international competition which makes the USSR subject to "the law of value" and, consequently, capitalist. However, as international trade was tiny under Stalinism "*competition with other countries is mainly military.*" It is this indirect competition in military matters which made Stalinist Russia capitalist rather than any internal factor. [State capitalism in Russia, pp. 311-2, p. 221 and p. 223]

The weakness of this argument should be obvious. From an anarchist position, it fails to discuss the social relations within production and the obvious fact that workers could, and did, move workplaces (i.e., there was a market for labour). Cliff only mentions the fact that

the Stalinist regime's plans were never fulfilled when he shows up the inefficiencies of Stalinist mismanagement. With regards to labour, that appears to be divided according to the plan. Similarly, to explain Stalinism's "capitalist" nature as being a product of military competition with other, more obviously, capitalist states is a joke. It is like arguing that Ford is a capitalist company because BMW is! As one libertarian Marxist put it: "*One can only wonder as to the type of contortions Cliff might have got into if Soviet military competition had been with China alone!*" [Neil C. Fernandez, **Capitalism and Class Struggle in the USSR**, p. 65] Significantly, Cliff raised the possibility of single world-wide Stalinist regime and concluded it would **not** be state capitalist, it would "*be a system of exploitation not subject to the law of value and all its implications.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 225] As Fernandez correctly summarises:

*"Cliff's position appears untenable when it is remembered that whatever capitalism may or may not entail, what it is a mode of production, defined by a certain type of social production relations. If the USSR is capitalist simply because it produces weaponry to compete with those countries that themselves would have been capitalist even without such competition, then one might as well say the same about tribes whose production is directed to the provision of tomahawks in the fight against colonialism."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 65]

Strangely, as Marxist, Cliff seemed unaware that, for Marx, "competition" did not define capitalism. As far as trade goes, the "*character of the production process from which [goods] derive is immaterial*" and so on the market commodities come "*from all modes of production*" (for example, they could be "*the produce of production based on slavery, the product of peasants . . . , of a community . . . , of state production (such as existed in earlier epochs of Russian history, based on serfdom) or half-savage hunting peoples*"). [**Capital**, vol. 2, pp. 189-90] This means that trade "*exploits a given mode of production but does not create it*" and so relates "*to the mode of production from outside.*" [**Capital**, vol. 3, p. 745] Much the same can be said of military competition - it does not define the mode of production.

There are other problems with Cliff's argument, namely that it implies that Lenin's regime was also state capitalist (as anarchists stress, but Leninists deny). If, as Cliff suggests, a "workers' state" is one in which "*the proletariat has direct or indirect control, no matter how restricted, over the state power*" then Lenin's regime was not one within six months. Similarly, workers' self-management was replaced by one-man management under Lenin, meaning that Stalin inherited the (capitalistic) relations of production rather than created them. Moreover, if it were military competition which made Stalinism "state capitalist" then, surely, so was Bolshevik Russia when it was fighting the White and Imperialist armies during the Civil War. Nor does Cliff prove that a proletariat actually existed under Stalinism, raising the clear contradiction that "*[i]f there is only one employer, a 'change of masters' is impossible . . . a mere formality*" while also attacking those who argued that Stalinism was "*bureaucratic collectivism*" because Russian workers were **not** proletarians but rather slaves. So this "*mere formality*" is used to explain that the Russian worker is a proletarian, not a slave, and so Russia was state capitalist in nature! [Cliff, **Op. Cit.**, p. 310, p. 219, p. 350 and p. 348]

All in all, attempts to draw a clear line between Leninism and Stalinism as regards its state capitalist nature are doomed to failure. The similarities are far too obvious and simply support the anarchist critique of state socialism as nothing more than state capitalism. Ultimately, "*Trotskyism merely promises socialism by adopting the same methods, and*

*mistakes, which have produced Stalinism.*" [J.H., "The Fourth International", pp. 37-43, **The Left and World War II**, Vernon Richards (ed.), p. 43]

### H.3.14 Don't Marxists believe in workers' control?

As we discussed in the [last section](#), anarchists consider the usual association of state ownership with socialism to be false. We argue that it is just another form of the wages system, of capitalism, albeit with the state replacing the capitalist and so state ownership, for anarchists, is simply state capitalism. Instead we urge socialisation based on workers' self-management of production. Libertarian Marxists concur.

Some mainstream Marxists, however, say they seek to combine state ownership with "*workers' control*." This can be seen from Trotsky, for example, who argued in 1938 for "*workers' control . . . the penetration of the workers' eye into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy . . . workers' control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalised industry when the hour for that eventuality strikes.*" This, it is argued, proves that nationalisation (state ownership and control) is not "*state capitalism*" but rather "*control is the first step along the road to the socialist guidance of economy.*" [**The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International**, p. 73 and p. 74] This explains why many modern day Leninists are often heard voicing support for what anarchists consider an obvious oxymoron, namely "*nationalisation under workers' control*."

Anarchists are not convinced. This is because of two reasons. Firstly, because by the term "*workers' control*" anarchists and Leninists mean two radically different things. Secondly, when in **power** Trotsky advocated radically different ideas. Based on these reasons, anarchists view Leninist calls for "*workers' control*" simply as a means of gaining popular support, calls which will be ignored once the real aim, party power, has been achieved: it is an example of Trotsky's comment that "*[s]logans as well as organisational forms should be subordinated to the indices of the movement.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 72] In other words, rather than express a commitment to the ideas of worker's control of production, mainstream Marxist use of the term "*workers' control*" is simply an opportunistic technique aiming at securing support for the party's seizure of power and once this is achieved it will be cast aside in favour of the first part of the demands, namely state ownership and so control. In making this claim anarchists feel they have more than enough evidence, evidence which many members of Leninist parties simply know nothing about.

We will look first at the question of terminology. Anarchists traditionally used the term "*workers' control*" to mean workers' full and direct control over their workplaces, and their work. However, after the Russian Revolution a certain ambiguity arose in using that term. This is because specific demands which were raised during that revolution were translated into English as "*workers' control*" when, in fact, the Russian meaning of the word (**kontrolia**) was far closer to "*supervision*" or "*steering*." Thus the term "*workers' control*" is used to describe two radically different concepts.

This can be seen from Trotsky when he argued that the workers should "*demand resumption, as public utilities, of work in private businesses closed as a result of the crisis. Workers' control in such case would be replaced by direct workers' management.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 73] Why workers' employed in open capitalist firms were not considered suitable for "*direct*

*"workers' management"* is not explained, but the fact remains Trotsky clearly differentiated between management and control. For him, "*workers' control*" meant "*workers supervision*" over the capitalist who retained power. Thus the "*slogan of workers' control of production*" was not equated to actual workers' control over production. Rather, it was "*a sort of economic dual power*" which meant that "*ownership and right of disposition remain in the hands of the capitalists.*" This was because it was "*obvious that the power is not yet in the hands of the proletariat, otherwise we would have not workers' control of production but the control of production by the workers' state as an introduction to a regime of state production on the foundations of nationalisation.*" [Trotsky, **The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany**, p. 91 and p. 92]

This vision of "*workers' control*" as simply supervision of the capitalist managers and a prelude to state control and, ultimately, nationalisation can be found in Lenin. Rather than seeing "*workers' control*" as workers managing production directly, he always saw it in terms of workers' "*controlling*" those who did. It simply meant "*the country-wide, all-embracing, omnipresent, most precise and most conscientious accounting of the production and distribution of goods.*" He clarified what he meant, arguing for "*country-wide, all-embracing workers' control over the capitalists*" who would still manage production. Significantly, he considered that "*as much as nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus*" required for this "*country-wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods*" would be achieved by nationalising the "*big banks,*" which "*are the 'state apparatus' which we need to bring about socialism*" (indeed, this was considered "*something in the nature of the skeleton of socialist society*"). This structure would be taken intact from capitalism for "*the modern state possesses an apparatus which has extremely close connection with the banks and [business] syndicates . . . this apparatus must not, and should not, be smashed.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 26, p. 105, p. 107, p. 106 and pp. 105-6] Over time, this system would move towards full socialism.

Thus, what Leninists mean by "*workers' control*" is radically different than what anarchists traditionally meant by that term (indeed, it was radically different from the workers' definition, as can be seen from a resolution of the Bolshevik dominated First Trade Union Congress which complained that "*the workers misunderstand and falsely interpret workers' control.*" [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 32]). It is for this reason that from the 1960s English speaking anarchists and other libertarian socialists have been explicit and have used the term "*workers' self-management*" rather than "*workers' control*" to describe their aims. Mainstream Marxists, however have continued to use the latter slogan, undoubtedly, as we note in [section H.3.5](#), to gain members from the confusion in meanings.

Secondly, there is the example of the Russian Revolution itself. As historian S.A. Smith correctly summarises, the Bolshevik party "*had no position on the question of workers' control prior to 1917.*" The "*factory committees launched the slogan of workers' control of production quite independently of the Bolshevik party. It was not until May that the party began to take it up.*" However, Lenin used "*the term ['workers' control'] in a very different sense from that of the factory committees.*" In fact Lenin's proposals were "*thoroughly statist and centralist in character, whereas the practice of the factory committees was essentially local and autonomous.*" While those Bolsheviks "*connected with the factory committees assigned responsibility for workers' control of production chiefly to the committees*" this "*never became official Bolshevik party policy.*" In fact, "*the Bolsheviks never deviated before or after October from a commitment to a statist, centralised solution to economic disorder.*

*The disagreement between the two wings of the socialist movement [i.e., the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks] was not about state control in the abstract, but what kind of state should co-ordinate control of the economy: a bourgeois state or a workers' state?" They "did not disagree radically in the specific measures which they advocated for control of the economy." Lenin "never developed a conception of workers' self-management. Even after October, workers' control remained for him fundamentally a matter of 'inspection' and 'accounting' . . . rather than as being necessary to the transformation of the process of production by the direct producers. For Lenin, the transformation of capitalist relations of production was achieved at central-state level, rather than at enterprise level. Progress to socialism was guaranteed by the character of the state and achieved through policies by the central state - not by the degree of power exercised by workers on the shop floor." [Red Petrograd, p. 153, p. 154, p. 159, p. 153, p. 154 and p. 228]*

Thus the Bolshevik vision of "*workers' control*" was always placed in a statist context and it would be exercised not by workers' organisations but rather by state capitalist institutions. This has nothing in common with control by the workers themselves and their own class organisations as advocated by anarchists. In May 1917, Lenin was arguing for the "*establishment of state control over all banks, and their amalgamation into a single central bank; also control over the insurance agencies and big capitalist syndicates.*" [Collected Works, vol. 24, p. 311] He reiterated this framework later that year, arguing that "*the new means of control have been created not by us, but by capitalism in its military-imperialist stage*" and so "*the proletariat takes its weapons from capitalism and does not 'invent' or 'create them out of nothing.'*" The aim was "*compulsory amalgamation in associations under state control,*" "*by workers' control of the workers' state.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 26, p. 108, p. 109 and p. 108] The factory committees were added to this "*state capitalist*" system but they played only a very minor role in it. Indeed, this system of state control was designed to limit the power of the factory committees:

*"One of the first decrees issued by the Bolshevik Government was the Decree on Workers' Control of 27 November 1917. By this decree workers' control was institutionalised . . . Workers' control implied the persistence of private ownership of the means of production, though with a 'diminished' right of disposal. The organs of workers' control, the factory committees, were not supposed to evolve into workers' management organs after the nationalisation of the factories. The hierarchical structure of factory work was not questioned by Lenin . . . To the Bolshevik leadership the transfer of power to the working class meant power to its leadership, i.e. to the party. Central control was the main goal of the Bolshevik leadership. The hasty creation of the VSNKh (the Supreme Council of the National Economy) on 1 December 1917, with precise tasks in the economic field, was a significant indication of fact that decentralised management was not among the projects of the party, and that the Bolsheviks intended to counterpose central direction of the economy to the possible evolution of workers' control toward self-management."* [Silvana Malle, The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918-1921, p. 47]

Once in power, the Bolsheviks soon turned away from even this limited vision of workers' control and in favour of "*one-man management.*" Lenin raised this idea in late April 1918 and it involved granting state appointed "*individual executives dictatorial powers (or 'unlimited' powers).*" Large-scale industry required "*thousands subordinating their will to the will of one,*" and so the revolution "*demands*" that "*the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour.*" Lenin's "*superior forms of labour discipline*" were simply hyper-

developed capitalist forms. The role of workers in production was the same, but with a novel twist, namely "*unquestioning obedience to the orders of individual representatives of the Soviet government during the work.*" This support for wage slavery was combined with support for capitalist management techniques. "*We must raise the question of piece-work and apply and test it in practice,*" argued Lenin, "*we must raise the question of applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system; we must make wages correspond to the total amount of goods turned out.*" [Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, vol. 27, p. 267, p. 269, p. 271 and p. 258]

This vision had already been applied in practice, with the "*first decree on the management of nationalised enterprises in March 1918*" which had "*established two directors at the head of each enterprise . . . Both directors were appointed by the central administrators.*" An "*economic and administrative council*" was also created in the workplace, but this "*did not reflect a syndicalist concept of management.*" Rather it included representatives of the employees, employers, engineers, trade unions, the local soviets, co-operatives, the local economic councils and peasants. This composition "*weakened the impact of the factory workers on decision-making . . . The workers' control organs [the factory committees] remained in a subordinate position with respect to the council.*" Once the Civil War broke out in May 1918, this process was accelerated. By 1920, most workplaces were under one-man management and the Communist Party at its Ninth Congress had "*promoted one-man management as the most suitable form of management.*" [Malle, **Op. Cit.**, p. 111, p. 112, p. 141 and p. 128] In other words, the manner in which Lenin organised industry had handed it over entirely into the hands of the bureaucracy.

Trotsky did not disagree with all this, quite the reverse - he wholeheartedly defended the imposing of "*one-man management*". As he put it in 1920, "*our Party Congress . . . expressed itself in favour of the principle of one-man management in the administration of industry . . . It would be the greatest possible mistake, however, to consider this decision as a blow to the independence of the working class. The independence of the workers is determined and measured not by whether three workers or one are placed at the head of a factory.*" As such, it "*would consequently be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers, and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered.*" The term "*collective will of the workers*" is simply a euphemism for the Party which Trotsky had admitted had "*substituted*" its dictatorship for that of the Soviets (indeed, "*there is nothing accidental*" in this "*'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the working class*" and "*in reality there is no substitution at all.*" The "*dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party*"). The unions "*should discipline the workers and teach them to place the interests of production above their own needs and demands.*" He even argued that "*the only solution to economic difficulties from the point of view of both principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power . . . and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation.*" [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 162, p. 109, p. 143 and p. 135]

Trotsky did not consider this a result of the Civil War. Again, the opposite was the case: "*I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path*

*of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 162-3] Significantly, discussing developments in Russia since the N.E.P, Trotsky a few years later argued that it was "necessary for each state-owned factory, with its technical director and with its commercial director, to be subjected not only to control from the top - by the state organs - but also from below, by the market which will remain the regulator of the state economy for a long time to come." Workers' control, as can be seen, was not even mentioned, nor considered as an essential aspect of control "from below." As Trotsky also stated that "[u]nder socialism economic life will be directed in a centralised manner," our discussion of the state capitalist nature of mainstream Marxism we presented in the [last section](#) is confirmed. [**The First Five Years of the Communist International**, vol. 2, p. 237 and p. 229]

The contrast between what Trotsky did when he was in power and what he argued for after he had been expelled is obvious. Indeed, the arguments of 1938 and 1920 are in direct contradiction to each other. Needless to say, Leninists and Trotskyists today are fonder of quoting Trotsky and Lenin when they did not have state power rather than when they did. Rather than compare what they said to what they did, they simply repeat ambiguous slogans which meant radically different things to Lenin and Trotsky than to the workers' who thrust them into power. For obvious reasons, we feel. Given the opportunity for latter day Leninists to exercise power, we wonder if a similar process would occur again? Who would be willing to take that chance?

As such, any claim that mainstream Marxism considers "workers' control" as an essential feature of its politics is simply nonsense. For a comprehensive discussion of "workers' control" during the Russian Revolution Maurice Brinton's account cannot be bettered. As he stressed, "*only the ignorant or those willing to be deceived can still kid themselves into believing that proletarian power at the point of production was ever a fundamental tenet or objective of Bolshevism.*" [**The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 14]

All this is not some academic point. As Brinton noted, faced "*with the bureaucratic monstrosity of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, yet wishing to retain some credibility among their working class supporters, various strands of Bolshevism have sought posthumously to rehabilitate the concept of 'workers' control.'*" The facts show that between 1917 and 1921 "*all attempts by the working class to assert real power over production - or to transcend the narrow role allocated by to it by the Party - were smashed by the Bolsheviks, after first having been denounced as anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist deviations. Today workers' control is presented as a sort of sugar coating to the pill of nationalisation of every Trotskyist or Leninist micro-bureaucrat on the make. Those who strangled the viable infant are now hawking the corpse around*" [**For Workers' Power**, p. 165] Little has changed since Brinton wrote those words in the 1960s, with Leninists today proclaiming with a straight face that they stand for "self-management"!

The roots of this confusion can be found in Marx and Engels. In the struggle between authentic socialism (i.e. workers' self-management) and state capitalism (i.e. state ownership) there **are** elements of the correct solution to be found in their ideas, namely their support for co-operatives. For example, Marx praised the efforts made within the Paris Commune to create co-operatives, so "*transforming the means of production, land and capital . . . into mere instruments of free and associated labour.*" He argued that "*[i]f co-operative production is not to remain a shame and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus*

*taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production - what else . . . would it be but Communism, 'possible' Communism?"* [Selected Works, pp. 290-1] In the 1880s, Engels suggested as a reform the putting of public works and state-owned land into the hands of workers' co-operatives rather than capitalists. [Collected Works, vol. 47, p. 239]

These comments should not be taken as being totally without aspects of nationalisation. Engels argued for "*the transfer - initially on lease - of large estates to autonomous co-operatives under state management and effected in such a way that the State retains ownership of the land.*" He stated that neither he nor Marx "*ever doubted that, in the course of transition to a wholly communist economy, widespread use would have to be made of co-operative management as an intermediate stage. Only it will mean so organising things that society, i.e. initially the State, retains ownership of the means of production and thus prevents the particular interests of the co-operatives from taking precedence over those of society as a whole.*" [Op. Cit., p. 389] However, Engels comments simply bring home the impossibilities of trying to reconcile state ownership and workers' self-management. While the advocacy of co-operatives is a positive step forward from the statist arguments of the **Communist Manifesto**, Engels squeezes these libertarian forms of organising production into typically statist structures. How "*autonomous co-operatives*" can co-exist with (and under!) "*state management*" and "*ownership*" is not explained, not to mention the fatal confusion of socialisation with nationalisation.

In addition, the differences between the comments of Marx and Engels are obvious. While Marx talks of "*united co-operative societies*," Engels talks of "*the State*." The former implies a free federation of co-operatives, the latter a centralised structure which the co-operatives are squeezed into and under. The former is socialist, the latter is state capitalist. From Engels argument, it is obvious that the stress is on state ownership and management rather than self-management. This confusion became a source of tragedy during the Russian Revolution when the workers, like their comrades during the Commune, started to form a federation of factory committees while the Bolsheviks squeezed these bodies into a system of state control which was designed to marginalise them.

Moreover, the aims of the Paris workers were at odds with the vision of the **Communist Manifesto** and in line with anarchism - most obviously Proudhon's demands for workers associations to replace wage labour and what he called, in his **Principle of Federation**, an "*agro-industrial federation*." Thus the Commune's idea of co-operative production was a clear expression of what Proudhon explicitly called "*industrial democracy*," a "*reorganisation of industry, under the jurisdiction of all those who compose it.*" [quoted by K. Steven Vincent, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 225] Thus, while Engels (in part) echoes Proudhon's ideas, he does not go fully towards a self-managed system of co-operation and co-ordination based on the workers' own organisations. Significantly, Bakunin and later anarchists simply developed these ideas to their logical conclusion.

Marx, to his credit, supported these libertarian visions when applied in practice by the Paris workers during the Commune and promptly revised his ideas. This fact has been obscured somewhat by Engels historical revisionism in this matter. In his 1891 introduction to Marx's "*The Civil War in France*", Engels painted a picture of Proudhon being opposed to association (except for large-scale industry) and stressed that "*to combine all these associations in one great union*" was "*the direct opposite of the Proudhon doctrine*" and so

*"the Commune was the grave of the Proudhon doctrine."* [Selected Works, p. 256] However, as noted, this is nonsense. The forming of workers' associations and their federation was a key aspect of Proudhon's ideas and so the Communards were obviously acting in his spirit. Given that the **Communist Manifesto** stressed state ownership and failed to mention co-operatives at all, the claim that the Commune acted in its spirit seems a tad optimistic. He also argued that the "*economic measures*" of the Commune were driven not by "*principles*" but by "*simple, practical needs.*" This meant that "*the confiscation of shut-down factories and workshops and handing them over to workers' associations*" were "*not at all in accordance with the spirit of Proudhonism but certainly in accordance with the spirit of German scientific socialism!*"! This seems unlikely, given Proudhon's well known and long-standing advocacy of co-operatives as well as Marx's comment in 1866 that in France the workers (*"particularly those of Paris!"*) "*are strongly attached, without knowing it [!], to the old rubbish*" and that the "*Parisian gentlemen had their heads full of the emptiest Proudhonian phrases.*" [Marx, Engels, Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 92, p. 46 and p. 45]

What did this "*old rubbish*" consist of? Well, in 1869 the delegate of the Parisian Construction Workers' Trade Union argued that "*[a]ssociation of the different corporations [labour unions/associations] on the basis of town or country . . . leads to the commune of the future . . . Government is replaced by the assembled councils of the trade bodies, and by a committee of their respective delegates.*" In addition, "*a local grouping which allows the workers in the same area to liaise on a day to day basis*" and "*a linking up of the various localities, fields, regions, etc.*" (i.e. international trade or industrial union federations) would ensure that "*labour organises for present and future by doing away with wage slavery.*" This "*mode of organisation leads to the labour representation of the future.*" [**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 184]

To state the obvious, this had clear links with both Proudhon's ideas **and** what the Commune did in practice. Rather than being the "*grave*" of Proudhon's ideas on workers' associations, the Commune saw their birth, i.e. their application. Rather than the Parisian workers becoming Marxists without knowing it, Marx had become a follower of Proudhon! The idea of socialism being based on a federation of workers' associations was not buried with the Paris Commune. It was integrated into all forms of social anarchism (including communist-anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism) and recreated every time there is a social revolution.

In ending we must note that anarchists are well aware that individual workplaces could pursue aims at odds with the rest of society (to use Engels expression, their "*particular interests*"). This is often termed "*localism.*" Anarchists, however, argue that the mainstream Marxist solution is worse than the problem. By placing self-managed workplaces under state control (or ownership) they become subject to even worse "*particular interests,*" namely those of the state bureaucracy who will use their power to further their own interests. In contrast, anarchists advocate federations of self-managed workplaces to solve this problem. This is because the problem of "*localism*" and any other problems faced by a social revolution will be solved in the interests of the working class only if working class people solve them themselves. For this to happen it requires working class people to manage their own affairs directly and that implies self-managed organising from the bottom up (i.e. anarchism) rather than delegating power to a minority at the top, to a "revolutionary" party or state. This applies economically, socially and politically. As Bakunin argued, the "*revolution should not only be made for the people's sake; it should also be made by the people.*" [**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 141]

## H.4 Didn't Engels refute anarchism in "*On Authority*"?

No, far from it. Engels (in)famous essay "*On Authority*" is often pointed to by Marxists of various schools as refuting anarchism. Indeed, it is often considered the essential Marxist work for this and is often trotted out (pun intended) when anarchist influence is on the rise. However this is not the case. In fact, his essay is both politically flawed and misrepresentative. As such, anarchists do not think that Engels refuted anarchism in his essay but rather just showed his ignorance of the ideas he was critiquing. This ignorance essentially rests on the fact that the whole concept of authority was defined and understood differently by Bakunin and Engels, meaning that the latter's critique was flawed. While Engels may have thought that they both were speaking of the same thing, in fact they were not.

For Engels, all forms of group activity meant the subjection of the individuals that make it up. As he put it, "*whoever mentions combined action speaks of organisation*" and so it is not possible "*to have organisation without authority*," as authority means "*the imposition of the will of another upon ours . . . authority presupposes subordination.*" [**Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 731 and p. 730] Given that, Engels considered the ideas of Bakunin to fly in the face of common sense and so show that he, Bakunin, did not know what he was talking about. However, in reality, it was Engels who did this.

The first fallacy in Engels account is that anarchists, as we indicated in [section B.1](#), do not oppose all forms of authority. Bakunin was extremely clear on this issue and differentiated between **types** of authority, of which he opposed only certain kinds. For example, he asked the question "*[d]oes it follow that I reject all authority?*" and answered quite clearly: "*No, far be it from me to entertain such a thought.*" He acknowledged the difference between being **an** authority - an expert - and being **in** authority. This meant that "*[i]f I bow before the authority of the specialists and declare myself ready to follow, to a certain extent and so long as it may seem to me to be necessary, their general indications and even their directions, it is because their authority is imposed upon me by no one . . . I bow before the authority of specialists because it is imposed upon me by my own reason.*" Similarly, he argued that anarchists "*recognise all natural authority, and all influence of fact upon us, but none of right; for all authority and all influence of right, officially imposed upon us, immediately becomes a falsehood and an oppression.*" He stressed that the "*only great and omnipotent authority, at once natural and rational, the only one we respect, will be that of the collective and public spirit of a society founded on equality and solidarity and the mutual respect of all its members.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 253, p. 241 and p. 255]

Bakunin contrasted this position with the Marxist one, whom he argued were "*champions of the social order built from the top down, always in the name of universal suffrage and the sovereignty of the masses upon whom they bestow the honour of obeying their leaders, their elected masters.*" In other words, a system based on delegated **power** and so **hierarchical** authority. This excludes the masses from governing themselves (as in the state) and this, in turn, "*means domination, and any domination presupposes the subjugation of the masses and, consequently, their exploitation for the benefit of some ruling minority.*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 277]

So while Bakunin and other anarchists, on occasion, **did** argue that anarchists reject "*all authority*" they, as Carole Pateman correctly notes, "*tended to treat 'authority' as a synonym for 'authoritarian,' and so have identified 'authority' with hierarchical power structures, especially those of the state. Nevertheless, their practical proposals and some of their theoretical discussions present a different picture.*" [The Problem of Political Obligation, p. 141] This can be seen when Bakunin noted that "*the principle of authority*" was the "*eminently theological, metaphysical and political idea that the masses, always incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed from above.*" [Marxism, Freedom and the State, p. 33] Clearly, by the term "*principle of authority*" Bakunin meant **hierarchy** rather than organisation and the need to make agreements (what is now called self-management).

Bakunin, clearly, did not oppose **all** authority but rather a specific kind of authority, namely **hierarchical** authority. This kind of authority placed power into the hands of a few. For example, wage labour produced this kind of authority, with a "*meeting . . . between master and slave . . . the worker sells his person and his liberty for a given time.*" The state is also based hierarchical authority, with "*those who govern*" (i.e. "*those who frame the laws of the country as well as those who exercise the executive power*") being in an "*exceptional position diametrically opposed to . . . popular aspirations*" towards liberty. They end up "*viewing society from the high position in which they find themselves*" and so "*[w]hoever says political power says domination*" over "*a more or less considerable section of the population.*" [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 187 and p. 218]

Thus hierarchical authority is top-down, centralised and imposed. It is **this** kind of authority Bakunin had in mind when he argued that anarchists "*are in fact enemies of all authority*" and it will "*corrupt those who exercise [it] as much as those who are compelled to submit to [it].*" [Op. Cit., p. 249] In other words, "authority" was used as shorthand for "hierarchy" (or "hierarchical authority"), the imposition of decisions rather than agreement to abide by the collective decisions you make with others when you freely associate with them. In place of this kind of authority, Bakunin proposed a "*natural authority*" based on the masses "*governing themselves.*" He did not object to the need for individuals associating themselves into groups and managing their own affairs, rather he opposed the idea that co-operation necessitated hierarchy:

*"Hence there results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of division and association of labour. I take and I give - such is human life. Each is an authoritative leader and in turn is led by others. Accordingly there is no fixed and constant authority, but continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination."* [Op. Cit., pp. 353-4]

This kind of free association would be the expression of liberty rather than (as in hierarchical structures) its denial. Anarchists reject the idea of giving a minority (a government) the power to make our decisions for us. Rather, power should rest in the hands of all, not concentrated in the hands of a few. We are well aware of the need to organise together and, therefore, the need to stick by decisions reached. The importance of solidarity in anarchist theory is an expression of this awareness. However, there are different kinds of organisation. There can be no denying that in a capitalist workplace or army there is "organisation" and "discipline" yet few, if any, sane persons would argue that this distinctly top-down and hierarchical form of working together is something to aspire to, particularly if you seek a free

society. This cannot be compared to making and sticking by a collective decision reached by free discussion and debate within a self-governing associations. As Bakunin argued:

*"Discipline, mutual trust as well as unity are all excellent qualities when properly understood and practised, but disastrous when abused . . . [one use of the word] discipline almost always signifies despotism on the one hand and blind automatic submission to authority on the other . . .*

*"Hostile as I am to [this,] the authoritarian conception of discipline, I nevertheless recognise that a certain kind of discipline, not automatic but voluntary and intelligently understood is, and will ever be, necessary whenever a greater number of individuals undertake any kind of collective work or action. Under these circumstances, discipline is simply the voluntary and considered co-ordination of all individual efforts for a common purpose. At the moment of revolution, in the midst of the struggle, there is a natural division of functions according to the aptitude of each, assessed and judged by the collective whole: Some direct and others carry out orders. But no function remains fixed and it will not remain permanently and irrevocably attached to any one person. Hierarchical order and promotion do not exist, so that the executive of yesterday can become the subordinate of tomorrow. No one rises above the others, and if he does rise, it is only to fall back again a moment later, like the waves of the sea forever returning to the salutary level of equality.*

*"In such a system, power, properly speaking, no longer exists. Power is diffused to the collectivity and becomes the true expression of the liberty of everyone, the faithful and sincere realisation of the will of all . . . this is the only true discipline, the discipline necessary for the organisation of freedom. This is not the kind of discipline preached by the State . . . which wants the old, routine-like, automatic blind discipline. Passive discipline is the foundation of every despotism."* [Bakunin on Anarchism, pp. 414-5]

Clearly Engels misunderstood the anarchist conception of liberty. Rather than seeing it as essentially negative, anarchists argue that liberty is expressed in two different, but integrated, ways. Firstly, there is rebellion, the expression of autonomy in the face of authority. This is the negative aspect of it. Secondly, there is association, the expression of autonomy by working with your equals. This is the positive aspect of it. As such, Engels concentrates on the negative aspect of anarchist ideas, ignoring the positive, and so paints a false picture of anarchism. Freedom, as Bakunin argued, is a product of connection, not of isolation. How a group organises itself determines whether it is authoritarian or libertarian. If the individuals who take part in a group manage the affairs of that group (including what kinds of decisions can be delegated) then that group is based on liberty. If that power is left to a few individuals (whether elected or not) then that group is structured in an authoritarian manner. This can be seen from Bakunin's argument that power must be "*diffused*" into the collective in an anarchist society. Clearly, anarchists do not reject the need for organisation nor the need to make and abide by collective decisions. Rather, the question is how these decisions are to be made - are they to be made from below, by those affected by them, or from above, imposed by a few people in authority.

Only a sophist would confuse hierarchical power with the power of people managing their own affairs. It is an improper use of words to denote equally as "authority" two such opposed concepts as individuals subjected to the autocratic power of a boss and the voluntary co-operation of conscious individuals working together as equals. The lifeless obedience of a

governed mass cannot be compared to the organised co-operation of free individuals, yet this is what Engels did. The former is marked by hierarchical power and the turning of the subjected into automations performing mechanical movements without will and thought. The latter is marked by participation, discussion and agreement. Both are, of course, based on co-operation but to argue that latter restricts liberty as much as the former simply confuses co-operation with coercion. It also indicates a distinctly liberal conception of liberty, seeing it restricted by association with others rather than seeing association as an expression of liberty. As Malatesta argued:

*"The basic error . . . is in believing that organisation is not possible without authority.*

*"Now, it seems to us that organisation, that is to say, association for a specific purpose and with the structure and means required to attain it, is a necessary aspect of social life. A man in isolation cannot even live the life of a beast . . . Having therefore to join with other humans . . . he must submit to the will of others (be enslaved) or subject others to his will (be in authority) or live with others in fraternal agreement in the interests of the greatest good of all (be an associate). Nobody can escape from this necessity."* [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, pp. 84-5]

Therefore, organisation is *"only the practice of co-operation and solidarity"* and is a *"natural and necessary condition of social life."* [Malatesta, Op. Cit., p. 83] Clearly, the question is not whether we organise, but how do we do so. This means that, for anarchists, Engels confused vastly different concepts: *"Co-ordination is dutifully confused with command, organisation with hierarchy, agreement with domination - indeed, 'imperious' domination."* [Murray Bookchin, Towards an Ecological Society, pp. 126-7]

Socialism will only exist when the discipline currently enforced by the stick in the hand of the boss is replaced by the conscious self-discipline of free individuals. It is not by changing who holds the stick (from a capitalist to a "socialist" boss) that socialism will be created. It is only by the breaking up and uprooting of this slavish spirit of discipline, and its replacement by self-management, that working people will create a new discipline what will be the basis of socialism (the voluntary self-discipline Bakunin talked about). As Kropotkin memorably put it:

*"Having been brought up in a serf-owner's family, I entered active life, like all young men of my time, with a great deal of confidence in the necessity of commanding, ordering, scolding, punishing, and the like. But when, at an early stage, I had to manage serious enterprises and to deal with men, and when each mistake would lead at once to heavy consequences, I began to appreciate the difference between acting on the principle of command and discipline and acting on the principle of common understanding. The former works admirably in a military parade, but it is worth nothing where real life is concerned, and the aim can be achieved only through the severe effort of many converging wills."* [Memoirs of a Revolutionist, p. 202]

Clearly, then, Engels did not refute anarchism by his essay. Rather, he refuted a straw man of his own creation. The question was **never** one of whether certain tasks need co-operation, co-ordination, joint activity and agreement. It was, in fact, a question of **how** that is achieved. As such, Engels diatribe misses the point. Instead of addressing the actual politics of anarchism or their actual use of the word "authority," he rather addressed a series of logical deductions he draws from a false assumption regarding those politics. Engels essay shows, to paraphrase

Keynes cutting remarks against von Hayek, the bedlam that can be created when a remorseless logician deduces away from an incorrect starting assumption.

For collective activity anarchists recognise the need to make and stick by agreements. Collective activity of course needs collective decision making and organisation. In so far as Engels had a point to his diatribe (namely that group efforts meant co-operating with others), Bakunin (like any anarchist) would have agreed. The question was how are these decisions to be made, not whether they should be or not. Ultimately, Engels confused agreement with hierarchy. Anarchists do not.

## H.4.1 Does organisation imply the end of liberty?

Engels argument in "*On Authority*" can be summed up as any form of collective activity means co-operating with others and that this means the individual subordinates themselves to others, specifically the group. As such, authority cannot be abolished as organisation means that "*the will of a single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way.*" [Op. Cit., p. 731]

Engels argument proves too much. As every form of joint activity involves agreement and "*subordination,*" then life itself becomes "*authoritarian.*" The only free person, according to Engels' logic, would be the hermit. Anarchists reject such nonsense. As George Barrett argued:

*"To get the full meaning out of life we must co-operate, and to co-operate we must make agreements with our fellow-men. But to suppose that such agreements mean a limitation of freedom is surely an absurdity; on the contrary, they are the exercise of our freedom.*

*"If we are going to invent a dogma that to make agreements is to damage freedom, then at once freedom becomes tyrannical, for it forbids men [and women] to take the most ordinary everyday pleasures. For example, I cannot go for a walk with my friend because it is against the principle of Liberty that I should agree to be at a certain place at a certain time to meet him. I cannot in the least extend my own power beyond myself, because to do so I must co-operate with someone else, and co-operation implies an agreement, and that is against Liberty. It will be seen at once that this argument is absurd. I do not limit my liberty, but simply exercise it, when I agree with my friend to go for a walk.*

*"If, on the other hand, I decide from my superior knowledge that it is good for my friend to take exercise, and therefore I attempt to compel him to go for a walk, then I begin to limit freedom. This is the difference between free agreement and government."* [Objections to Anarchism, pp. 348-9]

If we took Engels' argument seriously then we would have to conclude that living makes freedom impossible! After all by doing any joint activity you "subordinate" yourself to others and so, ironically, exercising your liberty by making decisions and associating with others would become a denial of liberty. Clearly Engels argument is lacking something!

Perhaps this paradox can be explained once we recognise that Engels is using a distinctly liberal view of freedom - i.e. freedom from. Anarchists reject this. We see freedom as holistic - freedom from and freedom to. This means that freedom is maintained by the kind of relationships we form with others, **not** by isolation. As Bakunin argued, "*man in isolation can have no awareness of his liberty. Being free for man means being acknowledged, considered and treated as such by another man. Liberty is therefore a feature not of isolation but of interaction, not of exclusion but rather of connection*". [Michael Bakunin: **Selected Writings**, p. 147] Liberty is denied when we form hierarchical relationships with others not necessarily when we associate with others. To combine with other individuals is an expression of individual liberty, **not** its denial! We are aware that freedom is impossible outside of association. Within an association absolute "autonomy" cannot exist, but such a concept of "autonomy" would restrict freedom to such a degree that it would be so self-defeating as to make a mockery of the concept of autonomy and no sane person would seek it. To requote Malatesta, freedom we want "*is not an absolute metaphysical, abstract freedom*" but "*a real freedom, possible freedom, which is the conscious community of interests, voluntary solidarity.*" [Anarchy, p. 43]

To state the obvious, anarchists are well aware that "*anyone who associates and co-operates with others for a common purpose must feel the need to co-ordinate his [or her] actions with those of his [or her] fellow members and do nothing that harms the work of others and, thus, the common cause; and respect the agreements that have been made - except when wishing sincerely to leave the association when emerging differences of opinion or changed circumstances or conflict over preferred methods make co-operation impossible or inappropriate.*" [Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, pp. 107-8] For anarchists, collective organisation and co-operation does not mean the end of individuality. Bakunin expressed it well:

*"You will think, you will exist, you will act collectively, which nevertheless will not prevent in the least the full development of the intellectual and moral faculties of each individual. Each of you will bring to you his own talents, and in all joining together you will multiply your value a hundred fold. Such is the law of collective action . . . in giving your hands to each other for this action in common, you will promise to each other a mutual fraternity which will be . . . a sort of free contract . . . Then proceed collectively to action you will necessarily commence by practising this fraternity between yourselves . . . by means of regional and local organisations . . . you will find in yourselves strength that you had never imagined, if each of you acted individually, according to his own inclination and not as a consequence of a unanimous resolution, discussed and accepted beforehand."* [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx, pp. 244-5]

So, unlike the essentially (classical) liberal position of Engels, anarchists recognise that freedom is a product of how we associate. This need not imply continual agreement nor an unrealistic assumption that conflict and uncooperative behaviour will disappear. For those within an organisation who refuse to co-operate, anarchists argue that this problem is easily solved. Freedom of association implies the freedom **not** to associate and so those who ignore the decisions reached collectively and disrupt the organisation's workings would simply be "*compelled to leave*" the association. In this way, a free association "*could protect itself without the authoritarian organisation we have nowadays.*" [Kropotkin, **The Conquest of Bread**, p. 152]

Clearly, Engels "critique" hides more than it explains. Yes, co-operation and coercion both involve people working jointly together, but they are **not** to be equated. While Bakunin recognised this fundamental difference and tried, perhaps incompletely, to differentiate them (by arguing against "*the principle of authority*") and to base his politics on the difference, Engels obscures the differences and muddies the water by confusing the two radically different concepts within the word "authority." Any organisation or group is based on co-operation and co-ordination (Engels' "principle of authority"). How that co-operation is achieved is dependent on the **type** of organisation in question and that, in turn, specifies the **social** relationships within it. It is these social relationships which determine whether an organisation is authoritarian or libertarian, not the universal need to make and stick by agreements.

Ultimately, Engels is simply confusing obedience with agreement, coercion with co-operation, organisation with authority, objective reality with despotism.

Rather than seeing organisation as restricting freedom, anarchists argue that the **kind** of organisation we create is what matters. We can form relationships with others which are based on equality, not subordination. As an example, we point to the differences between marriage and free love (see [next section](#)). Once it is recognised that decisions can be made on the basis of co-operation between equals, Engels essay can be seen for what it is - a deeply flawed piece of cheap and inaccurate diatribe.

## H.4.2 Does free love show the weakness of Engels' argument?

Yes! Engels, let us not forget, argued, in effect, that any activities which "*replace isolated action by combined action of individuals*" meant "*the imposition of the will of another upon ours*" and so "*the will of the single individual will have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian manner.*" This, for Engels, means that "*authority*" has not "*disappeared*" under anarchism but rather it has only "*changed its form.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 730-1]

However, to say that authority just changes its form misses the qualitative differences between authoritarian and libertarian organisation. Precisely the differences which Bakunin and other anarchists tried to stress by calling themselves anti-authoritarians and being against the "*principle of authority.*" By arguing that all forms of association are necessarily "authoritarian," Engels is impoverishing the liberatory potential of socialism. He ensures that the key question of liberty within our associations is hidden behind a mass of sophistry.

As an example, look at the difference between marriage and free love. Both forms necessitate two individuals living together, sharing the same home, organising their lives together. The same situation and the same commitments. But do both imply the same social relationships? Are they both "*authoritarian*"?

Traditionally, the marriage vow is based on the wife promising to obey the husband. Her role is simply that of obedience (in theory, at least). As Carole Pateman argues, "[u]ntil late into the nineteenth century the legal and civil position of a wife resembled that of a slave" and, in theory, she "*became the property of her husband and stood to him as a slave/servant to a master.*" [The Sexual Contract, p. 119 and pp. 130-1] As such, an obvious social

relationship exists - an authoritarian one in which the man has power over the woman. We have a relationship based on domination and subordination.

In free love, the couple are equals. They decide their own affairs, together. The decisions they reach are agreed between them and no domination takes place (unless you think making an agreement equals domination or subordination). They both agree to the decisions they reach, based on mutual respect and give and take. Subordination to individuals does not meaningfully exist (at best, it could be argued that both parties are "dominated" by their decisions, hardly a meaningful use of the word). Instead of subordination, there is free agreement.

Both types of organisation apply to the same activities - a couple living together. Has "authority" just changed its form as Engels argued? Of course not. There is a substantial difference between the two. The former is authoritarian. One part of the organisation dictates to the other. The latter is libertarian as neither dominates (or they, as a couple, "dominate" each other as individuals - surely an abuse of the language, we hope you agree!). Each part of the organisation agrees to the decision. Do all these differences just mean that we have changed name of "authority" or has authority been abolished and liberty created? This was the aim of Bakunin's terminology, namely to draw attention to the qualitative change that has occurred in the social relationships generated by the association of individuals when organised in an anarchist way. A few Marxists have also seen this difference. For example, Rosa Luxemburg repeated (probably unknowingly) Bakunin's distinction between forms of discipline and organisation when she argued that:

*"We misuse words and we practice self-deception when we apply the same term - discipline - to such dissimilar notions as: (1) the absence of thought and will in a body with a thousand automatically moving hands and legs, and (2) the spontaneous co-ordination of the conscious, political acts of a body of men. What is there in common between the regulated docility of an oppressed class and the self-discipline and organisation of a class struggling for its emancipation? . . . The working class will acquire the sense of the new discipline, the freely assumed self-discipline of the social democracy, not as a result of the discipline imposed on it by the capitalist state, but by extirpating, to the last root, its old habits of obedience and servility." [Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, pp. 119-20]*

Engels is confusing two radically different means of decision making by arguing both involve subordination and authority. The difference is clear: the first involves the domination of an individual over another while the second involves the "subordination" of individuals to the decisions and agreements they make. The first is authority, the second is liberty. As Kropotkin put it:

*"This applies to all forms of association. Cohabitation of two individuals under the same roof may lead to the enslavement of one by the will of the other, as it may also lead to liberty for both. The same applies to the family or . . . to large or small associations, to each social institution . . .*

*"Communism is capable of assuming all forms of freedom or of oppression - which other institutions are unable to do. It may produce a monastery where all implicitly obey the orders of their superior, and it may produce an absolutely free organisation, leaving his full freedom to the individual, existing only as long as the associates wish*

*to remain together, imposing nothing on anybody, being anxious rather to defend, enlarge, extend in all directions the liberty of the individual. Communism may be authoritarian (in which case the community will soon decay) or it may be Anarchist. The State, on the contrary, cannot be this. It is authoritarian or it ceases to be the State." [Small Communal Experiments and Why They Fail, pp. 12-3]*

Therefore, the example of free love indicates that, for anarchists, Engels' arguments are simply pedantic sophistry. It goes without saying that organisation involves co-operation and that, by necessity, means that individuals come to agreements between themselves to work together. The question is **how** do they do that, not whether they do so or not. As such, Engels' arguments confuse agreement with hierarchy, co-operation with coercion. Simply put, the **way** people conduct joint activity determines whether an organisation is libertarian or authoritarian. That was why anarchists called themselves anti-authoritarians, to draw attention to the different ways of organising collective life.

### H.4.3 How do anarchists propose to run a factory?

In his campaign against anti-authoritarian ideas within the First International, Engels asks in a letter written in January 1872 "*how do these people [the anarchists] propose to run a factory, operate a railway or steer a ship without having in the last resort one deciding will, without a single management?*" [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 729]

This could only be asked if Engels was totally ignorant of Bakunin's ideas and his many comments supporting co-operatives as the means by which workers would "*organise and themselves conduct the economy without guardian angels, the state or their former employers.*" Bakunin was "*convinced that the co-operative movement will flourish and reach its full potential only in a society where the land, the instruments of production, and hereditary property will be owned and operated by the workers themselves: by their freely organised federations of industrial and agricultural workers.*" [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 399 and p. 400] Which meant that Bakunin, like all anarchists, was well aware of how a factory or other workplace would be organised:

*"Only associated labour, that is, labour organised upon the principles of reciprocity and co-operation, is adequate to the task of maintaining . . . civilised society."* [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 341]

By October of that year, Engels had finally "*submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians*" who replied to run a factory, railway or ship did require organisation "*but here it was not a case of authority which we confer on our delegates, but of a commission entrusted!*" Engels commented that the anarchists "*think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves.*" He, therefore, thought that authority will "*only have changed its form*" rather than being abolished under anarchism as "*whoever mentions combined action speaks of organisation*" and it is not possible "*to have organisation without authority.*" [Op. Cit., p. 732 and p. 731]

However, Engels is simply confusing two different things, authority and agreement. To make an agreement with another person is an exercise of your freedom, not its restriction. As Malatesta argued, "*the advantages which association and the consequent division of labour offer*" meant that humanity "*developed towards solidarity.*" However, under class society "*the*

*"advantages of association, the good that Man could drive from the support of his fellows"* was distorted and a few gained "*the advantages of co-operation by subjecting other men to [their] will instead of joining with them.*" This oppression "*was still association and co-operation, outside of which there is no possible human life; but it was a way of co-operation, imposed and controlled by a few for their personal interest.*" [Anarchy, pp. 30-1] Anarchists seek to organise association to eliminate domination. This would be done by workers organising themselves collectively to make their own decisions about their work (workers' self-management, to use modern terminology). This did not necessitate the same authoritarian social relationships as exist under capitalism:

*"Of course in every large collective undertaking, a division of labour, technical management, administration, etc., is necessary. But authoritarians clumsily play on words to produce a *raison d'être* for government out of the very real need for the organisation of work. Government . . . is the concourse of individuals who have had, or have seized, the right and the means to make laws and to oblige people to obey; the administrator, the engineer, etc., instead are people who are appointed or assume the responsibility to carry out a particular job and do so. Government means the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few; administration means the delegation of work, that is tasks given and received, free exchange of services based on free agreement. . . Let one not confuse the function of government with that of administration, for they are essentially different, and if today the two are often confused, it is only because of economic and political privilege."* [Op. Cit., pp. 41-2]

For a given task, co-operation and joint activity may be required by its very nature. Take, for example, a train network. The joint activity of numerous workers are required to ensure that it operates successfully. The driver depends on the work of signal operators, for example, and guards to inform them of necessary information essential for the smooth running of the network. The passengers are dependent on the driver and the other workers to ensure their journey is safe and quick. As such, there is an objective need to co-operate but this need is understood and agreed to by the people involved.

If a specific activity needs the co-operation of a number of people and can only be achieved if these people work together as a team and, therefore, need to make and stick by agreements, then this is undoubtedly a natural fact which the individual can only rebel against by leaving the association. Similarly, if an association considers it wise to elect a delegate whose tasks have been allocated by that group then, again, this is a natural fact which the individuals in question have agreed to and so has not been imposed upon them by any external will - the individual has been convinced of the need to co-operate and does so.

If an activity requires the co-operation of numerous individuals then, clearly, that is a natural fact and there is not much the individuals involved can do about it. Anarchists are not in the habit of denying common sense. The question is simply **how** do these individuals co-ordinate their activities. Is it by means of self-management or by hierarchy (authority)? So anarchists have always been clear on how industry would be run - by the workers' themselves in their own free associations. In this way the domination of the boss would be replaced by agreements between equals.

#### H.4.4 How does the class struggle refute Engels' arguments?

Engels argued that large-scale industry (or, indeed, any form of organisation) meant that "authority" was required. He stated that factories should have "*Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate*" ("Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind") written above their doors. That is the basis of capitalism, with the wage worker being paid to obey. This obedience, Engels argued, was necessary even under socialism, as applying the "*forces of nature*" meant "*a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation.*" This meant that "*[w]anting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself.*" [Op. Cit., p. 731]

The best answer to Engels claims can be found in the class struggle. Given that Engels was a capitalist (an actual owner of a factory), he may have not been aware of the effectiveness of "*working to rule*" when practised by workers. This basically involves doing **exactly** what the boss tells you to do, regardless of the consequences as regards efficiency, production and so on. Quite simply, workers refusing to practice autonomy can be an extremely effective and powerful weapon in the class struggle.

This weapon has long been used by workers and advocated by anarchists, syndicalists and wobblies. For example, the IWW booklet **How to fire your boss** argues that "*[w]orkers often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority simply to meet the goals of the company. There is often a tacit understanding, even by the managers whose job it is to enforce the rules, that these shortcuts must be taken in order to meet production quotas on time.*" It argues, correctly, that "*if each of these rules and regulations were followed to the letter*" then "*[c]onfusion would result - production and morale would plummet. And best of all, the workers can't get in trouble with the tactic because they are, after all, 'just following the rules.'*" The British anarcho-syndicalists of the **Direct Action Movement** agreed and even quoted an industrial expert on the situation:

*"If managers' orders were completely obeyed, confusion would result and production and morale would be lowered. In order to achieve the goals of the organisation workers must often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority. Without this kind of systematic sabotage much work could not be done. This unsolicited sabotage in the form of disobedience and subterfuge is especially necessary to enable large bureaucracies to function effectively."* [J.A.C. Brown, quoted in **Direct Action in Industry**]

Another weapon of workers' resistance is what has been called "*Working without enthusiasm*" and is related to the "*work to rule*." This tactic aims at "*slowing production*" in order to win gains from management:

*"Even the simplest repetitive job demands a certain minimum of initiative and in this case it is failing to show any non-obligatory initiative . . . [This] leads to a fall in production - above all in quality. The worker carries out every operation minimally; the moment there is a hitch of any kind he abandons all responsibility and hands over to the next man above him in the hierarchy; he works mechanically, not checking the finished object, not troubling to regulate his machine. In short he gets away with as*

*much as he can, but never actually does anything positively illegal.*" [Pierre Dubois, **Sabotage in Industry**, p. 51]

The practice of "*working to rule*" and "*working without enthusiasm*" shows how out of touch Engels (like any capitalist) was with the realities of shop floor life. These forms of direct action are extremely effective **because** the workers refuse to act autonomously in industry, to work out the problems they face during the working day themselves, and instead place all the decisions on the authority required, according to Engels, to run the factory. The factory itself quickly grinds to a halt. What keeps it going is not the "*imperious*" will of authority, but rather the autonomous activity of workers thinking and acting for themselves to solve the numerous problems they face during the working day. In contrast, the hierarchical perspective "*ignores essential features of any real, functioning social order. This truth is best illustrated in a work-to-rule strike, which turns on the fact that any production process depends on a host of informal practices and improvisations that could never be codified. By merely following the rules meticulously, the workforce can virtually halt production.*" [James C. Scott, **Seeing like a State**, p. 6] As Cornelius Castoriadis argued:

*"Resistance to exploitation expresses itself in a drop in productivity as well as exertion on the workers' part . . . At the same time it is expressed in the disappearance of the minimum collective and spontaneous management and organisation of work that the workers normally and of necessity puts out. No modern factory could function for twenty-four hours without this spontaneous organisation of work that groups of workers, independent of the official business management, carry out by filling in the gaps of official production directives, by preparing for the unforeseen and for regular breakdowns of equipment, by compensating for management's mistakes, etc.*

*"Under 'normal' conditions of exploitation, workers are torn between the need to organise themselves in this way in order to carry out their work - otherwise there are repercussions for them - and their natural desire to do their work, on the one hand, and, on the other, the awareness that by doing so they only are serving the boss's interests. Added to those conflicting concerns are the continual efforts of factory's management apparatus to 'direct' all aspects of the workers' activity, which often results only in preventing them from organising themselves."* [**Political and Social Writings**, vol. 2, p. 68]

Needless to say, co-operation and co-ordination are required in any collective activity. Anarchists do not deny this fact of nature, but the example Engels considered as irrefutable simply shows the fallacy of his argument. If large-scale industry were run along the lines argued by Engels, it would quickly grind to halt. So trying to eliminate workers' autonomy is difficult as "[i]ndustrial history shows" that "*such management attempts to control the freedom of the work force invariably run up against the contradiction that the freedom is necessary for quality production.*" [David Noble, **Forces of Production**, p. 277]

Ironically, the example of Russia under Lenin and Trotsky reinforces this fact. "*Administrative centralisation*" was enforced on the railway workers which, in turn, "*led more to ignorance of distance and the inability to respond properly to local circumstances . . . 'I have no instructions' became all the more effective as a defensive and self-protective rationalisation as party officials vested with unilateral power insisted all their orders be strictly obeyed. Cheka ruthlessness instilled fear, but repression . . . only impaired the*

*exercise of initiative that daily operations required.*" [William G. Rosenberg, "The Social Background to Tsektran", pp. 349-373, **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 369] Without the autonomy required to manage local problems, the operation of the railways was seriously harmed and, unsurprisingly, a few months after Trotsky subjected to railway workers to the "*militarisation of labour*" in September 1920, there was a "*disastrous collapse of the railway network in the winter of 1920-1.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers against Lenin**, p. 102] There can be no better way to cripple an economy than to impose Lenin's demand that the task of workers was that of "*unquestioningly obeying the will of the Soviet leader, of the dictator, during the work.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 270]

As the experience of workers' in struggle shows, it is the **abolition** of autonomy which ensures the abolition of large-scale industry, not its exercise. The conscious decision by workers to **not** exercise their autonomy brings industry grinding to a halt and are effective tools in the class struggle. As any worker know, it is only our ability to make decisions autonomously that keeps industry going.

Rather than abolishing authority making large-scale industry impossible, it is the abolishing of autonomy which quickly achieves this. The issue is how do we organise industry so that this essential autonomy is respected and co-operation between workers achieved based on it. For anarchists, this is done by self-managed workers associations in which hierarchical authority is replaced by collective self-discipline.

#### **H.4.5 Is the way industry operates "*independent of all social organisation*"?**

As noted in the [last section](#), Engels argued that applying the "*forces of nature*" meant "*a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation.*" This meant that "*[w]anting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 731]

For anarchists, Engels' comments ignore the reality of class society in an important way. Modern ("*large-scale*") industry has not developed neutrally or naturally, independently of all social organisation as Engels claimed. Rather it has been shaped by the class struggle along with technology (which is often a weapon in that conflict - see [section D.10](#)). As Castoriadis argued:

*"Management organises production with a view of achieving 'maximum efficiency.' But the first result of this sort of organisation is to stir up the workers' revolt against production itself . . . To combat the resistance of the workers, the management institutes an ever more minute division of labour and tasks . . . Machines are invented, or selected, according to one fundamental criterion: Do they assist in the struggle of management against workers, do they reduce yet further the worker's margin of autonomy, do they assist in eventually replacing him [or her] altogether? In this sense, the organisation of production today . . . is **class organisation**. Technology is predominantly **class technology**. No . . . manager would ever introduce into his plant a machine which would increase the freedom of a particular worker or of a group of workers to run the job themselves, even if such a machine increased production.*

*"The workers are by no means helpless in this struggle. They constantly invent methods of self-defence. They break the rules, while 'officially' keeping them. They organise informally, maintain a collective solidarity and discipline."* [The Meaning of Socialism, pp. 9-10]

So one of the key aspects of the class struggle is the conflict of workers against attempts by management to eliminate their autonomy within the production process. This struggle generates the machines which Engels claims produce a "*veritable despotism independent of all social organisation.*" Regardless of what Engels implies, the way industry has developed is not independent of class society and its "despotism" has been engineered that way. For example, it may be a fact of nature that ten people may be required to operate a machine, but that machine is not such a fact, it is a human invention and so can be changed. Nor is it a fact of nature that work organisation should be based on a manager dictating to the workers what to do - rather it could be organised by the workers themselves, using collective self-discipline to co-ordinate their joint effort.

David Noble quotes one shop steward who stated the obvious, namely that workers are "*not automatons. We have eyes to see with, ears to hear with, and mouths to talk.*" As Noble comments, "*[f]or management . . . that was precisely the problem. Workers controlled the machines, and through their unions had real authority over the division of labour and job content.*" [Forces of Production, p. 37] This autonomy was what managers constantly struggled against and introduced technology to combat. So Engels' notion that machinery was "despotic" hides the nature of class society and the fact that authority is a social relationship, a relationship between people and not people and things. And, equally, that different kinds of organisation meant different social relationships to do collective tasks. It was precisely to draw attention to this that anarchists called themselves anti-authoritarians.

Clearly, Engels is simply ignoring the actual relations of authority within capitalist industry and, like the capitalism he claims to oppose, is raising the needs of the bosses to the plane of "natural fact." Indeed, is this not the refrain of every boss or supporter of capitalism? Right-wing "libertarian" guru Ludwig von Mises spouted this kind of nonsense when he argued that "*[t]he root of the syndicalist idea is to be seen in the belief that entrepreneurs and capitalists are irresponsible autocrats who are free to conduct their affairs arbitrarily. . . . The fundamental error of this argument is obvious [sic!]. The entrepreneurs and capitalists are not irresponsible autocrats. They are unconditionally subject to the sovereignty of the consumers. The market is a consumers' democracy.*" [Human Action, p. 814] In other words, it is not the bosses fault that they dictate to the worker. No, of course not, it is the despotism of the machine, of nature, of the market, of the customer, anyone and anything **but** the person **with** authority who is actually giving the orders and punishing those who do not obey!

Needless to say, like Engels, von Mises is fundamentally flawed simply because the boss is not just repeating the instructions of the market (assuming that it is a "consumers' democracy," which it is not). Rather, they give their own instructions based on their own sovereignty over the workers. The workers could, of course, manage their own affairs and meet the demands of consumers directly. The "sovereignty" of the market (just like the "despotism" of machines and joint action) is independent of the social relationships which exist within the workplace, but the social relationships themselves are not predetermined by it. Thus the same workshop can be organised in different ways and so the way industry operates **is** dependent on social organisation. The workers can manage their own affairs or be

subjected to the rule of a boss. To say that "authority" still exists simply means to confuse agreement with obedience.

The importance of differentiating between types of organisation and ways of making decisions can be seen from the experience of the class struggle. During the Spanish Revolution anarchists organised militias to fight the fascists. One was lead by anarchist militant Durruti. His military adviser, PÃ©rez Farras, a professional soldier, was concerned about the application of libertarian principles to military organisation. Durruti replied:

*"I've said it once and I'll say it again: I've been an anarchist my entire life and the fact that I'm responsible for this human collectivity won't change my convictions. It was as an anarchist that I agreed to carry out the task that the Central Committee of the Anti-Fascist Militias entrusted me.*

*"I don't believe - and everything happening around us confirms this - that you can run a workers' militia according to classic military rules. I believe that discipline, coordination, and planning are indispensable, but we shouldn't define them in terms taken from the world that we're destroying. We have to build on new foundations. My comrades and I are convinced that solidarity is the best incentive for arousing an individual's sense of responsibility and a willingness to accept discipline as an act of self-discipline.*

*"War has been imposed upon us . . . but our goal is revolutionary victory. This means defeating the enemy, but also a radical change in men. For that change to occur, man must learn to live and conduct himself as a free man, an apprenticeship that develops his personality and sense of responsibility, his capacity to be master of his own acts. The workers on the job not only transforms the material on which he works, but also transforms himself through that work. The combatant is nothing more than a worker whose tool is a rifle - and he should strive toward the same objective as a worker. One can't behave like an obedient soldier but rather as a conscious man who understands the importance of what he's doing. I know that it's not easy to achieve this, but I also know that what can't be accomplished with reason will not be obtained by force. If we have to sustain our military apparatus by fear, then we won't have changed anything except the colour of the fear. It's only by freeing itself from free that society can build itself in freedom."* [quoted by Abel Paz, **Durruti: In The Spanish Revolution**, p. 474]

Is it really convincing to argue that the individuals who made up the militia are subject to the same social relationships as those in a capitalist or Leninist army? The same, surely, goes for workers associations and wage labour. Ultimately, the flaw in Engels' argument can be best seen simply because he thinks that the "*automatic machinery of a big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalist who employ workers ever have been.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 731] Authority and liberty become detached from human beings, as if authoritarian social relationships can exist independently of individuals! It is a **social** relationship anarchists oppose, not an abstraction.

Engels' argument is applicable to **any** society and to **any** task which requires joint effort. If, for example, a table needs four people to move it then those four people are subject to the "despotism" of gravity! Under such "despotism" can we say its irrelevant whether these four people are slaves to a master who wants the table moved or whether they agree between

themselves to move the table and on the best way to do it? In both cases the table movers are subject to the same "despotism" of gravity, yet in the latter example they are **not** subject to the despotism of other human beings as they clearly are in the former. Engels is simply playing with words!

The fallacy of Engels' basic argument can be seen from this simple example. He essentially uses a **liberal** concept of freedom (i.e. freedom exists prior to society and is reduced within it) when attacking anarchism. Rather than see freedom as a product of interaction, as Bakunin did, Engels sees it as a product of isolation. Collective activity is seen as a realm of necessity (to use Marx's phrase) and not one of freedom. Indeed, machines and the forces of nature are considered by Engels' as "despots"! As if despotism were not a specific set of relationships between **humans**. As Bookchin argued:

*"To Engels, the factory is a natural fact of technics, not a specifically bourgeois mode of rationalising labour; hence it will exist under communism as well as capitalism. It will persist 'independently of all social organisation.' To co-ordinate a factory's operations requires 'imperious obedience,' in which factory hands lack all 'autonomy.' Class society or classless, the realm of necessity is also a realm of command and obedience, of ruler and ruled. In a fashion totally congruent with all class ideologists from the inception of class society, Engels weds Socialism to command and rule as a natural fact. Domination is reworked from a social attribute into a precondition for self-preservation in a technically advanced society."* [Towards an Ecological Society, p. 206]

Given this, it can be argued that Engels' *"On Authority"* had a significant impact in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into state capitalism. By deliberately obscuring the differences between self-managed and authoritarian organisation, he helped provide Bolshevism with ideological justification for eliminating workers self-management in production. After all, if self-management and hierarchical management both involve the same *"principle of authority,"* then it does not really matter how production is organised and whether industry is managed by the workers or by appointed managers (as Engels stressed, authority in industry was independent of the social system and all forms of organisation meant subordination). Murray Bookchin draws the obvious conclusion from Engels' (and Marx's) position: *"Obviously, the factory conceived of as a 'realm of necessity' [as opposed to a 'realm of freedom'] requires no need for self-management."* [Op. Cit., p. 126] Thus it is no great leap from the arguments of Engels in *"On Authority"* to Lenin's arguments justifying the imposition of capitalist organisational forms during the Russian Revolution:

*"Firstly, the question of principle, namely, is the appointment of individuals, dictators with unlimited powers, in general compatible with the fundamental principles of Soviet government? . . . concerning the significance of individual dictatorial powers from the point of view of the specific tasks of the present moment, it must be said that large-scale machine industry - which is precisely the material source, the productive source, the foundation of socialism - calls for absolute and strict unity of will, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people . . . But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one . . . unquestioning subordination to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry. On the railways it is twice and three times as necessary . . . Today . . . revolution demands - precisely in the interests of its development and*

*consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism - that the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour.*" [Collected Works, vol. 27, pp. 267-9]

Hence the Bolsheviks need not have to consider whether replacing factory committees with appointed managers armed with "*dictatorial powers*" would have any effect on the position of workers in socialism (after all, they were subject to subordination either way). Nor did they have to worry about putting economic power into the hands of a state-appointed bureaucracy as "authority" and subordination were required to run industry no matter what. Engels had used the modern factory system of mass production as a direct analogy to argue against the anarchist call for workers' councils, for autonomy, for participation, for self-management. Authority, hierarchy, and the need for submission and domination is inevitable given the current mode of production, both Engels and Lenin argued. Little wonder, then, the worker became the serf of the state under the Bolsheviks. In his own way, Engels contributed to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution by providing the rationale for the Bolsheviks disregard for workers' self-management of production.

Simply put, Engels was wrong. The need to co-operate and co-ordinate activity may be independent of social development, but the nature of a society does impact on how this co-operation is achieved. If it is achieved by hierarchical means, then it is a class society. If it is achieved by agreements between equals, then it is a socialist one. As such, how industry operates **is** dependent on the society it is part of. An anarchist society would run industry based on the free agreement of workers united in free associations. This would necessitate making and sticking to joint decisions but this co-ordination would be between equals, not master and servant. By not recognising this fact, Engels fatally undermined the cause of socialism.

#### **H.4.6 Why does Engels' "On Authority" harm Marxism?**

Ironically, Engels' essay "*On Authority*" also strikes at the heart of Marxism and its critique of anarchism. Forgetting what he had written in 1873, Engels argued in 1894 that for him and Marx the "*ultimate political aim is to overcome the whole state and therefore democracy as well.*" [quoted by Lenin, "*State and Revolution*", **Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 331] Lenin argued that "*the abolition of the state means also the abolition of democracy.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 332]

The problems arise from the awkward fact that Engels' "*On Authority*" had stated that any form of collective activity meant "authority" and so the subjection of the minority to the majority ("*if possible*") and "*the imposition of the will of another upon ours.*" [**Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 731 and p. 730] Aware of the contradiction, Lenin stresses that "*someone may even begin to fear we are expecting the advent of an order of society in which the subordination of the minority to the majority will not be respected.*" That was not the case, however. He simply rejected the idea that democracy was "*the recognition of this principle*" arguing that "*democracy is a state which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e. an organisation for the systematic use of violence by one class against the other, by one section of the population against another.*" He argued that "*the need for violence against people in general, the need for the subjection of one man to another, will vanish, since people will become accustomed to observing the elementary conditions of social life without force and without subordination.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 332-3]

Talk about playing with words! Earlier in his work Lenin summarised Engels "On Authority" by stating that "*is it not clear that . . . complex technical units, based on the employment of machinery and the ordered co-operation of many people, could function without a certain amount of subordination, without some authority or power.*" [Op. Cit., p. 316] Now, however, he argued that communism would involve no "subordination" while, at the same time, be based on the "*the principle of the subordination of the minority to the majority*"! A contradiction? Perhaps no, as he argued that the minority would "*become accustomed*" to the conditions of "*social life*" - in other words the recognition that sticking to your agreements you make with others does not involve "subordination." This, ironically, would confirm anarchist ideas as we argue that making agreements with others, as equals, does not involve domination or subordination but rather is an expression of autonomy, of liberty.

Similarly, we find Engels arguing in **Anti-Dühring** that socialism "*puts an end to the former subjection of men to their own means of production*" and that "*productive labour, instead of being a means of subjugating men, will become a means of their emancipation.*" This work was written in 1878, six years after "*On Authority*" where he stressed that "*the automatic machinery of a big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been*" and "*subdu[ing] the forces of nature . . . avenge themselves*" upon "*man*" by "*subjecting him . . . to a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation.*" [Op. Cit., p. 720, p. 721 and p. 731] Engels is clearly contradicting himself. When attacking the anarchists, he argues that the "*subjection*" of people to the means of production was inevitable and utterly "*independent of all social organisation.*" Six years later he proclaims that socialism will abolish this inescapable subjection to the "*veritable despotism*" of modern industry!

As can be seen from both Engels and Lenin, we have a contradiction within Marxism. On the one hand, they argue that authority ("*subjection*") will always be with us, no matter what, as "*subordination*" and "*authority*" is independent of the specific social society we live in. On the other, they argue that Marxist socialism will be without a state, "*without subordination*", "*without force*" and will end the "*subjection of men to their own means of production.*" The two positions cannot be reconciled.

Simply put, if "**On Authority**" is correct then, logically, it means that not only is anarchism impossible but also Marxist socialism. Lenin and Engels are trying to have it both ways. On the one hand, arguing that anarchism is impossible as any collective activity means subjection and subordination, on the other, that socialism will end that inevitable subjection. And, of course, arguing that democracy will be "*overcome*" while, at the same time, arguing that it can never be. Ultimately, it shows that Engels essay is little more than a cheap polemic without much merit.

Even worse for Marxism is Engels' comment that authority and autonomy "*are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of society*" and that "*the material conditions of production and circulation inevitably develop with large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture, and increasingly tend to enlarge the scope of this authority.*" Given that this is "*a veritable despotism*" and Marxism aims at "*one single vast plan*" in modern industry, then the scope for autonomy, for freedom, is continually reduced during the working day. [Op. Cit., p. 732, p. 731 and p. 723] If machinery and industry means despotism, as Engels claimed against Bakunin, then what does that mean for Lenin's aim to ensure "*the transformation of the whole state economic mechanism into a single huge machine . . . as to enable hundreds of*

*millions of people to be guided by a single plan?"* [Collected Works, vol. 27, pp. 90-1]  
Surely such an economy would be, to use Engels' words, a "a veritable despotism"?

The only possible solution is reducing the working day to a minimum and so the time spent as a slave to the machine (and plan) is reduced. The idea that work should be transformed into creative, empowering and liberating experience is automatically destroyed by Engels' argument. Like capitalism, Marxist-Socialism is based on "work is hell" and the domination of the producer. Hardly an inspiring vision of the future.

#### **H.4.7 Is revolution "*the most authoritarian thing there is*"?**

As well as the argument that "authority" is essential for every collective activity, Engels raises another argument against anarchism. This second argument is that revolutions are by nature authoritarian. In his words, a "*revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon - authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror its arms inspire in the reactionaries.*" [Marx-Engels Reader, p. 733]

Yet such an analysis is without class analysis and so will, by necessity, mislead the writer and the reader. Engels argues that revolution is the imposition by "*one part of the population*" on another. Very true - but Engels fails to indicate the nature of class society and, therefore, of a social revolution. In a class society "*one part of the population*" constantly "*imposes its will upon the other part*" - those with power impose their decisions to those beneath them in the social hierarchy. In other words, the ruling class imposes its will on the working class everyday in work by the hierarchical structure of the workplace and in society by the state. Discussing the "population" as if it were not divided by classes and so subject to specific forms of authoritarian social relationships is liberal nonsense.

Once we recognise that the "population" in question is divided into classes we can easily see the fallacy of Engels argument. In a social revolution, the act of revolution is the overthrow of the power and authority of an oppressing and exploiting class by those subject to that oppression and exploitation. In other words, it is an act of **liberation** in which the hierarchical power of the few over the many is eliminated and replaced by the freedom of the many to control their own lives. It is hardly authoritarian to destroy authority! Thus a social revolution is, fundamentally, an act of liberation for the oppressed who act in their own interests to end the system in which "*one part of population imposes its will upon the other*" everyday.

Malatesta stated the obvious:

*"To fight our enemies effectively, we do not need to deny the principle of freedom, not even for one moment: it is sufficient for us to want real freedom and to want it for all, for ourselves as well as for others.*

*"We want to expropriate the property-owning class, and with violence, since it is with violence that they hold on to social wealth and use it to exploit the working class. Not because freedom is a good thing for the future, but because it is a good thing, today*

*as well as tomorrow, and the property owners, be denying us the means of exercising our freedom, in effect, take it away from us.*

*"We want to overthrow the government, all governments - and overthrow them with violence since it is by the use of violence that they force us into obeying - and once again, not because we sneer at freedom when it does not serve our interests but because governments are the negation of freedom and it is not possible to be free without getting rid of them . . .*

*"The freedom to oppress, to exploit . . . is the denial of freedom: and the fact that our enemies make irrelevant and hypocritical use of the word freedom is not enough to make us deny the principle of freedom which is the outstanding characteristic of our movement and a permanent, constant and necessary factor in the life and progress of humanity."* [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 51]

It seems strange that Engels, in effect, is arguing that the abolition of tyranny is tyranny against the tyrants! As Malatesta so clearly argued, anarchists "*recognise violence only as a means of legitimate self-defence; and if today they are in favour of violence it is because they maintain that slaves are always in a state of legitimate defence.*" [Op. Cit., p. 59] As such, Engels fails to understand the revolution from a **working class** perspective (perhaps unsurprisingly, as he was a capitalist). The "authority" of the "armed workers" over the bourgeois is, simply, the defence of the workers' freedom against those who seek to end it by exercising/recreating the very authoritarian social relationships the revolution sought to end in the first place. This explains why, as we discussed in [section H.2.1](#) anarchists have always argued that a revolution would need to defend itself against those seeking to return the masses to their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

To equate the defence of freedom with "authority" is, in anarchist eyes, an expression of confused politics. Ultimately, Engels is like the liberal who equates the violence of the oppressed to end oppression with that the oppressors!

Needless to say, this applies to the class struggle as well. Is, for example, a picket line really authoritarian because it tries to impose its will on the boss, police or scabs? Rather, is it not defending the workers' freedom against the authoritarian power of the boss and their lackeys (the police and scabs)? Is it "authoritarian" to resist authority and create a structure - a strike assembly and picket line - which allows the formally subordinated workers to manage their own affairs directly and without bosses? Is it "authoritarian" to combat the authority of the boss, to proclaim your freedom and exercise it? Of course not.

Structurally, a strikers' assembly and picket line - which are forms of self-managed association - cannot be compared to an "authority" (such as a state). To try and do so fails to recognise the fundamental difference. In the strikers' assembly and picket line the strikers themselves decide policy and do not delegate power away into the hands of an authority (any strike committee executes the strikers decisions or is replaced). In a state, **power** is delegated into the hands of a few who then use that power as they see fit. This by necessity disempowers those at the base, who are turned into mere electors and order takers (i.e. an authoritarian relationship is created). Such a situation can only spell death of a social revolution, which requires the active participation of all if it is to succeed. It also, incidentally, exposes a central fallacy of Marxism, namely that it claims to desire a society

based on the participation of everyone yet favours a form of organisation - centralisation - that excludes that participation.

Georges Fontenais summarises anarchist ideas on this subject when he wrote:

*"And so against the idea of State, where power is exercised by a specialised group isolated from the masses, we put the idea of direct workers power, where accountable and controlled elected delegates (who can be recalled at any time and are remunerated at the same rate as other workers) replace hierarchical, specialised and privileged bureaucracy; where militias, controlled by administrative bodies such as soviets, unions and communes, with no special privileges for military technicians, realising the idea of the armed people, replace an army cut off from the body of Society and subordinated to the arbitrary power of a State or government."*

[**Manifesto of Libertarian Communism**, p. 24]

Anarchists, therefore, are no more impressed with this aspect of Engels critique than his "organisation equals authority" argument. In summary, his argument is simply a liberal analysis of revolution, totally without a class basis or analysis and so fails to understand the anarchist case nor answer it. To argue that a revolution is made up of two groups of people, one of which *"imposes its will upon the other"* fails to indicate the social relations that exist between these groups (classes) and the relations of authority between them which the revolution is seeking to overthrow. As such, Engels critique totally misses the point.

## H.5 What is vanguardism and why do anarchists reject it?

Many socialists follow the ideas of Lenin and, in particular, his ideas on vanguard parties. These ideas were expounded by Lenin in his (in)famous work **What is to be Done?** which is considered as one of the important books in the development of Bolshevism.

The core of these ideas is the concept of "*vanguardism*," or the "*vanguard party*." According to this perspective, socialists need to organise together in a party, based on the principles of "*democratic centralism*," which aims to gain a decisive influence in the class struggle. The ultimate aim of such a party is revolution and its seizure of power. Its short term aim is to gather into it all "*class conscious*" workers into a "*efficient*" and "*effective*" party, alongside members of other classes who consider themselves as revolutionary Marxists. The party would be strictly centralised, with all members expected to submit to party decisions, speak in one voice and act in one way. Without this "*vanguard*," injecting its politics into the working class (who, it is asserted, can only reach trade union consciousness by its own efforts), a revolution is impossible.

Lenin laid the foundation of this kind of party in his book **What is to be Done?** and the vision of the "*vanguard*" party was explicitly formalised in the Communist International. As Lenin put it, "*Bolshevism has created the ideological and tactical foundations of a Third International . . . Bolshevik can serve as a model of tactics for all.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 28, pp. 292-3] Using the Russian Communist Party as its model, Bolshevik ideas on party organisation were raised as a model for revolutionaries across the world. Since then, the

various followers of Leninism and its offshoots like Trotskyism have organised themselves in this manner (with varying success).

The wisdom of applying an organisational model that had been developed in the semi-feudal conditions of Tsarist Russia to **every** country, regardless of its level of development, has been questioned by anarchists from the start. After all, could it not be wiser to build upon the revolutionary tendencies which had developed in specific countries rather than import a new model which had been created for, and shaped by, radically different social, political and economic conditions? The wisdom of applying the vanguard model is not questioned on these (essentially materialist) points by those who subscribe to it. While revolutionary workers in the advanced capitalist nations subscribed to anarchist and syndicalist ideas, this tradition is rejected in favour of one developed by, in the main, bourgeois intellectuals in a nation which was still primarily feudal and absolutist. The lessons learned from years of struggle in actual capitalist societies were simply rejected in favour of those from a party operating under Tsarism. While most supporters of vanguardism will admit that conditions now are different than in Tsarist Russia, they still subscribe to organisational method developed in that context and justify it, ironically enough, because of its "success" in the totally different conditions that prevailed in Russia in the early 20th Century! And Leninists claim to be materialists!

Perhaps the reason why Bolshevism rejected the materialist approach was because most of the revolutionary movements in advanced capitalist countries were explicitly anti-parliamentarian, direct actionist, decentralist, federalist and influenced by libertarian ideas? This materialist analysis was a key aspect of the council communist critique of Lenin's **Left-Wing Communism**, for example (see Herman Gorter's **Open Letter to Comrade Lenin** for one excellent reply to Bolshevik arguments, tactics and assumptions). This attempt to squeeze every working class movement into **one** "officially approved" model dates back to Marx and Engels. Faced with any working class movement which did **not** subscribe to their vision of what they should be doing (namely organising in political parties to take part in "political action," i.e. standing in bourgeois elections) they simply labelled it as the product of non-proletarian "sects." They went so far as to gerrymander the 1872 conference of the First International to make acceptance of "political action" mandatory on all sections in an attempt to destroy anarchist influence in it.

So this section of our FAQ will explain why anarchists reject this model. In our view, the whole concept of a "*vanguard party*" is fundamentally anti-socialist. Rather than present an effective and efficient means of achieving revolution, the Leninist model is elitist, hierarchical and highly inefficient in achieving a socialist society. At best, these parties play a harmful role in the class struggle by alienating activists and militants with their organisational principles and manipulative tactics within popular structures and groups. At worse, these parties can seize power and create a new form of class society (a state capitalist one) in which the working class is oppressed by new bosses (namely, the party hierarchy and its appointees).

However, before discussing why anarchists reject "vanguardism" we need to stress a few points. Firstly, anarchists recognise the obvious fact that the working class is divided in terms of political consciousness. Secondly, from this fact most anarchists recognise the need to organise together to spread our ideas as well as taking part in, influencing and learning from the class struggle. As such, anarchists have long been aware of the need for revolutionaries to organise **as revolutionaries**. Thirdly, anarchists are well aware of the importance of revolutionary minorities playing an inspiring and "leading" role in the class struggle. We do

not reject the need for revolutionaries to "give a lead" in struggles, we reject the idea of institutionalised leadership and the creation of a leader/led hierarchy implicit (and sometimes no so implicit) in vanguardism.

As such, we do not oppose "*vanguardism*" for these reasons. So when Leninists like Tony Cliff argue that it is "*unevenness in the class [which] makes the party necessary*," anarchists reply that "*unevenness in the class*" makes it essential that revolutionaries organise together to influence the class but that organisation does not and need not take the form of a vanguard party. [Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 149] This is because we reject the concept and practice for three reasons.

Firstly, and most importantly, anarchists reject the underlying assumption of vanguardism. It is based on the argument that "*socialist consciousness*" has to be introduced into the working class from outside. We argue that not only is this position empirically false, it is fundamentally anti-socialist in nature. This is because it logically denies that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. Moreover, it serves to justify elite rule. Some Leninists, embarrassed by the obvious anti-socialist nature of this concept, try and argue that Lenin (and so Leninism) does not hold this position. We show that such claims are false.

Secondly, there is the question of organisational structure. Vanguard parties are based on the principle of "*democratic centralism*". Anarchists argue that such parties, while centralised, are not, in fact, democratic nor can they be. As such, the "*revolutionary*" or "*socialist*" party is no such thing as it reflects the structure of the capitalist system it claims to oppose.

Lastly, anarchists argue that such parties are, despite the claims of their supporters, not actually very efficient or effective in the revolutionary sense of the word. At best, they hinder the class struggle by being slow to respond to rapidly changing situations. At worse, they are "efficient" in shaping both the revolution and the post-revolutionary society in a hierarchical fashion, so re-creating class rule.

So these are key aspects of the anarchist critique of vanguardism, which we discuss in more depth in the following sections. It is a bit artificial to divide these issues into different sections because they are all related. The role of the party implies a specific form of organisation (as Lenin himself stressed), the form of the party influences its effectiveness. It is for ease of presentation we divide up our discussion so.

### H.5.1 Why are vanguard parties anti-socialist?

The reason why vanguard parties are anti-socialist is simply because of the role assigned to them by Lenin, which he thought was vital. Simply put, without the party, no revolution would be possible. As Lenin put it in 1900, "[i]solated from Social-Democracy, the working class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois." [**Collected Works**, vol. 4, p. 368] In **What is to be Done?**, he expands on this position:

*"Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers **only from without**, that is, **only outside of the economic struggle, outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers**. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships between **all** the various classes and strata*

*and the state and the government - the sphere of the interrelations between all the various classes.*" [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 112]

Thus the role of the party is to inject socialist politics into a class incapable of developing them itself.

Lenin is at pains to stress the Marxist orthodoxy of his claims and quotes the "*profoundly true and important*" comments of Karl Kautsky on the subject. [Op. Cit., p. 81] Kautsky, considered the "pope" of Social-Democracy, stated that it was "*absolutely untrue*" that "*socialist consciousness*" was a "*necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle.*" Rather, "*socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other . . . Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge . . . The vehicles of science are not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of some members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduced it into the proletarian class struggle.*" Kautsky stressed that "*socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without.*" [quoted by Lenin, Op. Cit., pp. 81-2]

So Lenin, it must be stressed, was not inventing anything new here. He was simply repeating the orthodox Marxist position and, as is obvious, wholeheartedly agreed with Kautsky's pronouncements (any attempt to claim that he did not or later rejected it is nonsense, as we prove in [section H.5.4](#)). Lenin, with his usual modesty, claimed to speak on behalf of the workers when he wrote that "*intellectuals must talk to us, and tell us more about what we do not know and what we can never learn from our factory and 'economic' experience, that is, you must give us political knowledge.*" [Op. Cit., p. 108] Thus we have Lenin painting a picture of a working class incapable of developing "*political knowledge*" or "*socialist consciousness*" by its own efforts and so is reliant on members of the party, themselves either radical elements of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie or educated by them, to provide it with such knowledge.

The obvious implication of this argument is that the working class cannot liberate itself by its own efforts. Without the radical bourgeois to provide the working class with "*socialist*" ideas, a socialist movement, let alone society, is impossible. If the working class cannot develop its own political theory by its own efforts then it cannot conceive of transforming society and, at best, can see only the need to work within capitalism for reforms to improve its position in society. A class whose members cannot develop political knowledge by its own actions cannot emancipate itself. It is, by necessity, dependent on others to shape and form its movements. To quote Trotsky's telling analogy on the respective roles of party and class, leaders and led:

*"Without a guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston. But nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam."* [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 1, p. 17]

While Trotsky's mechanistic analogy may be considered as somewhat crude, it does expose the underlying assumptions of Bolshevism. After all, did not Lenin argue that the working class could not develop "*socialist consciousness*" by themselves and that it had to be introduced from without? How can you expect steam to create a piston? You cannot. Thus we have a blind, elemental force incapable of conscious thought being guided by a creation of

science, the piston (which, of course, is a product of the work of the "vehicles of science," namely the **bourgeois intelligentsia**). In the Leninist perspective, if revolutions are the locomotives of history (to use Marx's words) then the masses are the steam, the party the locomotive and the leaders the train driver. The idea of a future society being constructed democratically from below by the workers themselves rather than through periodically elected leaders seems to have passed Bolshevism past. This is unsurprising, given that the Bolsheviks saw the workers in terms of blindly moving steam in a box, something incapable of being creative unless an outside force gave them direction (instructions).

Libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis provides a good critique of the implications of the Leninist position:

*"No positive content, nothing new capable of providing the foundation for the reconstruction of society could arise out of a mere awareness of poverty. From the experience of life under capitalism the proletariat could derive no new principles either for organising this new society or for orientating it in another direction. Under such conditions, the proletarian revolution becomes . . . a simple reflex revolt against hunger. It is impossible to see how socialist society could ever be the result of such a reflex . . . Their situation forces them to suffer the consequences of capitalism's contradictions, but in no way does it lead them to discover its causes. An acquaintance with these causes comes not from experiencing the production process but from theoretical knowledge . . . This knowledge may be accessible to individual workers, but not to the proletariat **qua** proletariat. Driven by its revolt against poverty, but incapable of self-direction since its experiences does not give it a privileged viewpoint on reality, the proletariat according to this outlook, can only be an infantry in the service of a general staff of specialists. These specialists **know** (from considerations that the proletariat as such does not have access to) what is going wrong with present-day society and how it must be modified. The traditional view of the economy and its revolutionary perspective can only found, and actually throughout history has only founded, a **bureaucratic politics** . . . [W]hat we have outlined are the consequences that follow objectively from this theory. And they have been affirmed in an ever clearer fashion within the actual historical movement of Marxism, culminating in Stalinism." [Social and Political Writings, vol. 2, pp. 257-8]*

Thus we have a privileged position for the party and a perspective which can (and did) justify party dictatorship **over** the proletariat. Given the perspective that the working class cannot formulate its own "ideology" by its own efforts, of its incapacity to move beyond "*trade union consciousness*" independently of the party, the clear implication is that the party could in no way be bound by the predominant views of the working class. As the party embodies "*socialist consciousness*" (and this arises outside the working class and its struggles) then opposition of the working class to the party signifies a failure of the class to resist alien influences. As Lenin put it:

*"Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement, the only choice is: either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course . . . Hence, to belittle socialist ideology in any way, to deviate from it in the slightest degree means strengthening bourgeois ideology. There is a lot of talk about spontaneity, but the spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to its becoming subordinated to bourgeois*

*ideology . . . Hence our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the labour movement from its spontaneous, trade unionist striving to go under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy." [Op. Cit., pp. 82-3]*

The implications of this argument became clear once the Bolsheviks seized power. As a justification for party dictatorship, you would be hard pressed to find any better. If the working class revolts against the ruling party, then we have a "*spontaneous*" development which, inevitably, is an expression of bourgeois ideology. As the party represents socialist consciousness, any deviation in working class support for it simply meant that the working class was being "*subordinated*" to the bourgeoisie. This meant, obviously, that to "*belittle*" the "*role*" of the party by questioning its rule meant to "*strengthen bourgeois ideology*" and when workers spontaneously went on strike or protested against the party's rule, the party had to "*combat*" these strivings in order to maintain working class rule! As the "*masses of the workers*" cannot develop an "*independent ideology*," the workers are rejecting socialist ideology in favour of bourgeois ideology. The party, in order to defend the "*the revolution*" (even the "*rule of the workers*!") has to impose its will onto the class, to "*combat spontaneity*."

As we saw in [section H.1.2](#), none of the leading Bolsheviks were shy about drawing these conclusions once in power and faced with working class revolt against their rule. Indeed, they raised the idea that the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" was also, in fact, the "*dictatorship of the party*" and, as we discussed in [section H.3.8](#) integrated this into their theory of the state. Thus, Leninist ideology implies that "*workers' power*" exists independently of the workers. This means that the sight of the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" (i.e. the Bolshevik government) repressing the proletariat is to be expected.

This elitist perspective of the party, the idea that it and it alone possesses knowledge can be seen from the resolution of the Communist International on the role of the party. It stated that "*the working class without an independent political party is a body without a head.*"

[**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, p. 194] This use of biological analogies says more about Bolshevism than its authors intended. After all, it suggests a division of labour which is unchangeable. Can the hands evolve to do their own thinking? Of course not. Yet again, we have an image of the class as unthinking brute force. As the Cohen-Bendit brothers argued, the "*Leninist belief that the workers cannot spontaneously go beyond the level of trade union consciousness is tantamount to beheading the proletariat, and then insinuating the Party as the head . . . Lenin was wrong, and in fact, in Russia the Party was forced to decapitate the workers' movement with the help of the political police and the Red Army under the brilliant leadership of Trotsky and Lenin.*"

[**Absolute Communism**, pp. 194-5]

As well as explaining the subsequent embrace of party dictatorship **over** the working class, vanguardism also explains the notorious inefficiency of Leninist parties faced with revolutionary situations we discuss in [section H.5.8](#). Basing themselves on the perspective that all spontaneous movements are inherently bourgeois they could not help but be opposed to autonomous class struggle and the organisations and tactics it generates. James C. Scott, in his excellent discussion of the roots and flaws in Lenin's ideas on the party, makes the obvious point that since, for Lenin, "*authentic, revolutionary class consciousness could never develop autonomously within the working class, it followed that that the actual political outlook of workers was always a threat to the vanguard party.*" [**Seeing like a State**, p. 155]

As Maurice Brinton argued, the "*Bolshevik cadres saw their role as the leadership of the revolution. Any movement not initiated by them or independent of their control could only evoke their suspicion.*" These developments, of course, did not occur by chance or accidentally for "*a given ideological premise (the preordained hegemony of the Party) led necessarily to certain conclusions in practice.*" [**The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. xi and p. xii]

Bakunin expressed the implications of the vanguardist perspective extremely well. It is worthwhile quoting him at length:

*"Idealists of all sorts, metaphysicians, positivists, those who uphold the priority of science over life, the doctrinaire revolutionists - all of them champion with equal zeal although differing in their argumentation, the idea of the State and State power, seeing in them, quite logically from their point of view, the only salvation of society. Quite logically, I say, having taken as their basis the tenet - a fallacious tenet in our opinion - that thought is prior to life, and abstract theory is prior to social practice, and that therefore sociological science must become the starting point for social upheavals and social reconstruction - they necessarily arrived at the conclusion that since thought, theory, and science are, for the present at least, the property of only a very few people, those few should direct social life; and that on the morrow of the Revolution the new social organisation should be set up not by the free integration of workers' associations, villages, communes, and regions from below upward, conforming to the needs and instincts of the people, but solely by the dictatorial power of this learned minority, allegedly expressing the general will of the people."*

[**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, pp. 283-4]

The idea that "*socialist consciousness*" can exist independently of the working class and its struggle suggests exactly the perspective Bakunin was critiquing. For vanguardism, the abstract theory of socialism exists prior to the class struggle and exists waiting to be brought to the masses by the educated few. The net effect is, as we have argued, to lay the ground for party dictatorship. The concept is fundamentally anti-socialist, a justification for elite rule and the continuation of class society in new, party approved, ways.

## H.5.2 Have vanguardist assumptions been validated?

Lenin claimed that workers can only reach a "*trade union consciousness*" by their own efforts. Anarchists argue that such an assertion is empirically false. The history of the labour movement is marked by revolts and struggles which went far further than just seeking reforms as well as revolutionary theories derived from such experiences.

The category of "*economic struggle*" corresponds to no known social reality. Every "*economic*" struggle is "*political*" in some sense and those involved can, and do, learn political lessons from them. As Kropotkin noted in the 1880s, there "*is almost no serious strike which occurs together with the appearance of troops, the exchange of blows and some acts of revolt. Here they fight with the troops; there they march on the factories . . . Thanks to government intervention the rebel against the factory becomes the rebel against the State.*" [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism**, p. 256] If history shows anything, it shows that workers are more than capable of going beyond "*trade union consciousness*." The Paris Commune, the 1848 revolts and, ironically enough,

the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions show that the masses are capable of revolutionary struggles in which the self-proclaimed "*vanguard*" of socialists spend most of their time trying to catch up with them!

The history of Bolshevism also helps discredit Lenin's argument that the workers cannot develop socialist consciousness alone due to the power of bourgeois ideology. Simply put, if the working class is subjected to bourgeois influences, then so are the "*professional*" revolutionaries within the party. Indeed, the strength of such influences on the "professionals" of revolution **must** be higher as they are not part of proletarian life. If social being influences consciousness then if a revolutionary is no longer part of the working class then they no longer are rooted in the social conditions which generate socialist theory and action. No longer connected with collective labour and working class life, the "*professional*" revolutionary is more likely to be influenced by the social milieu he or she now is part of (i.e. a bourgeois, or at best petit-bourgeois, environment).

This tendency for the "*professional*" revolutionary to be subject to bourgeois influences can continually be seen from the history of the Bolshevik party. As Trotsky himself noted:

*"It should not be forgotten that the political machine of the Bolshevik Party was predominantly made up of the intelligentsia, which was petty bourgeois in its origin and conditions of life and Marxist in its ideas and in its relations with the proletariat. Workers who turned professional revolutionists joined this set with great eagerness and lost their identity in it. The peculiar social structure of the Party machine and its authority over the proletariat (neither of which is accidental but dictated by strict historical necessity) were more than once the cause of the Party's vacillation and finally became the source of its degeneration . . . In most cases they lacked independent daily contact with the labouring masses as well as a comprehensive understanding of the historical process. They thus left themselves exposed to the influence of alien classes."* [Stalin, vol. 1, pp. 297-8]

He pointed to the example of the First World War, when, *"even the Bolshevik party did not at once find its way in the labyrinth of war. As a general rule, the confusion was most pervasive and lasted longest amongst the Party's higher-ups, who came in direct contact with bourgeois public opinion."* Thus the professional revolutionaries *"were largely affected by compromisist tendencies, which emanated from bourgeois circles, while the rank and file Bolshevik workingmen displayed far greater stability resisting the patriotic hysteria that had swept the country."* [Op. Cit., p. 248 and p. 298] It should be noted that he was repeating earlier comments on the *"immense intellectual backsliding of the upper stratum of the Bolsheviks during the war"* was caused by *"isolation from the masses and isolation from those abroad - that is primarily from Lenin."* [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 3, p. 134] As we discuss in [section H.5.12](#), even Trotsky had to admit that during 1917 the working class was far more revolutionary than the party and the party more revolutionary than the "*party machine*" of "*professional revolutionaries*."

Ironically enough, Lenin himself recognised this aspect of intellectuals after he had praised their role in bringing "revolutionary" consciousness to the working class. In his 1904 work **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back**, he argued that it was now the presence of "*large numbers of radical intellectuals in the ranks*" which has ensured that *"the opportunism which their mentality produces had been, and is, bound to exist."* [Collected Works, vol. 7, pp. 403-4] According to Lenin's new philosophy, the working class simply needs to have been

through the "*schooling of the factory*" in order to give the intelligentsia lessons in political discipline, the very same intelligentsia which up until then had played the leading role in the Party and had given political consciousness to the working class. In his words:

*"For the factory, which seems only a bogey to some, represents that highest form of capitalist co-operation which has united and disciplined the proletariat, taught it to organise . . . And it is Marxism, the ideology of the proletariat trained by capitalism, has been and is teaching . . . unstable intellectuals to distinguish between the factory as a means of exploitation (discipline based on fear of starvation) and the factory as a means of organisation (discipline based on collective work . . .). The discipline and organisation which come so hard to the bourgeois intellectual are very easily acquired by the proletariat just because of this factory 'schooling.'" [Op. Cit., pp. 392-3]*

Lenin's analogy is, of course, flawed. The factory is a "*means of exploitation*" because its "*means of organisation*" is top-down and hierarchical. The "*collective work*" which the workers are subjected to is organised by the boss and the "*discipline*" is that of the barracks, not that of free individuals. In fact, the "*schooling*" for revolutionaries is **not** the factory, but the class struggle - healthy and positive self-discipline is generated by the struggle against the way the workplace is organised under capitalism. Factory discipline, in other words, is completely different from the discipline required for social struggle or revolution. Workers become revolutionary in so far as they reject the hierarchical discipline of the workplace and develop the self-discipline required to fight it.

A key task of anarchism is to encourage working class revolt against this type of discipline, particularly in the capitalist workplace. The "*discipline*" Lenin praises simply replaces human thought and association with the following of orders and hierarchy. Thus anarchism aims to undermine capitalist (imposed and brutalising) discipline in favour of solidarity, the "*discipline*" of free association and agreement based on the community of struggle and the political consciousness and revolutionary enthusiasm that struggle creates. Thus, for anarchists, the model of the factory can never be the model for a revolutionary organisation any more than Lenin's vision of society as "*one big workplace*" could be our vision of socialism (see [section H.3.1](#)). Ultimately, the factory exists to reproduce hierarchical social relationships and class society just as much as it exists to produce goods.

It should be noted that Lenin's argument does not contradict his earlier ones. The proletarian and intellectual have complementary jobs in the party. The proletariat is to give lessons in political discipline to the intellectuals as they have been through the process of factory (i.e. hierarchical) discipline. The role of the intellectuals as providers of "*political consciousness*" is the same and so they give political lessons to the workers. Moreover, his vision of the vanguard party is basically the same as in **What is to Be Done?**. This can be seen from his comments that the leading Menshevik Martov "*lumps together in the party organised and unorganised elements, those who lend themselves to direction and those who do not, the advanced and the incorrigibly backward.*" He stressed that the "*division of labour under the direction of a centre evokes from him [the intellectual] a tragicomical outcry against transforming people into 'cogs and wheels.'*" [Op. Cit., p. 258 and p. 392] Thus there is the same division of labour as in the capitalist factory, with the boss (the "*centre*") having the power to direct the workers (who submit to "*direction*"). Thus we have a "revolutionary" party organised in a **capitalist** manner, with the same "*division of labour*" between order givers and order takers.

### H.5.3 Why does vanguardism imply party power?

As we discussed in [section H.5.1](#), anarchists argue that the assumptions of vanguardism lead to party rule over the working class. Needless to say, followers of Lenin disagree. For example, Chris Harman of the British **Socialist Workers Party** argues the opposite case in his essay *"Party and Class."* However, his own argument suggests the elitist conclusions libertarians have drawn from Lenin's.

Harman argues that there are two ways to look at the revolutionary party, the Leninist way and the traditional social-democratic way (as represented by the likes of Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg in 1903-5). *"The latter,"* he argues, *"was thought of as a party of the whole [working] class . . . All the tendencies within the class had to be represented within it. Any split within it was to be conceived of as a split within the class. Centralisation, although recognised as necessary, was feared as a centralisation over and against the spontaneous activity of the class. Yet it was precisely in this kind of party that the 'autocratic' tendencies warned against by Luxemburg were to develop most. For within it the confusion of member and sympathiser, the massive apparatus needed to hold together a mass of only half-politicised members in a series of social activities, led to a toning down of political debate, a lack of political seriousness, which in turn reduced the ability of the members to make independent political evaluations and increased the need for apparatus-induced involvement."* [**Party and Class**, p. 32]

Thus, the lumping together into one organisation all those who consider themselves as "socialist" and agree with the party's aims creates in a mass which results in *"autocratic"* tendencies within the party organisation. As such, it is important to remember that *"the Party, as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused with the entire class."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 22] For this reason, the party must be organised in a specific manner which reflects his Leninist assumptions:

*"The alternative [to the vanguard party] is the 'marsh' - where elements motivated by scientific precision are so mixed up with those who are irremediably confused as to prevent any decisive action, effectively allowing the most backward to lead."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 30]

The problem for Harman is to explain how the proletariat can become the ruling class if this were true. He argues that *"the party is not the embryo of the workers' state - the workers' council is. The working class as a whole will be involved in the organisations that constitute the state, the most backward as well as the most progressive elements."* The *"function of the party is not to be the state."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 33] The implication is that the working class will take an active part in the decision making process during the revolution (although the level of this *"involvement"* is unspecified, probably for good reasons as we explain). If this is the case, then the problem of the mass party reappears, but in a new form (we must also note that this problem must have also appeared in 1917, when the Bolshevik party opened its doors to become a mass party).

As the *"organisations that constitute the state"* are made up of the working class *"as a whole,"* then, obviously, they cannot be expected to wield power (i.e. directly manage the revolution from below). If they did, then the party would be *"mixed up"* with the *"irremediably confused"* and so could not lead (as we discuss in [section H.5.5](#), Lenin linked

"opportunism" to "primitive" democracy, i.e. self-management, within the party). Hence the need for party power. Which, of course, explains Lenin's 1920 comments that an organisation embracing the whole working class cannot exercise the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" and that a "*vanguard*" is required to do so (see [section H.1.2](#) for details). Of course, Harman does not explain how the "*irremediably confused*" are able to judge that the party is the best representative of its interests. Surely if someone is competent enough to pick their ruler, they must also be competent enough to manage their own affairs directly? Equally, if the "*irremediably confused*" vote against the party once it is in power, what happens? Will the party submit to the "*leadership*" of what it considers "*the most backward*"? If the Bolsheviks are anything to go by, the answer has to be no.

Ironically, Harman argues that it "*is worth noting that in Russia a real victory of the apparatus over the party required precisely the bringing into the party hundreds of thousands of 'sympathisers,' a dilution of the 'party' by the 'class.'* . . . *The Leninist party does not suffer from this tendency to bureaucratic control precisely because it restricts its membership to those willing to be serious and disciplined enough to take political and theoretical issues as their starting point, and to subordinate all their activities to those.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 33] It would be churlish to note that, firstly, the party had already imposed its dictatorship on the working class by that time and, secondly, his own party is regularly attacked by its own dissidents for being bureaucratic (see [section H.5.11](#)).

Significantly, this substitution of the rule of the party for working class self-government and the party apparatus for the party membership does not happen by accident. In order to have a socialist revolution, the working class as a whole must participate in the process so the decision making organisations will be based on the party being "*mixed up*" with the "*irremediably confused*" as if they were part of a non-Leninist party. So from Harman's own assumptions, this by necessity results in an "*autocratic*" regime within the new "*workers' state*."

This was implicitly recognised by the Bolsheviks when they stressed that the function of the party was to become the government, the head of the state, to "*assume power*", (see [section H.3.3](#)). Thus, while the working class "*as a whole*" will be "*involved in the organisations that constitute the state*," the party (in practice, its leadership) will hold power. And for Trotsky, this substitution of the party for the class was inevitable:

*"We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its strong revolutionary organisation that the party has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this 'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class. It is quite natural that, in the period in which history brings up those interests . . . the Communists have become the recognised representatives of the working class as a whole."* [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 109]

He noted that within the state, "*the last word belongs to the Central Committee of the party.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 107] As we discuss in [section H.3.8](#), he held this position into the 1930s.

This means that given Harman's own assumptions, autocratic rule by the party is inevitable. Ironically, he argues that "*to be a 'vanguard' is not the same as to substitute one's own desires, or policies or interests, for those of the class.*" He stresses that an "*organisation that is concerned with participating in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class cannot conceive of substituting itself for the organs of the direct rule of that class.*" [Op. Cit., p. 33 and p. 34] However, the logic of his argument suggests otherwise. Simply put, his arguments against a broad party organisation are also applicable to self-management during the class struggle and revolution. The rank and file party members are "*mixed up*" in the class. This leads to party members becoming subject to bourgeois influences. This necessitates the power of the higher bodies over the lower (see [section H.5.5](#)). The highest party organ, the central committee, must rule over the party machine, which in turn rules over the party members, who, in turn, rule over the workers. This logical chain was, ironically enough, recognised by Trotsky in 1904 in his polemic against Lenin:

*"The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the central committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally the 'dictator' substitutes himself for the central committee."* [quoted by Harman, Op. Cit., p. 22]

Obviously once in power this substitution was less of a concern for him! Which, however, does not deny the insight Trotsky had previously showed about the dangers inherent in the Bolshevik assumptions on working class spontaneity and how revolutionary ideas develop. Dangers which he, ironically, helped provide empirical evidence for.

This false picture of the party (and its role) explains the progression of the Bolshevik party after 1917. As the soviets organised all workers, we have the problem that the party (with its "scientific" knowledge) is swamped by the class. The task of the party is to "*persuade, not coerce these [workers] into accepting its lead*" and, as Lenin made clear, for it to take political power. [Harman, Op. Cit., p. 34] Once in power, the decisions of the party are in constant danger of being overthrown by the working class, which necessitates a state run with "*iron discipline*" (and the necessary means of coercion) by the party. With the disempowering of the mass organisations by the party, the party itself becomes a substitute for popular democracy as being a party member is the only way to influence policy. As the party grows, the influx of new members "*dilutes*" the organisation, necessitating a similar growth of centralised power at the top of the organisation. This eliminated the substitute for proletarian democracy which had developed within the party (which explains the banning of factions within the Bolshevik party in 1921). Slowly but surely, power concentrates into fewer and fewer hands, which, ironically enough, necessitates a bureaucracy to feed the party leaders information and execute its will. Isolated from all, the party inevitably degenerates and Stalinism results.

We are sure that many Trotskyists will object to our analysis, arguing that we ignore the problems facing the Russian Revolution in our discussion. Harman argues that it was "*not the form of the party that produces party as opposed to soviet rule, but the decimation of the working class*" that occurred during the Russian Revolution. [Op. Cit., p. 37] This is false. As noted, Lenin was always explicit about the fact that the Bolshevik's sought party rule ("*full state power*") and that their rule **was** working class rule. As such, we have the first, most basic, substitution of party power for workers power. Secondly, as we discuss in [section H.6.1](#), the Bolshevik party had been gerrymandering and disbanding soviets before the start of the Civil War, so proving that the war cannot be held accountable for this process of substitution. Thirdly, Leninists are meant to know that civil war is inevitable during a

revolution. To blame the inevitable for the degeneration of the revolution is hardly convincing (particularly as the degeneration started before the civil war broke out).

Unsurprisingly, anarchists reject the underlying basis of this progression, the idea that the working class, by its own efforts, is incapable of developing beyond a "*trade union consciousness*." The actions of the working class itself condemned these attitudes as outdated and simply wrong long before Lenin's infamous comments were put on paper. In every struggle, the working class has created its own organisations to co-ordinate its struggle. In the process of struggle, the working class changes its perspectives. This process is uneven in both quantity and quality, but it does happen. However, anarchists do not think that **all** working class people will, at the same time, spontaneously become anarchists. If they did, we would be in an anarchist society today! As we argue in [section J.3](#), anarchists acknowledge that political development within the working class is uneven. The difference between anarchism and Leninism is how we see socialist ideas developing and how revolutionaries influence that process.

In every class struggle there is a radical minority which takes the lead and many of this minority develop revolutionary conclusions from their experiences. As such, members of the working class develop their own revolutionary theory and it does not need bourgeois intellectuals to inject it into them. Anarchists go on to argue that this minority (along with any members of other classes who have broken with their background and become libertarians) should organise and work together. The role of this revolutionary organisation is to spread, discuss and revise its ideas and help others draw the same conclusions as they have from their own, and others, experiences. The aim of such a group is, by word and deed, to assist the working class in its struggles and to draw out and clarify the libertarian aspects of this struggle. It seeks to abolish the rigid division between leaders and led which is the hallmark of class society by drawing the vast majority of the working class into social struggle and revolutionary politics by encouraging their direct management of the struggle. Only this participation and the political discussion it generates will allow revolutionary ideas to become widespread.

In other words, anarchists argue that precisely **because** of political differences ("unevenness") we need the fullest possible democracy and freedom to discuss issues and reach agreements. Only by discussion and self-activity can the political perspectives of those in struggle develop and change. In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is the strongest argument against it.

Our differences with vanguardism could not be more clear.

## H.5.4 Did Lenin abandon vanguardism?

Vanguardism rests on the premise that the working class cannot emancipate itself. As such, the ideas of Lenin as expounded in **What is to be Done? (WITBD)** contradicts the key idea of Marx that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. Thus the paradox of Leninism. On the one hand, it subscribes to an ideology allegedly based on working class self-liberation. On the other, the founder of that school wrote an obviously influential work whose premise not only logically implies that they cannot, it also provides the perfect rationale for party dictatorship over the working class (and as the history of

Leninism in power shows, this underlying premise was much stronger than any democratic-sounding rhetoric).

It is for this reason that many Leninists are somewhat embarrassed by Lenin's argument in that key text. Hence we see Chris Harman writing that "*the real theoretical basis for [Lenin's] argument on the party is not that the working class is incapable on its own of coming to theoretical socialist consciousness . . . The real basis for his argument is that the level of consciousness in the working class is never uniform.*" [Party and Class, pp. 25-6] In other words, Harman changes the focus of the question away from the point explicitly and repeatedly stated by Lenin that the working class was incapable on its own of coming to socialist consciousness and that he was simply repeating Marxist orthodoxy when he did.

Harman bases his revision on Lenin's later comments regarding his book, namely that he sought to "*straighten matters out*" by "*pull[ing] in the other direction*" to the "*extreme*" which the "*economists*" had went to. [Collected Works, vol. 6, p. 491] He repeated this in 1907, as we will discuss shortly. While Lenin may have been right to attack the "*economists*", his argument that socialist consciousness comes to the working class only "*from without*" is not a case of going too far in the other direction; it is wrong. Simply put, you do not attack ideas you disagree with by arguing an equally false set of ideas. This suggests that Harman's attempt to downplay Lenin's elitist position is flawed. Simply put, the "*real theoretical basis*" of the argument was precisely the issue Lenin himself raised, namely the incapacity of the working class to achieve socialist consciousness by itself. It is probably the elitist conclusions of this argument which drives Harman to try and change the focus to another issue, namely the political unevenness within the working class.

Some go to even more extreme lengths, denying that Lenin even held such a position. For example, Hal Draper argued at length that Lenin did not, in fact, hold the opinions he actually expressed in his book! While Draper covers many aspects of what he called the "*Myth of Lenin's 'Concept of The Party'*" in his essay of the same name, we will concentrate on the key idea, namely that socialist ideas are developed outside the class struggle by the radical intelligentsia and introduced into the working class from without. Here, as argued in [section H.5.1](#), is the root of the anti-socialist basis of Leninism.

So what did Draper say? On the one hand, he denied that Lenin held this theory (he states that it is a "*virtually non-existent theory*" and "*non-existent after WITBD*"). He argued that those who hold the position that Lenin actually meant what he said in his book "*never quote anything other than WITBD*," and stated that this is a "*curious fact*" (a fact we will disprove shortly). Draper argued as follows: "*Did Lenin put this theory forward even in WITBD? Not exactly.*" He then noted that Lenin "*had just read this theory in the most prestigious theoretical organ of Marxism of the whole international socialist movement*" and it had been "*put forward in an important article by the leading Marxist authority,*" Karl Kautsky and so "*Lenin first paraphrased Kautsky*" before "*quot[ing] a long passage from Kautsky's article.*"

This much, of course, is well known by anyone who has read Lenin's book. By paraphrasing and quoting Kautsky as he does, Lenin is showing his agreement with Kautsky's argument. Indeed, Lenin states before quoting Kautsky that his comments are "*profoundly true and important*". [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 79] By explicitly agreeing with Kautsky, it can be said that it also becomes Lenin's theory as well! Over time, particularly after Kautsky had been labelled a "*renegade*" by Lenin, Kautsky's star waned and Lenin's rose. Little wonder the argument became associated with Lenin rather than the discredited Kautsky. Draper then

speculated that "*it is curious . . . that no one has sought to prove that by launching this theory . . . Kautsky was laying the basis for the demon of totalitarianism.*" A simply reason exists for this, namely the fact that Kautsky, unlike Lenin, was never the head of a one-party dictatorship and justified this system politically. Indeed, Kautsky attacked the Bolsheviks for this, which caused Lenin to label him a "*renegade*." Kautsky, in this sense, can be considered as being inconsistent with his political assumptions, unlike Lenin who took these assumptions to their logical conclusions.

How, after showing the obvious fact that "*the crucial 'Leninist' theory was really Kautsky's,*" he then wondered: "*Did Lenin, in WITBD, adopt Kautsky's theory?*" He answered his own question with an astounding "*Again, not exactly!*" Clearly, quoting approvingly of a theory and stating it is "*profoundly true*" does not, in fact, make you a supporter of it! What evidence does Draper present for his amazing answer? Well, Draper argued that Lenin "*tried to get maximum mileage out of it against the right wing; this was the point of his quoting it. If it did something for Kautsky's polemic, he no doubt figured that it would do something for his.*" Or, to present a more simple and obvious explanation, Lenin **agreed** with Kautsky's "*profoundly true*" argument!

Aware of this possibility, Draper tried to combat it. "*Certainly,*" he argued, "*this young man Lenin was not (yet) so brash as to attack his 'pope' or correct him overtly. But there was obviously a feeling of discomfort. While showing some modesty and attempting to avoid the appearance of a head-on criticism, the fact is that Lenin inserted two longish footnotes rejecting (or if you wish, amending) precisely what was worst about the Kautsky theory on the role of the proletariat.*" So, here we have Lenin quoting Kautsky to prove his own argument (and noting that Kautsky's words were "*profoundly true and important*"!) but "*feeling discomfort*" over what he has just approvingly quoted! Incredible!

So how does Lenin "*amend*" Kautsky's "*profoundly true and important*" argument? In two ways, according to Draper. Firstly, in a footnote which "*was appended right after the Kautsky passage*" Lenin quoted. Draper argued that it "*was specifically formulated to undermine and weaken the theoretical content of Kautsky's position. It began: 'This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology.' But this was exactly what Kautsky did mean and say. In the guise of offering a caution, Lenin was proposing a modified view. 'They [the workers] take part, however,' Lenin's footnote continued, 'not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able . . .' In short, Lenin was reminding the reader that Kautsky's sweeping statements were not even 100% true historically; he pointed to exceptions.*" Yes, Lenin **did** point to exceptions **in order to refute objections to Kautsky's argument before they were raised!** It is clear that Lenin was **not** refuting Kautsky. Thus Proudhon adds to socialist ideology in so far as he is a "*socialist theoretician*" and not a worker! How clear can you be? This can be seen from the rest of the sentence Draper truncates. Lenin continued by noting that people like Proudhon "*take part only to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and advance that knowledge.*" {

Op. Cit., p. 82f] In other words, insofar as they learn from the "*vehicles of science*." Neither Kautsky or Lenin denied that it was possible for workers to acquire such knowledge and pass it on (sometimes even develop it). However this does **not** mean that they thought workers, as part of their daily life and struggle **as workers**, could develop "*socialist theory*." Thus Lenin's footnote reiterated Kautsky's argument rather than, as Draper hoped, refute it.

Draper turns to another footnote, which he noted "*was not directly tied to the Kautsky article, but discussed the 'spontaneity' of the socialist idea. It is often said,' Lenin began, 'that the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class . . . and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily,' but he reminded that this process itself was not subordinated to mere spontaneity. 'The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, . . . bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree."*" Draper argued that this "*was obviously written to modify and recast the Kautsky theory, without coming out and saying that the Master was wrong.*" So, here we have Lenin approvingly quoting Kautsky in the main text while, at the same time, providing a footnote to show that, in fact, he did not agree with what he has just quoted! Truly amazing - and easily refuted.

Lenin's footnote stressed, in a part Draper did not consider it wise to quote, that workers appreciate socialist theory "**provided**, however, that this theory does not step aside for spontaneity and **provided** it subordinates spontaneity to itself." [Op. Cit., p. 84f] In other words, workers "*assimilate*" socialist theory only when socialist theory does not adjust itself to the "*spontaneous*" forces at work in the class struggle. The workers adjust to socialist theory, they do not create it. Thus, rather than refuting Kautsky by the backdoor, Lenin in this footnote still agreed with him. Socialism does not develop, as Kautsky stressed, from the class struggle but rather has to be injected into it. This means, by necessity, the party "*subordinates spontaneity to itself.*"

Draper argued that this "*modification*" simply meant that there "*are several things that happen 'spontaneously,' and what will win out is not decided only by spontaneity*" but as can be seen, this is not the case. Only when "*spontaneity*" is subordinated to the theory (i.e. the party) can socialism be won, a totally different position. As such, when Draper asserted that "*[a]ll that was clear at this point was that Lenin was justifiably dissatisfied with the formulation of Kautsky's theory,*" he was simply expressing wishful thinking. This footnote, like the first one, continued the argument developed by Lenin in the main text and in no way is in contradiction to it. As is obvious.

Draper as final evidence of his case asserted that it "*is a curious fact that no one has ever found this alleged theory anywhere else in Lenin's voluminous writings, not before and not after [WITBD]. It never appeared in Lenin again. No Leninologist has ever quoted such a theory from any other place in Lenin.*" However, as this theory was the orthodox Marxist position, Lenin had no real need to reiterate this argument continuously. After all, he had quoted the acknowledged leader of Marxism on the subject explicitly to show the orthodoxy of his argument and the non-Marxist base of those he argued against. Once the debate had been won and orthodox Marxism triumphant, why repeat the argument again? This, as we will see, was exactly the position Lenin **did** take in 1907 when he wrote an introduction to a book which contained **What is to Be Done?**.

In contradiction to Draper's claim, Lenin **did** return to this matter. In October 1905 he wrote an a short article in praise of an article by Stalin on this very subject. Stalin had sought to explain Lenin's ideas to the Georgian Social-Democracy and, like Lenin, had sought to root the argument in Marxist orthodoxy (partly to justify the argument, partly to expose the Menshevik opposition as being non-Marxists). Stalin argued along similar lines to Lenin:

*"the question now is: who works out, who is able to work out this socialist consciousness (i.e. scientific socialism)? Kautsky says, and I repeat his idea, that the masses of proletarians, as long as they remain proletarians, have neither the time nor the opportunity to work out socialist consciousness . . . The vehicles of science are the intellectuals . . . who have both the time and opportunity to put themselves in the van of science and workout socialist consciousness. Clearly, socialist consciousness is worked out by a few Social-Democratic intellectuals who posses the time and opportunity to do so."* [Collected Works, vol. 1, p. 164]

Stalin stressed the Marxist orthodoxy by stating Social-Democracy "comes in and introduces socialist consciousness into the working class movement. This is what Kautsky has in mind when he says 'socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without.'" [Op. Cit., pp. 164-5] That Stalin was simply repeating Lenin's and Kautsky's arguments is clear, as is the fact it was considered the orthodox position within social-democracy.

If Draper was right, then Lenin would have taken the opportunity to attack Stalin's article and express the alternative viewpoint Draper was convinced he held. Lenin, however, put pen to paper to **praise** Stalin's work, noting "*the splendid way in which the problem of the celebrated 'introduction of a consciousness from without' had been posed.*" Lenin explicitly agreed with Stalin's summary of his argument, writing that "*social being determines consciousness . . . Socialist consciousness corresponds to the position of the proletariat*" before quoting Stalin: "*Who can and does evolve this consciousness (scientific socialism)?*" He answers by again approvingly quoting Stalin: "*its 'evolution' is a matter for a few Social-Democratic intellectuals who posses the necessary means and time.*" Lenin did argue that Social-Democracy meets "*an instinctive urge towards socialism*" when it "*comes to the proletariat with the message of socialism,*" but this does not counter the main argument that the working class cannot develop socialist consciousness by its own efforts and the, by necessity, elitist and hierarchical politics that flow from this position. [Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 9, p. 388]

That Lenin did not reject his early formulations can also be seen from in his introduction to the pamphlet "Twelve Years" which contained **What is to be Done?**. Rather than explaining the false nature of that work's more infamous arguments, Lenin in fact defended them. For example, as regards the question of professional revolutionaries, he argued that the statements of his opponents now "*look ridiculous*" as "*today the idea of an organisation of professional revolutionaries has already scored a complete victory,*" a victory which "*would have been impossible if this idea had not been pushed to the forefront at the time.*" He noted that his work had "*vanquished Economism . . . and finally created this organisation.*" On the question of socialist consciousness, he simply reiterated the Marxist orthodoxy of his position, noting that its "*formulation of the relationship between spontaneity and political consciousness was agreed upon by all the Iskra editors . . . Consequently, there could be no question of any difference in principle between the draft Party programme and What is to be Done? on this issue.*" So while Lenin argued that his book "*straightens out what had been twisted by the Economists,*" (who had "*gone to one extreme*") he did not correct his earlier arguments. [Collected Works, vol. 13, p. 101, p. 102 and p. 107]

Looking at Lenin's arguments at the Communist International on the question of the party we see an obvious return to the ideas of **WITBD** (see [section H.5.5](#)). Here was have a similar legal/illegal duality, strict centralism, strong hierarchy and the vision of the party as the

"head" of the working class (i.e. its consciousness). In **Left-Wing Communism**, Lenin mocks those who reject the idea that dictatorship by the party is the same as that of the class (see [section H.3.3](#)).

For Draper, the key problem was that critics of Lenin *"run two different questions together: (a) What was, historically, the initial role of intellectuals in the beginnings of the socialist movement, and (b) what is - and above all, what should be - the role of bourgeois intellectuals in a working-class party today."* He argued that Kautsky did not believe that *"if it can be shown that intellectuals historically played a certain initiatory role, they must and should continue to play the same role now and forever. It does not follow; as the working class matured, it tended to throw off leading strings."* However, this is unconvincing. If socialist consciousness cannot be generated by the working class by its own struggles then this is applicable now and in the future. Thus workers who join the socialist movement will be repeating the party ideology, as developed by intellectuals in the past. If they **do** develop new theory, it would be, as Lenin stressed, *"not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians"* and so socialist consciousness still does not derive from their own class experiences. This places the party in a privileged position vis-À-vis the working class and so the elitism remains.

Somewhat ironically given how much Draper is at pains to distance his hero Lenin from claims of elitism, he himself **agreed** with the arguments of Kautsky and Lenin. For Draper socialism did **not** develop out of the class struggle: *"As a matter of fact, in the International of 1902 no one really had any doubts about the historical facts concerning the beginnings of the movement."* This was true. Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, made similar arguments to Kautsky's before Lenin put pen to paper. For Plekhanov, the socialist intelligentsia *"will bring consciousness into the working class."* It must *"become the leader of the working class"* and *"explain to it its political and economic interests."* This would *"prepare them to play an independent role in the social life of Russia."* [quoted by Neil Harding, **Lenin's Political Thought**, vol. 1, p. 50 and p. 51]

As one expert notes, *"Lenin's position . . . did not differ in any essentials"* from those *"Plekhanov had himself expressed."* Its *"basic theses were his own"*, namely that it is *"clear from Plekhanov's writing that it was the intelligentsia which virtually created the working class movement in its conscious form. It brought it science, revolutionary theory and organisation."* In summary, *"Lenin's views of the Party . . . are not to be regarded as extraordinary, innovative, perverse, essentially Jacobin or unorthodox. On the contrary"* they were *"the touchstone of orthodoxy"* and so *"what it [What is to be Done?] presented at the time"* was *"a restatement of the principles of Russian Marxist orthodoxy."* By quoting Kautsky, Lenin also proved that he was simply repeating the general Marxist orthodoxy: *"Those who dispute Lenin's conclusions on the genesis of socialist consciousness must it seems, also dispute Kautsky's claim to represent Social-Democratic orthodoxy."* [Harding, **Op. Cit.**, p. 170, p. 172, pp. 50-1, p. 187, p. 188, p. 189 and p. 169]

Moreover, Engels wrote some interesting words in the 1840s on this issue which places the subsequent development of Marxism into sharper light. He noted that *"it is evident that the working-men's movement is divided into two sections, the Chartists and the Socialists. The Chartists are theoretically the more backward, the less developed, but they are genuine proletarians . . . The Socialists are more far-seeing . . . but proceeding originally from the bourgeoisie, are for this reason unable to amalgamate completely with the working class. The union of Socialism with Chartistism . . . will be the next step . . . Then, only when this has*

*been achieved, will the working class be the true intellectual leader of England.*" Thus socialist ideas have to be introduced into the proletariat, as they are "more backward" and cannot be expected to develop theory for themselves! In the same year, he expounded on what this "*union*" would entail, writing in an Owenite paper that "*the union between the German philosophers . . . and the German working men . . . is all but accomplished. With the philosophers to think, and the working mean to fight for us, will any earthly power be strong enough to resist our progress?*" [Collected Works, vol. 4, pp. 526-7 and p. 236] This, of course, fits in with the **Communist Manifesto**'s assertion that "*a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class.*" Today, this "*portion of the bourgeois ideologists*" have "*raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.*" [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 481] This, needless to say, places "*bourgeois ideologists*" (like Marx, Engels, Kautsky and Lenin) in a privileged position within the movement and has distinctly vanguardist undercurrents.

Seemingly unaware how this admission destroyed his case, Draper went on to ask: "*But what followed from those facts?*" To which he argued that Marx and Engels "*concluded, from the same facts and subsequent experiences, that the movement had to be sternly warned against the influence of bourgeois intellectuals inside the party.*" (We wonder if Marx and Engels included themselves in the list of "*bourgeois intellectuals*" the workers had to be "*sternly warned*" about?) Thus, amusingly enough, Draper argued that Marx, Engels, Kautsky and Lenin all held to the "*same facts*" that socialist consciousness developed outside the experiences of the working classes!

Ultimately, the whole rationale for the kind of wishful thinking that Draper inflicted on us is flawed. As noted above, you do not combat what you think is an incorrect position with one which you consider as also being wrong or do not agree with! You counter what you consider as an incorrect position with one you consider correct and agree with. As Lenin, in **WITBD**, explicitly did. This means that later attempts by his followers to downplay the ideas raised in Lenin's book are unconvincing. Moreover, as he was simply repeating Social-Democratic orthodoxy it seems doubly unconvincing.

Clearly, Draper was wrong. Lenin did, as indicated above, actually meant what he said in **WITBD**. The fact that Lenin quoted Kautsky simply shows, as Lenin intended, that this position was the orthodox Social Democratic one, held by the mainstream of the party (one with roots in Marx and Engels). Given that Leninism was (and still is) a "radical" offshoot of this movement, this should come as no surprise. However, Draper's comments remind us how religious many forms of Marxism are - why do we need facts when we have the true faith?

## H.5.5 What is "*democratic centralism*"?

Anarchists oppose vanguardism for three reasons, one of which is the way it recommends how revolutionaries should organise to influence the class struggle.

So how is a "vanguard" party organised? To quote the Communist International's 1920 resolution on the role of the Communist Party in the revolution, the party must have a "*centralised political apparatus*" and "*must be organised on the basis of iron proletarian centralism.*" This, of course, suggests a top-down structure internally, which the resolution explicitly calls for. In its words, "*Communist cells of every kind must be subordinate to one another as precisely as possible in a strict hierarchy.*" [Proceedings and Documents of the

**Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, p. 193, p. 198 and p. 199] Therefore, the vanguard party is organised in a centralised, top-down way. However, this is not all, as well as being "centralised," the party is also meant to be democratic, hence the expression "*democratic centralism*." On this the resolution states:

*"The Communist Party must be organised on the basis of democratic centralism. The most important principle of democratic centralism is election of the higher party organs by the lowest, the fact that all instructions by a superior body are unconditionally and necessarily binding on lower ones, and existence of a strong central party leadership whose authority over all leading party comrades in the period between one party congress and the next is universally accepted."* [Op. Cit., p. 198]

For Lenin, speaking in the same year, democratic centralism meant "*only that representatives from the localities meet and elect a responsible body which must then govern . . . Democratic centralism consists in the Congress checking on the Central Committee, removing it and electing a new one.*" [quoted by Robert Service, **The Bolshevik Party in Revolution**, p. 131] Thus, "*democratic centralism*" is inherently top-down, although the "*higher*" party organs are, in principle, elected by the "*lower*." However, the key point is that the central committee is the active element, the one whose decisions are implemented and so the focus of the structure is in the "*centralism*" rather than the "*democratic*" part of the formula.

As we noted in [section H.2.14](#), the Communist Party was expected to have a dual structure, one legal and the other illegal. It goes without saying that the illegal structure is the real power in the party and that it cannot be expected to be as democratic as the legal party, which in turn would be less than democratic as the illegal would have the real power within the organisation.

All this has clear parallels with Lenin's **What is to be done?**, where he argued for "*a powerful and strictly secret organisation, which concentrates in its hands all the threads of secret activities, an organisation which of necessity must be a centralised organisation.*" This call for centralisation is not totally dependent on secrecy, though. As he noted, "*specialisation necessarily presupposes centralisation, and in its turn imperatively calls for it.*" Such a centralised organisation would need leaders and Lenin argued that "*no movement can be durable without a stable organisation of leaders to maintain continuity.*" As such, "*the organisation must consist chiefly of persons engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession.*" Thus, we have a centralised organisation which is managed by specialists, by "*professional revolutionaries.*" This does not mean that these all come from the bourgeoisie or petit bourgeoisie. According to Lenin a "*workingman agitator who is at all talented and 'promising' must not be left to work eleven hours a day in a factory. We must arrange that he be maintained by the Party, that he may in due time go underground.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 158, p. 153, p. 147, p. 148 and p. 155]

Thus the full time professional revolutionaries are drawn from all classes into the party apparatus. However, in practice the majority of such full-timers were/are middle class. Trotsky noted that "*just as in the Bolshevik committees, so at the [1905] Congress itself, there were almost no workingmen. The intellectuals predominated.*" [**Stalin**, vol. 1, p. 101] This did not change, even after the influx of working class members in 1917 the "*incidence of middle-class activists increases at the highest echelons of the hierarchy of executive committees.*" [Robert Service, **Op. Cit.**, p. 47] An ex-worker was a rare sight in the Bolshevik

Central Committee, an actual worker non-existent. However, regardless of their original class background what unites the full-timers is not their origin but rather their current relationship with the working class, one of separation and hierarchy.

The organisational structure of this system was made clear at around the same time as **What is to be Done?**, with Lenin arguing that the factory group (or cell) of the party "*must consist of a small number of revolutionaries, receiving direct from the [central] committee orders and power to conduct the whole social-democratic work in the factory. All members of the factory committee must regard themselves as agents of the [central] committee, bound to submit to all its directions, bound to observe all 'laws and customs' of this 'army in the field' in which they have entered and which they cannot leave without permission of the commander.*" [quoted by E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 33] The similarities to the structure proposed by Lenin and agreed to by the Comintern in 1920 is obvious. Thus we have a highly centralised party, one run by "*professional revolutionaries*" from the top down.

It will be objected that Lenin was discussing the means of party building under Tsarism and advocated wider democracy under legality. However, given that in 1920 he universalised the Bolshevik experience and urged the creation of a dual party structure (based on legal and illegal structures), his comments on centralisation are applicable to vanguardism in general. Moreover, in 1902 he based his argument on experiences drawn from democratic capitalist regimes. As he argued, "*no revolutionary organisation has ever practised broad democracy, nor could it, however much it desired to do so.*" This was not considered as just applicable in Russia under the Tsar as Lenin then goes on to quote the Webb's "*book on trade unionism*" in order to clarify what he calls "*the confusion of ideas concerning the meaning of democracy.*" He noted that "*in the first period of existence in their unions, the British workers thought it was an indispensable sign of democracy for all members to do all the work of managing the unions.*" This involved "*all questions [being] decided by the votes of all the members*" and all "*official duties*" being "*fulfilled by all the members in turn.*" He dismissed "*such a conception of democracy*" as "*absurd*" and "*historical experience*" made them "*understand the necessity for representative institutions*" and "*full-time professional officials.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 161 and pp. 162-3]

Needless to say, Lenin linked this to Kautsky, who "*shows the need for professional journalists, parliamentarians, etc., for the Social-Democratic leadership of the proletarian class struggle*" and who "*attacks the 'socialism of anarchists and litterateurs' who . . . proclaim the principle that laws should be passed directly by the whole people, completely failing to understand that in modern society this principle can have only a relative application.*" The universal nature of his dismissal of self-management within the revolutionary organisation in favour of representative forms is thus stressed. Significantly, Lenin stated that this "*'primitive' conception of democracy*" exists in two groups, the "*masses of the students and workers*" and the "*Economists of the Bernstein persuasion*" (i.e. reformists). Thus the idea of directly democratic working class organisations is associated with opportunism. He was generous, noting that he "*would not, of course, . . . condemn practical workers who have had too few opportunities for studying the theory and practice of real democratic [sic!] organisation*" but individuals "*play[ing] a leading role*" in the movement should be so condemned! [**Op. Cit.**, p. 163] These people should know better! Thus "*real*" democratic organisation implies the restriction of democracy to that of electing leaders and any attempt to widen the input of ordinary members is simply an expression of workers who need educating from their "*primitive*" failings!

In summary, we have a model of a "*revolutionary*" party which is based on full-time "*professional revolutionaries*" in which the concept of direct democracy is replaced by a system of, at best, representative democracy. It is highly centralised, as befitting a specialised organisation. As noted in [section H.3.3](#), the "*organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy*" was "*to proceed from the top downward*" rather than "*from the bottom upward*."  
[Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 7, pp. 396-7] Rather than being only applicable in Tsarist Russia, Lenin drew on examples from advanced, democratic capitalist countries to justify his model in 1902 and in 1920 he advocated a similar hierarchical and top-down organisation with a dual secret and public organisation in the **Communist International**. The continuity of ideas is clear.

## H.5.6 Why do anarchists oppose "*democratic centralism*"?

What to make of Lenin's suggested model of "*democratic centralism*" discussed in the [last section](#)? It is, to use Cornelius Castoriadis's term, a "*revolutionary party organised on a capitalist manner*" and so in practice the "*democratic centralist*" party, while being centralised, will not be very democratic. In fact, the level of democracy would reflect that in a capitalist republic rather than a socialist society:

*"The dividing up of tasks, which is indispensable wherever there is a need for co-operation, becomes a real division of labour, the labour of giving orders being separate from that of carrying them out . . . this division between directors and executants tends to broaden and deepen by itself. The leaders specialise in their role and become indispensable while those who carry out orders become absorbed in their concrete tasks. Deprived of information, of the general view of the situation, and of the problems of organisation, arrested in their development by their lack of participation in the overall life of the Party, the organisation's rank-and-file militants less and less have the means or the possibility of having any control over those at the top.*

*"This division of labour is supposed to be limited by 'democracy.' But democracy, which should mean that **the majority rules**, is reduced to meaning that the majority **designates its rulers**; copied in this way from the model of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, drained of any real meaning, it quickly becomes a veil thrown over the unlimited power of the rulers. The base does not run the organisation just because once a year it elects delegates who designate the central committee, no more than the people are sovereign in a parliamentary-type republic because they periodically elect deputies who designate the government.*

*"Let us consider, for example, 'democratic centralism' as it is supposed to function in an ideal Leninist party. That the central committee is designated by a 'democratically elected' congress makes no difference since, once it is elected, it has complete (statutory) control over the body of the Party (and can dissolve the base organisations, kick out militants, etc.) or that, under such conditions, it can determine the composition of the next congress. The central committee could use its powers in an honourable way, these powers could be reduced; the members of the Party might enjoy 'political rights' such as being able to form factions, etc. Fundamentally this would not change the situation, for the central committee would still remain the organ that defines the political line of the organisation and controls its application from top to bottom, that, in a word, has permanent monopoly on the job of leadership. The*

*expression of opinions only has a limited value once the way the group functions prevents this opinion from forming on solid bases, i.e. permanent participation in the organisation's activities and in the solution of problems that arise. If the way the organisation is run makes the solution of general problems the specific task and permanent work of a separate category of militants, only their opinion will, or will appear, to count to the others.*" [Castoriadis, **Social and Political Writings**, vol. 2, pp. 204-5]

Castoriadis' insight is important and strikes at the heart of the problem with vanguard parties. They simply reflect the capitalist society they claim to represent. As such, Lenin's argument against "primitive" democracy in the revolutionary and labour movements is significant. When he asserts that those who argue for direct democracy "completely" fail to "understand that in modern society this principle can have only a relative application," he is letting the cat out of the bag. [Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 163] After all, "modern society" is capitalism, a class society. In such a society, it is understandable that self-management should not be applied as it strikes at the heart of class society and how it operates. That Lenin can appeal to "modern society" without recognising its class basis says a lot. The question becomes, if such a "principle" is valid for a class system, is it applicable in a socialist society and in the movement aiming to create such a society? Can we postpone the application of our ideas until "after the revolution" or can the revolution only occur when we apply our socialist principles in resisting class society?

In a nutshell, can the same set of organisational structures be used for the different ends? Can bourgeois structures be considered neutral or have they, in fact, evolved to ensure and protect minority rule? Ultimately, form and content are not independent of each other. Form and content adapt to fit each other and they cannot be divorced in reality. Thus, if the bourgeoisie embrace centralisation and representation they have done so because it fits perfectly with their specific form of class society. Neither centralisation and representation can undermine minority rule and, if they did, they would quickly be eliminated.

Interestingly, both Bukharin and Trotsky acknowledged that fascism had appropriated Bolshevik ideas. The former demonstrated at the 12th Congress of the Communist Party in 1923 how Italian fascism had "*adopted and applied in practice the experiences of the Russian revolution*" in terms of their "*methods of combat*." In fact, "[i]f one regards them from the **formal** point of view, that is, from the point of view of the technique of their political methods, then one discovers in them a complete application of Bolshevik tactics... in the sense of the rapid concentration of forced [and] energetic action of a tightly structured military organisation." [quoted by R. Pipes, **Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919-1924**, p. 253] The latter, in his uncompleted biography on Stalin noted that "*Mussolini stole from the Bolsheviks... Hitler imitated the Bolsheviks and Mussolini.*" [Stalin, vol. 2, p. 243] The question arises as to whether the same tactics and structures serve both the needs of fascist reaction **and** socialist revolution? Now, if Bolshevism can serve as a model for fascism, it must contain structural and functional elements which are also common to fascism. After all, no one has detected a tendency of Hitler or Mussolini, in their crusade against democracy, the organised labour movement and the left, to imitate the organisational principles of anarchism.

Surely we can expect decisive structural differences to exist between capitalism and socialism if these societies are to have different aims. Where one is centralised to facilitate minority rule, the other must be decentralised and federal to facilitate mass participation. Where one is

top-down, the other must be from the bottom-up. If a "socialism" exists which uses bourgeois organisational elements then we should not be surprised if it turns out to be socialist in name only. The same applies to revolutionary organisations. As the anarchists of **Trotwatch** explain:

*"In reality, a Leninist Party simply reproduces and institutionalises existing capitalist power relations inside a supposedly 'revolutionary' organisation: between leaders and led; order givers and order takers; between specialists and the acquiescent and largely powerless party workers. And that elitist power relation is extended to include the relationship between the party and class."* [Carry on Recruiting!, p. 41]

If you have an organisation which celebrates centralisation, having an institutionalised "leadership" separate from the mass of members becomes inevitable. Thus the division of labour which exists in the capitalist workplace or state is created. Forms cannot and do not exist independently of people and so imply specific forms of social relationships within them. These social relationships shape those subject to them. Can we expect the same forms of authority to have different impacts simply because the organisation has "socialist" or "revolutionary" in its name? Of course not. It is for this reason that anarchists argue that only in a *"libertarian socialist movement the workers learn about non-dominating forms of association through creating and experimenting with forms such as libertarian labour organisations, which put into practice, through struggle against exploitation, principles of equality and free association."* [John Clark, **The Anarchist Moment**, p. 79]

As noted above, a "democratic centralist" party requires that the "lower" party bodies (cells, branches, etc.) should be subordinate to the higher ones (e.g. the central committee). The higher bodies are elected at the (usually) annual conference. As it is impossible to mandate for future developments, the higher bodies therefore are given carte blanche to determine policy which is binding on the whole party (hence the "from top-down" principle). In between conferences, the job of full time (ideally elected, but not always) officers is to lead the party and carry out the policy decided by the central committee. At the next conference, the party membership can show its approval of the leadership by electing another. The problems with this scheme are numerous:

*"The first problem is the issue of hierarchy. Why should 'higher' party organs interpret party policy any more accurately than 'lower' ones? The pat answer is that the 'higher' bodies compromise the most capable and experienced members and are (from their lofty heights) in a better position to take an overall view on a given issue. In fact what may well happen is that, for example, central committee members may be more isolated from the outside world than mere branch members. This might ordinarily be the case because given the fact that many central committee members are full timers and therefore detached from more real issues such as making a living . . ." [ACF, Marxism and its Failures, p. 8]*

Equally, in order that the "higher" bodies can evaluate the situation they need effective information from the "lower" bodies. If the "lower" bodies are deemed incapable of formulating their own policies, how can they be wise enough, firstly, to select the right leaders and, secondly, determine the appropriate information to communicate to the "higher" bodies? Given the assumptions for centralised power in the party, can we not see that "democratic centralised" parties will be extremely inefficient in practice as information and knowledge is lost in the party machine and whatever decisions which are reached at the top

are made in ignorance of the real situation on the ground? As we discuss in [section H.5.8](#), this is usually the fate of such parties.

Within the party, as noted, the role of "*professional revolutionaries*" (or "*full timers*") is stressed. As Lenin argued, any worker which showed any talent must be removed from the workplace and become a party functionary. Is it surprising that the few Bolshevik cadres (i.e. professional revolutionaries) of working class origin soon lost real contact with the working class? Equally, what will their role **within** the party be? As we discuss in [section H.5.12](#), their role in the Bolshevik party was essentially conservative in nature and aimed to maintain their own position.

That the anarchist critique of "*democratic centralism*" is valid, we need only point to the comments and analysis of numerous members (and often soon to be ex-members) of such parties. Thus we get a continual stream of articles discussing why specific parties are, in fact, "*bureaucratic centralist*" rather than "*democratic centralist*" and what is required to reform them. That every "*democratic centralist*" party in existence is not that democratic does not hinder their attempts to create one which is. In a way, the truly "*democratic centralist*" party is the Holy Grail of modern Leninism. As we discuss in [section H.5.10](#), their goal may be as mythical as that of the Arthurian legends.

## H.5.7 Is the way revolutionaries organise important?

As we discussed in the [last section](#), anarchists argue that the way revolutionaries organise today is important. However, according to some of Lenin's followers, the fact that the "revolutionary" party is organised in a non-revolutionary manner does not matter. In the words of Chris Harman, a leading member of the British **Socialist Workers Party**, "*[e]xisting under capitalism, the revolutionary organisation [i.e. the vanguard party] will of necessity have a quite different structure to that of the workers' state that will arise in the process of overthrowing capitalism.*" [**Party and Class**, p. 34]

However, in practice this distinction is impossible to make. If the party is organised in specific ways then it is so because this is conceived to be "*efficient*," "*practical*" and so on. Hence we find Lenin arguing against "*backwardness in organisation*" and that the "*point at issue is whether our ideological struggle is to have forms of a higher type to clothe it, forms of Party organisation binding on all.*" Why would the "workers' state" be based on "backward" or "lower" kinds of organisational forms? If, as Lenin remarked, "*the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy*" was "*to proceed from the top downward*", why would the party, once in power, reject its "*organisational principle*" in favour of one it thinks is "*opportunist*," "*primitive*" and so on? [**Collected Works**, vol. 7, p. 389, p. 388 and pp. 396-7]

Therefore, as the **vanguard** the party represents the level to which the working class is supposed to reach then its organisational principles must, similarly, be those which the class must reach. As such, Harman's comments are incredulous. How we organise today is hardly irrelevant, particularly if the revolutionary organisation in question seeks (to use Lenin's words) to "*tak[e] full state power alone.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 26, p. 94] These prejudices (and the political and organisational habits they generate) will influence the shaping of the "*workers' state*" by the party once it has taken power. This decisive influence of the party and its ideological as well as organisational assumptions can be seen when Trotsky argued in 1923

that "*the party created the state apparatus and can rebuild it anew . . . from the party you get the state, but not the party from the state.*" [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 161] This is to be expected, after all the aim of the party is to take, hold and execute power. Given that the vanguard party is organised as it is to ensure effectiveness and efficiency, why should we assume that the ruling party will not seek to recreate these organisational principles once in power? As the Russian Revolution proves, this is the case (see [section H.6](#))

To claim how we organise under capitalism is not important to a revolutionary movement is simply not true. The way revolutionaries organise have an impact both on themselves and how they will view the revolution developing. An ideological prejudice for centralisation and "top-down" organisation will not disappear once the revolution starts. Rather, it will influence the way the party acts within it and, if it aims to seize power, how it will exercise that power once it has.

For these reasons anarchists stress the importance of building the new world in the shell of the old (see [section H.1.6](#)). All organisations create social relationships which shape their memberships. As the members of these parties will be part of the revolutionary process, they will influence how that revolution will develop and any "transitional" institutions which are created. As the aim of such organisations is to facilitate the creation of socialism, the obvious implication is that the revolutionary organisation must, itself, reflect the society it is trying to create. Clearly, then, the idea that how we organise as revolutionaries today can be considered somehow independent of the revolutionary process and the nature of post-capitalist society and its institutions cannot be maintained (particularly if the aim of the "revolutionary" organisation is to seize power on behalf of the working class).

As we argue elsewhere (see [section J.3](#)) anarchists argue for revolutionary groups based on self-management, federalism and decision making from below. In other words, we apply within our organisations the same principles as those which the working class has evolved in the course of its own struggles. Autonomy is combined with federalism, so ensuring co-ordination of decisions and activities is achieved from below upwards by means of mandated and recallable delegates. Effective co-operation is achieved as it is informed by and reflects the needs on the ground. Simply put, working class organisation and discipline - as exemplified by the workers' council or strike committee - represents a completely different thing from **capitalist** organisation and discipline, of which Leninists are constantly asking for more (albeit draped with the Red Flag and labelled "*revolutionary*"). And as we discuss in the [next section](#), the Leninist model of top-down centralised parties is marked more by its failures than its successes, suggesting that not only is the vanguard model undesirable, it is also unnecessary.

## H.5.8 Are vanguard parties effective?

In a word, no. Vanguard parties have rarely been proven to be effective organs for fermenting revolutionary change which is, let us not forget, their stated purpose. Indeed, rather than being in the vanguard of social struggle, the Leninist parties are often the last to recognise, let alone understand, the initial stirrings of important social movements and events. It is only once these movements have exploded in the streets that the self-proclaimed "vanguards" notice them and decide they require the party's leadership.

Part of this process are constant attempts to install their political program onto movements that they do not understand, movements that have proven to be successful using different tactics and methods of organisation. Rather than learn from the experiences of others, social movements are seen as raw material, as a source of new party members, to be used in order to advance the party rather than the autonomy and combativeness of the working class. This process was seen in the "*anti-globalisation*" or "*anti-capitalist*" movement at the end of the 20th century. This started without the help of these self-appointed vanguards, who once it appeared spent a lot of time trying to catch up with the movement while criticising its proven organisational principles and tactics.

The reasons for such behaviour are not too difficult to find. They lie in the organisational structure favoured by these parties and the mentality lying behind them. As anarchists have long argued, a centralised, top-down structure will simply be unresponsive to the needs of those in struggle. The inertia associated with the party hierarchy will ensure that it responds slowly to new developments and its centralised structure means that the leadership is isolated from what is happening on the ground and cannot respond appropriately. The underlying assumption of the vanguard party, namely that the party represents the interests of the working class, makes it unresponsive to new developments within the class struggle. As Lenin argued that spontaneous working class struggle tends to reformism, the leaders of a vanguard party automatically are suspicious of new developments which, by their very nature, rarely fit into previously agreed models of "*proletarian*" struggle. The example of Bolshevik hostility to the soviets spontaneously formed by workers during the 1905 Russian revolution is one of the best known examples of this tendency.

Murray Bookchin is worth quoting at length on this subject:

*"The 'glorious party,' when there is one, almost invariably lags behind the events . . . In the beginning . . . it tends to have an inhibitory function, not a 'vanguard' role. Where it exercises influence, it tends to slow down the flow of events, not 'coordinate' the revolutionary forces. This is not accidental. The party is structured along hierarchical lines that reflect the very society it professes to oppose. Despite its theoretical pretensions, it is a bourgeois organism, a miniature state, with an apparatus and a cadre whose function it is to seize power, not dissolve power. Rooted in the pre-revolutionary period, it assimilates all the forms, techniques and mentality of bureaucracy. Its membership is schooled in obedience and in the preconceptions of a rigid dogma and is taught to revere the leadership. The party's leadership, in turn, is schooled in habits born of command, authority, manipulation and egomania. This situation is worsened when the party participates in parliamentary elections. In election campaigns, the vanguard party models itself completely on existing bourgeois forms and even acquires the paraphernalia of the electoral party. . .*

*"As the party expands, the distance between the leadership and the ranks inevitably increases. Its leaders not only become 'personages,' they lose contact with the living situation below. The local groups, which know their own immediate situation better than any remote leaders, are obliged to subordinate their insights to directives from above. The leadership, lacking any direct knowledge of local problems, responds sluggishly and prudently. Although it stakes out a claim to the 'larger view,' to greater 'theoretical competence,' the competence of the leadership tends to diminish as one ascends the hierarchy of command. The more one approaches the level where the real decisions are made, the more conservative is the nature of the decision-making*

*process, the more bureaucratic and extraneous are the factors which come into play, the more considerations of prestige and retrenchment supplant creativity, imagination, and a disinterested dedication to revolutionary goals.*

*"The party becomes less efficient from a revolutionary point of view the more it seeks efficiency by means of hierarchy, cadres and centralisation. Although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong, especially when events begin to move rapidly and take unexpected turns - as they do in all revolutions. . .*

*"On the other hand, this kind of party is extremely vulnerable in periods of repression. The bourgeoisie has only to grab its leadership to destroy virtually the entire movement. With its leaders in prison or in hiding, the party becomes paralysed; the obedient membership has no one to obey and tends to flounder. Demoralisation sets in rapidly. The party decomposes not only because of the repressive atmosphere but also because of its poverty of inner resources.*

*"The foregoing account is not a series of hypothetical inferences, it is a composite sketch of all the mass Marxian parties of the past century - the Social Democrats, the Communists and the Trotskyist party of Ceylon (the only mass party of its kind). To claim that these parties failed to take their Marxian principles seriously merely conceals another question: why did this failure happen in the first place? The fact is, these parties were co-opted into bourgeois society because they were structured along bourgeois lines. The germ of treachery existed in them from birth." [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, pp. 123-6]*

The evidence Bookchin summarises suggests that vanguard parties are less than efficient in promoting revolutionary change. Sluggish, unresponsive, undemocratic, they simply cannot adjust to the dynamic nature of social struggle, never mind revolution. This is to be expected:

*"For the state centralisation is the appropriate form of organisation, since it aims at the greatest possible uniformity in social life for the maintenance of political and social equilibrium. But for a movement whose very existence depends on prompt action at any favourable moment and on the independent thought and action of its supporters, centralism could but be a curse by weakening its power of decision and systematically repressing all immediate action. If, for example, as was the case in Germany, every local strike had first to be approved by the Central, which was often hundreds of miles away and was not usually in a position to pass a correct judgement on the local conditions, one cannot wonder that the inertia of the apparatus of organisation renders a quick attack quite impossible, and there thus arises a state of affairs where the energetic and intellectually alert groups no longer serve as patterns for the less active, but are condemned by these to inactivity, inevitably bringing the whole movement to stagnation. Organisation is, after all, only a means to an end. When it becomes an end in itself, it kills the spirit and the vital initiative of its members and sets up that domination by mediocrity which is the characteristic of all bureaucracies." [Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 61]*

As we discuss in [section H.5.12](#), the example of the Bolshevik party during the Russian Revolution amply proves Rocker's point. Rather than being a highly centralised, disciplined vanguard party, the Bolshevik party was marked by extensive autonomy throughout its ranks. Party discipline was regularly ignored, including by Lenin in his attempts to get the central

party bureaucracy to catch up with the spontaneous revolutionary actions and ideas of the Russian working class. As Bookchin summarised, the "*Bolshevik leadership was ordinarily extremely conservative, a trait that Lenin had to fight throughout 1917 - first in his efforts to reorient the Central Committee against the provisional government (the famous conflict over the 'April Theses'), later in driving the Central Committee toward insurrection in October. In both cases he threatened to resign from the Central Committee and bring his views to the lower ranks of the party.*" Once in power, however, "*the Bolsheviks tended to centralise their party to the degree that they became isolated from the working class.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 126 and p. 127]

The "vanguard" model of organising is not only inefficient and ineffective from a revolutionary perspective, it generates bureaucratic and elitist tendencies which undermine any revolution unfortunate enough to be dominated by such a party. For these extremely practical and sensible reasons anarchists reject it wholeheartedly. As we discuss in the [next section](#), the only thing vanguard parties **are** effective at is to supplant the diversity produced and required by revolutionary movements with the drab conformity produced by centralisation and to replace popular power and freedom with party power and tyranny.

## H.5.9 What are vanguard parties effective at?

As we discussed the [last section](#), vanguard parties are not efficient as agents of revolutionary change. So, it may be asked, what **are** vanguard parties effective at? If they are harmful to revolutionary struggle, what are they good at? The answer to this is simple. No anarchist would deny that vanguard parties are extremely efficient and effective at certain things, most notably reproducing hierarchy and bourgeois values into so-called "*revolutionary*" organisations and movements. As Murray Bookchin put it, the party "*is efficient in only one respect - in moulding society in its own hierarchical image if the revolution is successful. It recreates bureaucracy, centralisation and the state. It fosters the very social conditions which justify this kind of society. Hence, instead of 'withering away,' the state controlled by the 'glorious party' preserves the very conditions which 'necessitate' the existence of a state - and a party to 'guard' it.*" [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, pp. 125-6]

By being structured along hierarchical lines that reflect the very system that it professes to oppose, the vanguard party very "effectively" reproduces that system within both the current radical social movements **and** any revolutionary society that may be created. This means that once in power, it shapes society in its own image. Ironically, this tendency towards conservatism and bureaucracy was noted by Trotsky:

*"As often happens, a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines. Even the Bolshevik Party cadres, who enjoyed the benefit of exceptional revolutionary training, were definitely inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown. What, then, could be expected of these cadres when they became an all-powerful state bureaucracy?"* [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 298]

In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that urging party power and identifying it with working class power would have less than revolutionary results. Discussing the Bolsheviks in 1905 Trotsky points out this tendency existed from the start:

*"The habits peculiar to a political machine were already forming in the underground. The young revolutionary bureaucrat was already emerging as a type. The conditions of conspiracy, true enough, offered rather merge scope for such formalities of democracy as electiveness, accountability and control. Yet, undoubtedly the committeemen narrowed these limitations considerably more than necessity demanded and were far more intransigent and severe with the revolutionary workingmen than with themselves, preferring to domineer even on occasions that called for lending an attentive ear to the voice of the masses." [Op. Cit., p. 101]*

He quoted Krupskaya, a party member, on these party bureaucrats, the "committeemen." Krupskaya stated that "*as a rule*" they "*did not recognise any party democracy*" and "*did not want any innovations*. *The 'committeeman' did not desire, and did not know how to, adapt himself to rapidly changing conditions.*" [quoted by Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 101] This conservatism played havoc in the party during 1917, incidentally. It would be no exaggeration to argue that the Russian revolution occurred in spite of, rather than because of, Bolshevik organisational principles (see [section H.5.12](#)). These principles, however, came into their own once the party had seized power, ensuring the consolidation of bureaucratic rule by an elite.

That a vanguard party helps to produce a bureaucratic regime once in power should not come as a surprise. If the party, to use Trotsky's expression, exhibits a "*caste tendency of the committeemen*" can we be surprised if once in power it reproduces such a tendency in the state it is now the master of? [Op. Cit., p. 102] And this "*tendency*" can be seen today in the multitude of Leninist sects that exist.

### **H.5.10 Why does "*democratic centralism*" produce "*bureaucratic centralism*"?**

In spite of the almost ritualistic assertions that vanguard parties are "*the most democratic the world has seen*," an army of ex-members, expelled dissidents and disgruntled members testify that they do not live up to the hype. They argue that most, if not all, "vanguard" parties are not "*democratic centralist*" but are, in fact, "*bureaucratic centralist*." Within the party, in other words, a bureaucratic clique controls it from the top-down with little democratic control, never mind participation. For anarchists, this is hardly surprising. The reasons why this continually happens are rooted in the nature of "*democratic centralism*" itself.

Firstly, the assumption of "*democratic centralism*" is that the membership elect a leadership and give them the power to decide policy between conferences and congresses. This has a subtle impact on the membership, as it is assumed that the leadership has a special insight into social problems above and beyond that of anyone else, otherwise they would not have been elected to such an important position. Thus many in the membership come to believe that disagreements with the leadership's analysis, even before they had been clearly articulated, are liable to be wrong. Doubt dares not speak its name. Unquestioning belief in the party leadership has been an all too common recurring theme in many accounts of vanguard parties. The hierarchical structure of the party promotes a hierarchical mentality in its members.

Conformity within such parties is also reinforced by the intense activism expected by members, particularly leading activists and full-time members. Paradoxically, the more

deeply people participate in activism, the harder it becomes to reflect on what they are doing. The unrelenting pace often induces exhaustion and depression, while making it harder to "*think your way out*" - too many commitments have been made and too little time is left over from party activity for reflection. Moreover, high levels of activism prevent many, particularly the most committed, from having a personal life outside their role as party members. This high-speed political existence means that rival social networks atrophy through neglect, so ensuring that the party line is the only perspective which members get exposed to. Members tend to leave, typically, because of exhaustion, crisis, even despair rather than as the result of rational reflection and conscious decision.

Secondly, given that vanguard parties are based on the belief that they are the guardians of "*scientific socialism*," this means that there is a tendency to squeeze all of social life into the confines of the party's ideology. Moreover, as the party's ideology is a "science" it is expected to explain everything (hence the tendency of Leninists to expound on every subject imaginable, regardless of whether the author knows enough about the subject to discuss it in an informed way). The view that the party's ideology explains everything eliminates the need for fresh or independent thought, precludes the possibility of critically appraising past practice or acknowledging mistakes, and removes the need to seek meaningful intellectual input outside the party's own ideological fortress. As Victor Serge, anarchist turned Bolshevik, admitted in his memoirs: "*Bolshevik thinking is grounded in the possession of the truth. The Party is the repository of truth, and any form of thinking which differs from it is a dangerous or reactionary error. Here lies the spiritual source of its intolerance. The absolute conviction of its lofty mission assures it of a moral energy quite astonishing in its intensity - and, at the same time, a clerical mentality which is quick to become Inquisitorial.*" [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 134]

The intense level of activism means that members are bombarded with party propaganda, are in endless party meetings, or spend time reading party literature and so, by virtue of the fact that there is not enough time to read anything, members end up reading nothing but party publications. Most points of contact with the external world are eliminated or drastically curtailed. Indeed, such alternative sources of information and such thinking is regularly dismissed as being contaminated by bourgeois influences. This often goes so far as to label those who question any aspect of the party's analysis revisionists or deviationists, bending to the "*pressures of capitalism*," and are usually driven from the ranks as heretics. All this is almost always combined with contempt for all other organisations on the Left (indeed, the closer they are to the party's own ideological position the more likely they are to be the targets of abuse).

Thirdly, the practice of "*democratic centralism*" also aids this process towards conformity. Based on the idea that the party must be a highly disciplined fighting force, the party is endowed with a powerful central committee and a rule that all members must publicly defend the agreed-upon positions of the party and the decisions of the central committee, whatever opinions they might hold to the contrary in private. Between conferences, the party's leading bodies usually have extensive authority to govern the party's affairs, including updating party doctrine and deciding the party's response to current political events.

As unity is the key, there is a tendency to view any opposition as a potential threat. It is not at all clear when "*full freedom to criticise*" policy internally can be said to disturb the unity of a defined action. The norms of democratic centralism confer all power between conferences onto a central committee, allowing it to become the arbiter of when a dissident viewpoint is

in danger of weakening unity. The evidence from numerous vanguard parties suggest that their leaderships usually view **any** dissent as precisely such a disruption and demand that dissidents cease their action or face expulsion from the party.

It should also be borne in mind that Leninist parties also view themselves as vitally important to the success of any future revolution. This cannot help but reinforce the tendency to view dissent as something which automatically imperils the future of the planet and, therefore, something which must be combated at all costs. As Lenin stressed in a polemic directed to the international communist movement in 1920, "*[w]hoever brings about even the slightest weakening of the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat (especially during its dictatorship) is actually aiding the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.*" [Collected Works, vol. 31, p. 45] As can be seen, Lenin stresses the importance of "iron discipline" at all times, not only during the revolution when "*the party*" is applying "*its dictatorship*" (see [section H.3.8](#) for more on this aspect of Leninism). This provides a justification of whatever measures are required to restore the illusion of unanimity, including the trampling underfoot of whatever rights the membership may have on paper and the imposition of any decisions the leadership considers as essential between conferences.

Fourthly, and more subtly, it is well known that when people take a public position in defence of a proposition, there is a strong tendency for their private attitudes to shift so that they harmonise with their public behaviour. It is difficult to say one thing in public and hold to a set of private beliefs at variance with what is publicly expressed. In short, if people tell others that they support X (for whatever reason), they will slowly begin to change their own opinions and, indeed, internally come to support X. The more public such declarations have been, the more likely it is that such a shift will take place. This has been confirmed by empirical research (see R. Cialdini's **Influence: Science and Practice**). This suggests that if, in the name of democratic centralism, party members publicly uphold the party line, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold a private belief at variance with publicly expressed opinions. The evidence suggests that it is not possible to have a group of people presenting a conformist image to society at large while maintaining an inner party regime characterised by frank and full discussion. Conformity in public tends to produce conformity in private. So given what is now known of social influence, "*democratic centralism*" is almost certainly destined to prevent genuine internal discussion. This is sadly all too often confirmed in the internal regimes of vanguard parties, where debate is often narrowly focused on a few minor issues of emphasis rather than fundamental issues of policy and theory.

It has already been noted (in [section H.5.5](#)) that the organisational norms of democratic centralism imply a concentration of power at the top. There is abundant evidence that such a concentration has been a vital feature of every vanguard party and that such a concentration limits party democracy. An authoritarian inner party regime is maintained, which ensures that decision making is concentrated in elite hands. This regime gradually dismantles or ignores all formal controls on its activities. Members are excluded from participation in determining policy, calling leaders to account, or expressing dissent. This is usually combined with persistent assurances about the essentially democratic nature of the organisation, and the existence of exemplary democratic controls - on paper. Correlated with this inner authoritarianism is a growing tendency toward the abuse of power by the leaders, who act in arbitrary ways, accrue personal power and so on (as noted by Trotsky with regards to the Bolshevik party machine). Indeed, it is often the case that activities that would provoke outrage if engaged in by rank-and-file members are tolerated when their leaders do it. As one group of Scottish libertarians noted:

*"Further, in so far as our Bolshevik friends reject and defy capitalist and orthodox labourist conceptions, they also are as much 'individualistic' as the anarchist. Is it not boasted, for example, that on many occasions Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were prepared to be in a minority of one - if they thought they were more correct than all others on the question at issue? In this, like Galileo, they were quite in order. Where they and their followers, obsessed by the importance of their own judgement go wrong, is in their tendency to refuse this inalienable right to other protagonists and fighters for the working class."* [APCF, "Our Reply," **Class War on the Home Front**, p. 70]

As in any hierarchical structure, the tendency is for those in power to encourage and promote those who agree with them. This means that members usually find their influence and position in the party dependent on their willingness to conform to the hierarchy and its leadership. Dissenters will rarely find their contribution valued and advancement is limited, which produces a strong tendency not to make waves. As Miasnikov, a working class Bolshevik dissident, argued in 1921, "*the regime within the party*" meant that "*if someone dares to have the courage of his convictions,*" they are called either a self-seeker or, worse, a counter-revolutionary, a Menshevik or an SR. Moreover, within the party, favouritism and corruption were rife. In Miasnikov's eyes a new type of Communist was emerging, the toadying careerist who "*knows how to please his superiors.*" [quoted by Paul Avrich, **Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin**, p. 8 and p. 7] At the last party congress Lenin attended, Miasnikov was expelled. Only one delegate, V. V. Kosior, "*argued that Lenin had taken the wrong approach to the question of dissent. If someone . . . had the courage to point out deficiencies in party work, he was marked down as an oppositionist, relieved of authority, placed under surveillance, and - a reference to Miasnikov - even expelled from the party.*" [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 15] Serge noted about the same period that Lenin "*proclaimed a purge of the Party, aimed at those revolutionaries who had come in from other parties - i.e. those who were not saturated with the Bolshevik mentality. This meant the establishment within the Party of a dictatorship of the old Bolsheviks, and the direction of disciplinary measures, not against the unprincipled careerists and conformist late-comers, but against those sections with a critical outlook.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 135]

This, of course, also applies to the party congress, on paper the sovereign body of the organisation. All too often resolutions at party conferences will either come from the leadership or be completely supportive of its position. If branches or members submit resolutions which are critical of the leadership, enormous pressure is exerted to ensure that they are withdrawn. Moreover, often delegates to the congress are not mandated by their branches, so ensuring that rank and file opinions are not raised, never mind discussed. Other, more drastic measures have been known to occur. Victor Serge saw what he termed the "*Party steamroller*" at work in early 1921 when "*the voting [was] rigged for Lenin's and Zinoviev's 'majority'*" in one of the districts of Petrograd. [**Op. Cit.**, p.123]

All to often, such parties have "elected" bodies which have, in practice, usurped the normal democratic rights of members and become increasingly removed from formal controls. All practical accountability of the leaders to the membership for their actions is eliminated. Usually this authoritarian structure is combined with militaristic sounding rhetoric and the argument that the "revolutionary" movement needs to be organised in a more centralised way than the current class system, with references to the state's forces of repression (notably the army). As Murray Bookchin argued, the Leninist "*has always had a grudging admiration and respect for that most inhuman of all hierarchical institutions, the military.*" [**Toward an Ecological Society**, p. 254f]

The modern day effectiveness of the vanguard party can be seen by the strange fact that many Leninists fail to join any of the existing parties due to their bureaucratic internal organisation and that many members are expelled (or leave in disgust) as a result of their failed attempts to make them more democratic. If vanguard parties are such positive organisations to be a member of, why do they have such big problems with member retention? Why are there so many vocal ex-members? Why are so many Leninists ex-members of vanguard parties, desperately trying to find an actual party which matches their own vision of democratic centralism rather than the bureaucratic centralism which seems the norm?

Our account of the workings of vanguard parties explains, in part, why many anarchists and other libertarians voice concern about them and their underlying ideology. We do so because their practices are disruptive and alienate new activists, hindering the very goal (socialism/revolution) they claim to be aiming for. As anyone familiar with the numerous groupings and parties in the Leninist left will attest, the anarchist critique of vanguardism seems to be confirmed in reality while the Leninist defence seems sadly lacking (unless, of course, the person is a member of such a party and then their organisation is the exception to the rule!).

### **H.5.11 Can you provide an example of the negative nature of vanguard parties?**

Yes. Our theoretical critique of vanguardism we have presented in the last few sections is more than proved by the empirical evidence of such parties in operation today. Rarely do "vanguard" parties reach in practice the high hopes their supporters like to claim for them. Such parties are usually small, prone to splitting as well as leadership cults, and usually play a negative role in social struggle. A long line of ex-members complain that such parties are elitist, hierarchical and bureaucratic.

Obviously we cannot hope to discuss all such parties. As such, we will take just one example, namely the arguments of one group of dissidents of the biggest British Leninist party, the **Socialist Workers Party**. It is worth quoting their account of the internal workings of the SWP at length:

*"The SWP is not democratic centralist but bureaucratic centralist. The leadership's control of the party is unchecked by the members. New perspectives are initiated exclusively by the central committee (CC), who then implement their perspective against all party opposition, implicit or explicit, legitimate or otherwise.*

*"Once a new perspective is declared, a new cadre is selected from the top down. The CC select the organisers, who select the district and branch committees - any elections that take place are carried out on the basis of 'slates' so that it is virtually impossible for members to vote against the slate proposed by the leadership. Any members who have doubts or disagreements are written off as 'burnt out' and, depending on their reaction to this, may be marginalised within the party and even expelled.*

*"These methods have been disastrous for the SWP in a number of ways: Each new perspective requires a new cadre (below the level of the CC), so the existing cadre are actively marginalised in the party. In this way, the SWP has failed to build a stable*

*and experienced cadre capable of acting independently of the leadership. Successive layers of cadres have been driven into passivity, and even out of the revolutionary movement altogether. The result is the loss of hundreds of potential cadres. Instead of appraising the real, uneven development of individual cadres, the history of the party is written in terms of a star system (comrades currently favoured by the party) and a demonology (the 'renegades' who are brushed aside with each turn of the party). As a result of this systematic dissolution of the cadre, the CC grows ever more remote from the membership and increasingly bureaucratic in its methods. In recent years the national committee has been abolished (it obediently voted for its own dissolution, on the recommendation of the CC), to be replaced by party councils made up of those comrades active at any one time (i.e. those who already agree with current perspectives); district committees are appointed rather than elected; the CC monopolise all information concerning the party, so that it is impossible for members to know much about what happens in the party outside their own branch; the CC give a distorted account of events rather than admit their mistakes . . . history is rewritten to reinforce the prestige of the CC . . . The outcome is a party whose conferences have no democratic function, but serve only to orientate party activists to carry out perspectives drawn up before the delegates even set out from their branches. At every level of the party, strategy and tactics are presented from the top down, as pre-digested instructions for action. At every level, the comrades 'below' are seen only as a passive mass to be shifted into action, rather than as a source of new initiatives . . .*

*"The only exception is when a branch thinks up a new tactic to carry out the CC's perspective. In this case, the CC may take up this tactic and apply it across the party. In no way do rank and file members play an active role in determining the strategy and theory of the party - except in the negative sense that if they refuse to implement a perspective eventually even the CC notice, and will modify the line to suit. A political culture has been created in which the leadership outside of the CC consists almost solely of comrades loyal to the CC, willing to follow every turn of the perspective without criticism . . . Increasingly, the bureaucratic methods used by the CC to enforce their control over the political direction of the party have been extended to other areas of party life. In debates over questions of philosophy, culture and even anthropology an informal party 'line' emerged (i.e. concerning matters in which there can be no question of the party taking a 'line'). Often behind these positions lay nothing more substantial than the opinions of this or that CC member, but adherence to the line quickly became a badge of party loyalty, disagreement became a stigma, and the effect was to close down the democracy of the party yet further by placing even questions of theory beyond debate. Many militants, especially working class militants with some experience of trade union democracy, etc., are often repelled by the undemocratic norms in the party and refuse to join, or keep their distance despite accepting our formal politics." [ISG, Discussion Document of Ex-SWP Comrades]*

The dissidents argue that a "democratic" party would involve the "[r]egular election of all party full-timers, branch and district leadership, conference delegates, etc. with the right of recall," which means that in the SWP appointment of full-timers, leaders and so on is the norm. They argue for the "right of branches to propose motions to the party conference" and for the "right for members to communicate horizontally in the party, to produce and distribute their own documents." They stress the need for "an independent Control Commission to review all disciplinary cases (independent of the leadership bodies that exercise discipline), and the right of any disciplined comrades to appeal directly to party

*conference.*" They argue that in a democratic party "*no section of the party would have a monopoly of information*" which indicates that the SWP's leadership is essentially secretive, withholding information from the party membership. Even more significantly, given our discussion on the influence of the party structure on post-revolutionary society in [section H.5.7](#), they argue that "[w]orst of all, the SWP are training a layer of revolutionaries to believe that the organisational norms of the SWP are a shining example of proletarian democracy, applicable to a future socialist society. Not surprisingly, many people are instinctively repelled by this idea."

Some of these critics of specific Leninist parties do not give up hope and still look for a truly democratic centralist party rather than the bureaucratic centralist ones which seem so common. For example, our group of ex-SWP dissidents argue that "*[a]nybody who has spent time involved in 'Leninist' organisations will have come across workers who agree with Marxist politics but refuse to join the party because they believe it to be undemocratic and authoritarian. Many draw the conclusion that Leninism itself is at fault, as every organisation that proclaims itself Leninist appears to follow the same pattern.*" [ISG, **Lenin vs. the SWP: Bureaucratic Centralism Or Democratic Centralism?**] This is a common refrain with Leninists - when reality says one thing and the theory another, it must be reality that is at fault. Yes, every Leninist organisation may be bureaucratic and authoritarian but it is not the theory's fault that those who apply it are not capable of actually doing so successfully. Such an application of scientific principles by the followers of "*scientific socialism*" is worthy of note - obviously the usual scientific method of generalising from facts to produce a theory is inapplicable when evaluating "*scientific socialism*" itself. However, rather than ponder the possibility that "*democratic centralism*" does not actually work and automatically generates the "*bureaucratic centralism*," they point to the example of the Russian revolution and the original Bolshevik party as proof of the validity of their hopes.

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to argue that the only reason people take the vanguard party organisational structure seriously is the apparent success of the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution. However, as noted above, even the Bolshevik party was subject to bureaucratic tendencies and as we discuss in the [next section](#), the experience of the 1917 Russian Revolutions disprove the effectiveness of "*vanguard*" style parties. The Bolshevik party of 1917 was a totally different form of organisation than the ideal "*democratic centralist*" type argued for by Lenin in 1902 and 1920. As a model of revolutionary organisation, the "*vanguardist*" one has been proven false rather than confirmed by the experience of the Russian revolution. Insofar as the Bolshevik party was effective, it operated in a non-vanguardist way and insofar as it did operate in such a manner, it held back the struggle.

## **H.5.12 Surely the Russian Revolution proves that vanguard parties work?**

No, far from it. Looking at the history of vanguardism we are struck by its failures, not its successes. Indeed, the proponents of "*democratic centralism*" can point to only one apparent success of their model, namely the Russian Revolution. Strangely, though, we are warned by Leninists that failure to use the vanguard party will inevitably condemn future revolutions to failure:

*"The proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. . . Without the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power . . . The Soviets are the only organised form of the tie between the vanguard and the class. A revolutionary content can be given to this form only by the party. This is proved by the positive experience of the October Revolution and by the negative experience of other countries (Germany, Austria, finally, Spain). No one has either shown in practice or tried to explain articulately on paper how the proletariat can seize power without the political leadership of a party that knows what it wants."* [Trotsky, **Writings 1936-37**, p. 490]

To anarchist ears, such claims seem out of place. After all, did the Russian Revolution actually result in socialism or even a viable form of soviet democracy? Far from it. Unless you picture revolution as simply the changing of the party in power, you have to acknowledge that while the Bolshevik party **did** take power in Russia in November 1917, the net effect of this was **not** the stated goals that justified that action. Thus, if we take the term "effective" to mean "an efficient means to achieve the desired goals" then vanguardism has not been proven to be effective, quite the reverse (assuming that your desired goal is a socialist society, rather than party power). Needless to say, Trotsky blames the failure of the Russian Revolution on "*objective*" factors rather than Bolshevik policies and practice, an argument we address in [section H.6](#) and will not do so here.

So while Leninists make great claims for the effectiveness of their chosen kind of party, the hard facts of history are against their positive evaluation of vanguard parties. Ironically, even the Russian Revolution disproves the claims of Leninists. The fact is that the Bolshevik party in 1917 was very far from the "*democratic centralist*" organisation which supporters of vanguardism like to claim it is. As such, its success in 1917 lies more in its divergence from the principles of "*democratic centralism*" than in their application. The subsequent degeneration of the revolution and the party is marked by the increasing **application** of those principles in the life of the party.

Thus, to refute the claims of the "*effectiveness*" and "*efficiency*" of vanguardism, we need to look at its one and only success, namely the Russian Revolution. As the Cohen-Bendit brothers argued, *"far from leading the Russian Revolution forwards, the Bolsheviks were responsible for holding back the struggle of the masses between February and October 1917, and later for turning the revolution into a bureaucratic counter-revolution - in both cases because of the party's very nature, structure and ideology."* Indeed, *"[f]rom April to October, Lenin had to fight a constant battle to keep the Party leadership in tune with the masses."* [**Obsolete Communism**, p. 183 and p. 187] It was only by continually violating its own "*nature, structure and ideology*" that the Bolshevik party played an important role in the revolution. Whenever the principles of "*democratic centralism*" were applied, the Bolshevik party played the role the Cohen-Bendit brothers subscribed to it (and once in power, the party's negative features came to the fore).

Even Leninists acknowledge that, to quote Tony Cliff, throughout the history of Bolshevism, "*a certain conservatism arose.*" Indeed, *"[a]t practically all sharp turning points, Lenin had to rely on the lower strata of the party machine against the higher, or on the rank and file against the machine as a whole."* [**Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 135] This fact, incidentally, refutes the basic assumptions of Lenin's party schema, namely that the broad party membership, like the working class, was subject to bourgeois influences so necessitating central leadership and control from above.

Looking at both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, we are struck by how often this "conservatism" arose and how often the higher bodies lagged behind the spontaneous actions of the masses and the party membership. Looking at the 1905 revolution, we discover a classic example of the inefficiency of "democratic centralism." Facing the rise of the soviets, councils of workers' delegates elected to co-ordinate strikes and other forms of struggle, the Bolsheviks did not know what to do. *"The Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks,"* noted Trotsky, *"was frightened at first by such an innovation as a non-partisan representation of the embattled masses, and could find nothing better to do than to present the Soviet with an ultimatum: immediately adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband. The Petersburg Soviet as a whole, including the contingent of Bolshevik workingmen as well ignored this ultimatum without batting an eyelash."* [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 106] More than that, "[t]he party's Central Committee published the resolution on October 27, thereby making it the binding directive for all other Bolshevik organisations." [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] It was only the return of Lenin which stopped the Bolshevik's open attacks against the Soviet. As we discuss in [section H.6.2](#), the rationale for these attacks is significant as they were based on arguing that the soviets could not reflect workers' interests because they were elected by the workers! The implications of this perspective came clear in 1918, when the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and disbanded soviets to remain in power (see [section H.6.1](#)). That the Bolshevik's position flowed naturally from Lenin's arguments in **What is to be Done?** is clear. Thus the underlying logic of Lenin's vanguardism ensured that the Bolsheviks played a negative role with regards the soviets which, combined with "democratic centralism" ensured that it was spread far and wide. Only by ignoring their own party's principles and staying in the Soviet did rank and file Bolsheviks play a positive role in the revolution. This divergence of top and bottom would be repeated in 1917.

Given this, perhaps it is unsurprising that Leninists started to rewrite the history of the 1905 revolution. Victor Serge, an anti-Stalinist Leninist, asserted in the late 1920s that in 1905 the Petrograd Soviet was *"led by Trotsky and inspired by the Bolsheviks."* [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 36]. While the former claim is partially correct, the latter is not. As noted, the Bolsheviks were initially opposed the soviets and systematically worked to undermine them. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky at that time was a Menshevik, not a Bolshevik. After all, how could the most revolutionary party that ever existed have messed up so badly? How could democratic centralism fared so badly in practice? Best, then, to suggest that it did not and give the Bolsheviks a role better suited to the rhetoric of Bolshevism than its reality.

Trotsky was no different. He, needless to say, denied the obvious implications of these events in 1905. While admitting that the Bolsheviks *"adjusted themselves more slowly to the sweep of the movement"* and that the Mensheviks *"were preponderant in the Soviet,"* he tries to save vanguardism by asserting that *"the general direction of the Soviet's policy proceeded in the main along Bolshevik lines."* So, in spite of the lack of Bolshevik influence, in spite of the slowness in adjusting to the revolution, Bolshevism was, in fact, the leading set of ideas in the revolution! Ironically, a few pages later, he mocks the claims of Stalinists that Stalin had *"isolated the Mensheviks from the masses"* by noting that the *"figures hardly bear [the claims] out."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 112 and p. 117] Shame he did not apply this criteria to his own assertions.

Of course, every party makes mistakes. The question is, how did the *"most revolutionary party of all time"* fare in 1917. Surely that revolution proves the validity of vanguardism and "democratic centralism"? After all, there was a successful revolution, the Bolshevik party did seize power. However, the apparent success of 1917 was not due to the application of

"democratic centralism," quite the reverse. While the myth of 1917 is that a highly efficient, democratic centralist vanguard party ensured the overthrow of the Provisional Government in November 1917 in favour of the Soviets (or so it seemed at the time) the facts are somewhat different. Rather, the Bolshevik party throughout 1917 was a fairly loose collection of local organisations (each more than willing to ignore central commands and express their autonomy), with much internal dissent and infighting and no discipline beyond what was created by common loyalty. The "democratic centralist" party, as desired by Lenin, was only created in the course of the Civil War and the tightening of the party dictatorship. In other words, the party became more like a "democratic centralist" one as the revolution degenerated. As such, the various followers of Lenin (Stalinists, Trotskyists and their multitude of offshoots) subscribe to a myth, which probably explains their lack of success in reproducing a similar organisation since. So assuming that the Bolsheviks did play an important role in the Russian revolution, it was because it was **not** the centralised, disciplined Bolshevik party of Leninist myth. Indeed, when the party **did** operate in a vanguardist manner, failure was soon to follow.

This claim can be proven by looking at the history of the 1917 revolution. The February revolution started with a spontaneous protests and strikes yet "*the Petrograd organisation of the Bolsheviks opposed the calling of strikes precisely on the eve of the revolution which was destined to overthrow the Tsar. Fortunately, the workers ignored the Bolshevik 'directives' and went on strike anyway. In the events which followed, no one was more surprised by the revolution than the 'revolutionary' parties, including the Bolsheviks.*" [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 123] Trotsky quoted one of the Bolshevik leaders at the time:

*"Absolutely no guiding initiative from the party centres was felt . . . the Petrograd Committee had been arrested and the representative of the Central Committee . . . was unable to give any directives for the coming day."* [quoted by Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 147]

Not the best of starts. Of course rank and file Bolsheviks took part in the demonstrations, street fights and strikes and so violated the principles their party was meant to be based on. As the revolution progressed, so did the dual nature of the Bolshevik party (i.e. its practical divergence from "democratic centralism" in order to be effective and attempts to force it back into that schema which handicapped the revolution). However, during 1917, "democratic centralism" was ignored in order to ensure the Bolsheviks played any role at all in the revolution. As one historian of the party makes clear, in 1917 and until the outbreak of the Civil War, the party operated in ways that few modern "vanguard" parties would tolerate:

*"The committees were a law unto themselves when it came to accepting orders from above. Democratic centralism, as vague a principle of internal administration as there ever has been, was commonly held at least to enjoin lower executive bodies that they should obey the behests of all higher bodies in the organisational hierarchy. But town committees in practice had the devil's own job in imposing firm leadership . . . Insubordination was the rule of the day whenever lower party bodies thought questions of importance were at stake.*

*"Suburb committees too faced difficulties in imposing discipline. Many a party cell saw fit to thumb its nose at higher authority and to pursue policies which it felt to be more suited to local circumstances or more desirable in general. No great secret was made of this. In fact, it was openly admitted that hardly a party committee existed*

*which did not encounter problems in enforcing its will even upon individual activists."*  
[Robert Service, **The Bolshevik Party in Revolution 1917-1923**, pp. 51-2]

So while Lenin's ideal model of a disciplined, centralised and top-down party had been expounded since 1902, the operation of the party never matched his desire. As Service notes, "*a disciplined hierarchy of command stretching down from the regional committees to party cells*" had "*never existed in Bolshevik history.*" In the heady days of the revolution, when the party was flooded by new members, Bolshevik party life was the exact opposite of that usually considered (by both opponents and supporters of Bolshevism) as its normal mode of operation. "*Anarchist attitudes to higher authority,*" he argues, "*were the rule of the day*" and "*no Bolshevik leader in his right mind could have contemplated a regular insistence upon rigid standards of hierarchical control and discipline unless he had abandoned all hope of establishing a mass socialist party.*" This meant that "*in the Russia of 1917 it was the easiest thing in the world for lower party bodies to rebut the demands and pleas by higher authority.*" He stresses that "*[s]uburb and town committees . . . often refused to go along with official policies . . . they also . . . sometimes took it into their heads to engage in active obstruction.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 80, p. 62 p. 56 and p. 60]

This worked both ways, of course. Town committees did "*snub their nose at lower-echelon viewpoints in the time before the next election. Try as hard as they might, suburb committees and ordinary cells could meanwhile do little to rectify matters beyond telling their own representative on their town committee to speak on their behalf. Or, if this too failed, they could resort to disruptive tactics by criticising it in public and refusing it all collaboration.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 52-3] Even by early 1918, the Bolshevik party bore little resemblance to the "democratic centralist" model desires by Lenin:

*"The image of a disciplined hierarchy of party committees was therefore but a thin, artificial veneer which was used by Bolshevik leaders to cover up the cracked surface of the real picture underneath. Cells and suburb committees saw no reason to kow-tow to town committees; nor did town committees feel under compulsion to show any greater respect to their provincial and regional committees than before."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 74]

It is this insubordination, this local autonomy and action in spite of central orders which explains the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917. Rather than a highly centralised and disciplined body of "professional" revolutionaries, the party saw a "*significant change . . . within the membership of the party at local level . . . From the time of the February revolution requirements for party membership had been all but suspended, and now Bolshevik ranks swelled with impetuous recruits who knew next to nothing about Marxism and who were united by little more than overwhelming impatience for revolutionary action.*" [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Prelude to Revolution**, p. 41]

This mass of new members (many of whom were peasants who had just recently joined the industrial workforce) had a radicalising effect on the party's policies and structures. As even Leninist commentators argue, it was this influx of members who allowed Lenin to gain support for his radical revision of party aims in April. However, in spite of this radicalisation of the party base, the party machine still was at odds with the desires of the party. As Trotsky acknowledged, the situation "*called for resolute confrontation of the sluggish Party machine with masses and ideas in motion.*" He stressed that "*the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen.*"

Ironically, given the role Trotsky usually gave the party, he admits that "*[w]ithout Lenin, no one had known what to make of the unprecedented situation.*" [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 301, p. 305 and p. 297]

Which is significant in itself. The Bolshevik party is usually claimed as being the most "revolutionary" that ever existed, yet here is Trotsky admitting that its leading members did not have a clue what to do. He even argued that "*[e]very time the Bolshevik leaders had to act without Lenin they fell into error, usually inclining to the Right.*" [Op. Cit., p. 299] This negative opinion of the Bolsheviks applied even to the "*left Bolsheviks, especially the workers*" whom we are informed "*tried with all their force to break through this quarantine*" created by the Bolshevik leaders policy "*of waiting, of accommodation, and of actual retreat before the Compromisers*" after the February revolution and before the arrival of Lenin. Trotsky argued that "*they did not know how to refute the premise about the bourgeois character of the revolution and the danger of an isolation of the proletariat. They submitted, gritting their teeth, to the directions of their leaders.*" [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 1, p. 273] It seems strange, to say the least, that without one person the whole of the party was reduced to such a level given that the aim of the "revolutionary" party was to develop the political awareness of its members.

Lenin's arrival, according to Trotsky, allowed the influence of the more radical rank and file to defeat the conservatism of the party machine. By the end of April, Lenin had managed to win over the majority of the party leadership to his position. However, this "*April conflict between Lenin and the general staff of the party was not the only one of its kind. Throughout the whole history of Bolshevism . . . all the leaders of the party at all the most important moments stood to the right of Lenin.*" [Op. Cit., p. 305] As such, if "democratic centralism" had worked as intended, the whole party would have been arguing for incorrect positions the bulk of its existence (assuming, of course, that Lenin was correct most of the time).

For Trotsky, "*Lenin exerted influence not so much as an individual but because he embodied the influence of the class on the Party and of the Party on its machine.*" Yet, this was the machine which Lenin had forged, which embodied his vision of how a "revolutionary" party should operate and was headed by him. To argue that the party machine was behind the party membership and the membership behind the class shows the bankruptcy of Lenin's organisational scheme. This "backwardness", moreover, indicates an independence of the party bureaucracy from the membership and the membership from the masses. As Lenin's constantly repeated aim was for the party to seize power (based on the dubious assumption that class power would only be expressed, indeed was identical to, party power) this independence held serious dangers, dangers which became apparent once this goal was achieved. This is confirmed when Trotsky asked the question "*by what miracle did Lenin manage in a few short weeks to turn the Party's course into a new channel?*" Significantly, he answers as follows: "*Lenin's personal attributes and the objective situation.*" [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 299] No mention is made of the democratic features of the party organisation, which suggests that without Lenin the rank and file party members would not have been able to shift the weight of the party machine in their favour. Trotsky seemed close to admitting this:

*"As often happens, a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines. Even the Bolshevik Party cadres, who enjoyed the benefit of exceptional revolutionary training, were definitely inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown."* [Op. Cit., vol. 1, p. 298]

Thus the party machine, which embodied the principles of "democratic centralism" proved less than able to the task assigned it in practice. Without Lenin, it is doubtful that the party membership would have overcome the party machine:

*"Lenin was strong not only because he understood the laws of the class struggle but also because his ear was faultlessly attuned to the stirrings of the masses in motion. He represented not so much the Party machine as the vanguard of the proletariat. He was definitely convinced that thousands from among those workers who had borne the brunt of supporting the underground Party would now support him. The masses at the moment were more revolutionary than the Party, and the Party more revolutionary than its machine. As early as March the actual attitude of the workers and soldiers had in many cases become stormily apparent, and it was widely at variance with the instructions issued by all the parties, including the Bolsheviks." [Op. Cit., p. 299]*

Little wonder the local party groupings ignored the party machine, practising autonomy and initiative in the face of a party machine inclined to conservatism, inertia, bureaucracy and remoteness. This conflict between the party machine and the principles it was based on and the needs of the revolution and party membership was expressed continually throughout 1917:

*"In short, the success of the revolution called for action against the 'highest circles of the party,' who, from February to October, utterly failed to play the revolutionary role they ought to have taken in theory. The masses themselves made the revolution, with or even against the party - this much at least was clear to Trotsky the historian. But far from drawing the correct conclusion, Trotsky the theorist continued to argue that the masses are incapable of making a revolution without a leader." [Daniel & Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, Op. Cit., p. 188]*

Looking at the development of the revolution from April onwards, we are struck by the sluggishness of the party hierarchy. At every revolutionary upsurge, the party simply was not to the task of responding to the needs of masses and the local party groupings closest to them. This can be seen in June, July and October itself. At each turn, the rank and file groupings or Lenin had to constantly violate the principles of their own party in order to be effective.

For example, when discussing the cancellation by the central committee of a demonstration planned for June 10th by the Petrograd Bolsheviks, the unresponsiveness of the party hierarchy can be seen. The *"speeches by Lenin and Zinoviev [justifying their actions] by no means satisfied the Petersburg Committee. If anything, it appears that their explanations served to strengthen the feeling that at best the party leadership had acted irresponsibly and incompetently and was seriously out of touch with reality."* Indeed, many *"blamed the Central Committee for taking so long to respond to Military Organisation appeals for a demonstration."* During the discussions in late June, 1917, on whether to take direct action against the Provisional Government there was a *"wide gulf"* between lower organs evaluations of the current situation and that of the Central Committee. [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 88, p. 92 and p. 129] Indeed, among the delegates from the Bolshevik military groups, only Lashevich (an old Bolshevik) spoke in favour of the Central Committee position and he noted that *"[f]requently it is impossible to make out where the Bolshevik ends and the Anarchist begins."* [quoted by Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 129]

In the July days, the breach between the local party groups and the central committee increased. This spontaneous uprising was opposed to by the Bolshevik leadership, in spite of the leading role of their own militants (along with anarchists) in fermenting it. While calling on their own activists to restrain the masses, the party leadership was ignored by the rank and file membership who played an active role in the event. Sickened by being asked to play the role of "*fireman*", the party militants rejected party discipline in order to maintain their credibility with the working class. Rank and file activists, pointing to the snowballing of the movement, showed clear dissatisfaction with the Central Committee. One argued that it "*was not aware of the latest developments when it made its decision to oppose the movement into the streets.*" Ultimately, the Central Committee appeal "*for restraining the masses . . . was removed from* **Pravda** *"and so the party's indecision was reflected by a large blank space on page one."* [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 150, p. 159 and p. 175] Ultimately, the indecisive nature of the leadership can be explained by the fact it did not think it could seize state power for itself ("*the state of popular consciousness . . . made impossible the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in July.*" [Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 2, p. 81]).

The indecision of the party hierarchy did have an effect, of course. While the anarchists at Kronstadt looked at the demonstration as the start of an uprising, the Bolsheviks there were "*wavering indecisively in the middle*" between them and the Left-Social Revolutionaries who saw it as a means of applying pressure on the government. This was because they were "*hamstrung by the indecision of the party Central Committee.*" [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187] Little wonder so many Bolshevik party organisations developed and protected their own autonomy and ability to act!

Significantly, one of the main Bolshevik groupings which helped organise and support the July uprising, the Military Organisation, started their own paper after the Central Committee had decreed after the failed revolt that neither it, nor the Petersburg Committee, should be allowed to have one. It "*angrily insisted on what it considered its just prerogatives*" and in "*no uncertain terms it affirmed its right to publish an independent newspaper and formally protested what is referred to as 'a system of persecution and repression of an extremely peculiar character which had begun with the election of the new Central Committee.'*" [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 227] The Central Committee backed down, undoubtedly due to the fact it could not enforce its decision.

This was but one example of what the Cohn-Bendit brothers pointed to, namely that "*five months after the Revolution and three months before the October uprising, the masses were still governing themselves, and the Bolshevik vanguard simply had to toe the line.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 186] Within that vanguard, the central committee proved to be out of touch with the rank and file, who ignored it rather than break with their fellow workers.

Even by October, the party machine still lagged behind the needs of the revolution. In fact, Lenin could only impose his view by going over the head of the Central Committee. According to Trotsky's account, "*this time he [was] not satisfied with furious criticism*" of the "*ruinous Fabianism of the Petrograd leadership*" and "*by way of protest he resign[ed] from the Central Committee.*" [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 131] Trotsky quoted Lenin as follows:

*"I am compelled to request permission to withdraw from the Central Committee, which I hereby do, and leave myself freedom of agitation in the lower ranks of the party and at the party congress."* [quoted by Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 131]

Thus the October revolution was precipitated by a blatant violation of the principles Lenin spent his life advocating. Indeed, if someone else other than Lenin had done this we are sure that Lenin, and his numerous followers, would have dismissed it as the action of a "*petty-bourgeois intellectual*" who cannot handle party "*discipline*." This is itself is significant, as is the fact that he decided to appeal to the "*lower ranks*" of the party - rather than being "democratic" the party machine effectively blocked communication and control from the bottom-up. Looking to the more radical party membership, he "*could only impose his view by going over the head of his Central Committee.*" [Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187] He made sure to send his letter of protest to "*the Petrograd and Moscow committees*" and also made sure that "*copies fell into the hands of the more reliable party workers of the district locals.*" By early October (and "*over the heads of the Central Committee*") he wrote "*directly to the Petrograd and Moscow committees*" calling for insurrection. He also "*appealed to a Petrograd party conference to speak a firm word in favour of insurrection.*" [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 131 and p. 132]

In October, Lenin had to fight what he called "*a wavering*" in the "*upper circles of the party*" which lead to a "*sort of dread of the struggle for power, an inclination to replace this struggle with resolutions protests, and conferences.*" [quoted by Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 132] For Trotsky, this represented "*almost a direct pitting of the party against the Central Committee,*" required because "*it was a question of the fate of the revolution*" and so "*all other considerations fell away.*" On October 8th, when Lenin addressed the Bolshevik delegates of the forthcoming Northern Congress of Soviets on this subject, he did so "*personally*" as there "*was no party decision*" and the "*higher institutions of the party had not yet expressed themselves.*" [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 132-3 and p. 133] Ultimately, the Central Committee came round to Lenin's position but they did so under pressure of means at odds with the principles of the party.

This divergence between the imagine and reality of the Bolsheviks explains their success. If the party had applied or had remained true to the principles of "democratic centralism" it is doubtful that it would have played an important role in the movement. As Alexander Rabinowitch argues, Bolshevik organisational unity and discipline is "*vastly exaggerated*" and, in fact, Bolshevik success in 1917 was down to "*the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character - in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.*" In 1917, he goes on, "*subordinate party bodies like the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organisation were permitted considerable independence and initiative . . . Most importantly, these lower bodies were able to tailor their tactics and appeals to suit their own particular constituencies amid rapidly changing conditions. Vast numbers of new members were recruited into the party . . . The newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers . . . who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline.*" For example, while the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*" was "*officially withdrawn by the Sixth [Party] Congress in late July, this change did not take hold at the local level.*" [**The Bolsheviks Come to Power**, p. 311, p. 312 and p. 313]

It is no exaggeration to argue that if any member of a current vanguard party acted as the Bolshevik rank and file did in 1917, they would quickly be expelled (this probably explains why no such party has been remotely successful since). However, this ferment from below was quickly undermined within the party with the start of the Civil War. It is from this period when "democratic centralism" was actually applied within the party and clarified as an organisational principle:

*"It was quite a turnaround since the anarchic days before the Civil War. The Central Committee had always advocated the virtues of obedience and co-operation; but the rank-and-filers of 1917 had cared little about such entreaties as they did about appeals made by other higher authorities. The wartime emergency now supplied an opportunity to expatiate on this theme at will." [Service, **Op. Cit.**, p. 91]*

Service stresses that *"it appears quite remarkable how quickly the Bolsheviks, who for years had talked idly about a strict hierarchy of command inside the party, at last began to put ideas into practice."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 96]

In other words, the conversion of the Bolshevik party into a fully fledged "*democratic centralist*" party occurred during the degeneration of the Revolution. This was both a consequence of the rising authoritarianism within the party, state and society as well as one of its causes so it is quite ironic that the model used by modern day followers of Lenin is that of the party during the decline of the revolution, not its peak. This is not surprising. Once in power, the Bolshevik party imposed a state capitalist regime onto the Russian people. Can it be surprising that the party structure which it developed to aid this process was also based on bourgeois attitudes and organisation? The party model advocated by Lenin may not have been very effective during a revolution but it was exceedingly effective at promoting hierarchy and authority in the post-revolutionary regime. It simply replaced the old ruling elite with another, made up of members of the radical intelligentsia and the odd ex-worker or ex-peasant.

This was due to the hierarchical and top-down nature of the party Lenin had created. While the party base was largely working class, the leadership was not. Full-time revolutionaries, they were either middle-class intellectuals or (occasionally) ex-workers and (even rarer) ex-peasants who had left their class to become part of the party machine. Even the delegates at the party congresses did not truly reflect class basis of the party membership. For example, the number of delegates was still dominated by white-collar or others (59.1% to 40.9%) at the sixth party congress at the end of July 1917. [Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 160] So while the party gathered more working class members in 1917, it cannot be said that this was reflected in the party leadership which remained dominated by non-working class elements. Rather than being a genuine working class organisation, the Bolshevik party was a hierarchical group headed by non-working class elements whose working class base could not effectively control them even during the revolution in 1917. It was only effective because these newly joined and radicalised working class members ignored their own party structure and its defining ideology.

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks saw their membership start to decrease. Significantly, *"the decline in numbers which occurred from early 1918 onwards"* started happening *"contrary to what is usually assumed, some months before the Central Committee's decree in midsummer that the party should be purged of its 'undesirable' elements."* These lost members reflected two things. Firstly, the general decline in the size of the industrial working class. This meant that the radicalised new elements from the countryside which had flocked to the Bolsheviks in 1917 returned home. Secondly, the loss of popular support due to the realities of the Bolshevik regime. This can be seen from the fact that while the Bolsheviks were losing members, the Left SRS almost doubled in size to 100,000 (the Mensheviks claimed to have a similar number). Rather than non-proletarians leaving, *"[i]t is more probable by far that it was industrial workers who were leaving in droves. After all, it would have been strange if the growing unpopularity of Sovnarkom in factory milieu had been*

*confined exclusively to non-Bolsheviks.*" Unsurprisingly, given its position in power, "[a]s the proportion of working-class members declined, so that of entrants from the middle-class rose; the steady drift towards a party in which industrial workers no longer numerically predominated was under way." By late 1918 membership started to increase again but "[m]ost newcomers were not of working-class origin . . . the proportion of Bolsheviks of working-class origin fell from 57 per cent at the year's beginning to 48 per cent at the end." It should be noted that it was not specified how many were classed as having working-class origin were still employed in working-class jobs. [Robert Service, **Op. Cit.**, p. 70, pp. 70-1 and p. 90] A new ruling elite was thus born, thanks to the way vanguard parties are structured and the application of vanguardist principles which had previously been ignored.

In summary, the experience of the Russian Revolution does not, in fact, show the validity of the "vanguard" model. The Bolshevik party in 1917 played a leading role in the revolution only insofar as its members violated its own organisational principles (Lenin included). Faced with a real revolution and an influx of more radical new members, the party had to practice anarchist ideas of autonomy, local initiative and the ignoring of central orders which had no bearing to reality on the ground. When the party did try to apply the top-down and hierarchical principles of "democratic centralism" it failed to adjust to the needs of the moment. Moreover, when these principles were finally applied they helped ensure the degeneration of the revolution. This was to be expected, given the nature of vanguardism and the Bolshevik vision of socialism.

## H.6 Why did the Russian Revolution fail?

The greatest myth of Marxism must surely be the idea that the Russian Revolution failed solely due to the impact of objective factors. While the date Leninists consider the revolution to have become beyond reform varies (over time it has moved backwards towards 1917 as the authoritarianism under Lenin and Trotsky has become better known), the actual reasons are common. For Leninists, the failure of the revolution was the product of such things as civil war, foreign intervention, economic collapse and the isolation and backwardness of Russia and **not** Bolshevik ideology. Bolshevik authoritarianism, then, was forced upon the party by difficult objective circumstances. It follows that there are no fundamental problems with Leninism and so it is a case of simply applying it again, hopefully in more fortuitous circumstances.

Anarchists are not impressed by this argument and we will show why by refuting common Leninist explanations for the failure of the revolution. For anarchists, Bolshevik ideology played its part, creating social structures (a new state and centralised economic organisations) which not only disempowered the masses but also made the objective circumstances being faced much worse. Moreover, we argue, vanguardism could not help turn the rebels of 1917 into the ruling elite of 1918. We explore these arguments and the evidence for them in this section.

For those who argue that the civil war provoked Bolshevik policies, the awkward fact is that many of the features of war communism, such as the imposition of one-man management and centralised state control of the economy, were already apparent before war communism. As one historian argues, "[f]rom the first days of Bolshevik power there was only a weak correlation between the extent of 'peace' and the mildness or severity of Bolshevik rule, between the intensity of the war and the intensity of proto-war communist measures . . .

*Considered in ideological terms there was little to distinguish the 'breathing space' (April-May 1918) from the war communism that followed." Unsurprisingly, then, "the breathing space of the first months of 1920 after the victories over Kolchak and Denikin . . . saw their intensification and the militarisation of labour" and, in fact, "no serious attempt was made to review the aptness of war communist policies." Ideology "constantly impinged on the choices made at various points of the civil war . . . Bolshevik authoritarianism cannot be ascribed simply to the Tsarist legacy or to adverse circumstances."* [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 24, p. 27 and p. 30] The inherent tendencies of Bolshevism were revealed by the civil war, a war which only accelerated the development of what was implicit (and, often, not so implicit) in Bolshevik ideology and its vision of socialism, the state and the role of the party.

Thus "*the effective conclusion of the Civil War at the beginning of 1920 was followed by a more determined and comprehensive attempt to apply these so-called War Communism policies rather than their relaxation*" and so the "*apogee of the War Communism economy occurred after the Civil War was effectively over.*" With the fighting over Lenin "*forcefully raised the introduction of one-man management . . . Often commissars fresh from the Red Army were drafted into management positions in the factories.*" By the autumn of 1920, one-man management was in 82% of surveyed workplaces. This "*intensification of War Communism labour policies would not have been a significant development if they had continued to be applied in the same haphazard manner as in 1919, but in early 1920 the Communist Party leadership was no longer distracted by the Civil War from concentrating its thoughts and efforts on the formulation and implementation of its labour policies.*" While the "*experience of the Civil War was one factor predisposing communists towards applying military methods*" to the economy in early 1920, "*ideological considerations were also important.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 2, p. 17, p. 15, p. 30, p. 17 and p. 11]

So it seems incredulous for Leninist John Rees to assert, for example, that "[w]ith the civil war came the need for stricter labour discipline and for . . . 'one man management'. Both these processes developed lock step with the war." [*In Defence of October*, pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 43] As we discuss in the [next section](#), Lenin was advocating both of these **before** the outbreak of civil war in May 1918 **and** after it was effectively over. Indeed he explicitly, both before and after the civil war, stressed that these policies were being implemented because the lack of fighting meant that the Bolsheviks could turn their full attention to building socialism. How these facts can be reconciled with claims of policies being in "*lock step*" with the civil war is hard to fathom.

Part of the problem is the rampant confusion within Leninist circles as to when the practices condemned as Stalinism actually started. For example, Chris Harman (of the UK's SWP) in his summary of the rise Stalinism asserted that after "*Lenin's illness and subsequent death*" the "*principles of October were abandoned one by one.*" Yet the practice of, and ideological commitment to, party dictatorship, one-man management in industry, banning opposition groups/parties (as well as factions within the Communist Party), censorship, state repression of strikes and protests, piece-work, Taylorism, the end of independent trade unions and a host of other crimes against socialism were all implemented under Lenin and normal practice at the time of his death. In other words, the "*principles of October*" were abandoned under, and by, Lenin. Which, incidentally, explains why, Trotsky "*continued to his death to harbour the illusion that somehow, despite the lack of workers' democracy, Russia was a 'workers' state.'*" [**Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 14 and p. 20] Simply put, there had

been no workers' democracy when Trotsky held state power and he considered that regime a "workers' state". The question arises why Harman thinks Lenin's Russia was some kind of "workers' state" if workers' democracy is the criteria by which such things are to be judged.

From this it follows that, unlike Leninists, anarchists do not judge a regime by who happens to be in office. A capitalist state does not become less capitalist just because a social democrat happens to be prime minister or president. Similarly, a regime does not become state capitalist just because Stalin is in power rather than Lenin. While the Marxist analysis concentrates on the transfer of state power from one regime to another, the anarchist one focuses on the transfer of power from the state and bosses to working class people. What makes a regime socialist is the social relationships it has, not the personal opinions of those in power. Thus if the social relationships under Lenin are similar to those under Stalin, then the nature of the regime is similar. That Stalin's regime was far more brutal, oppressive and exploitative than Lenin's does not change the underlying nature of the regime. As such, Chomsky is right to point to "*the techniques of use of terminology to delude*" with respect to the Bolshevik revolution. Under Lenin and Trotsky, "*a popular revolution was taken over by a managerial elite who immediately dismantled all the socialist institutions.*" They used state power to "*create a properly managed society, run by smart intellectuals, where everybody does his job and does what he's told . . . That's Leninism. That's the exact opposite of socialism. If socialism means anything, it means workers' control of production and then on from there. That's the first thing they destroyed. So why do we call it socialism?*" [**Language and Politics**, p. 537]

To refute in advance one obvious objection to our argument, the anarchist criticism of the Bolsheviks is **not** based on the utopian notion that they did not create a fully functioning (libertarian) communist society. As we discussed [section H.2.5](#), anarchists have never thought a revolution would immediately produce such an outcome. As Emma Goldman argued, she had not come to Russia "*expecting to find Anarchism realised*" nor did she "*expect Anarchism to follow in the immediate footsteps of centuries of despotism and submission.*" Rather, she "*hope[d] to find in Russia at least the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought*" and that "*the Russian workers and peasants as a whole had derived essential social betterment as a result of the Bolshevik regime.*" Both hopes were dashed. [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlvi] Equally, anarchists were, and are, well aware of the problems facing the revolution, the impact of the civil war and economic blockade. Indeed, both Goldman and Berkman used these (as Leninists still do) to rationalise their support for the Bolsheviks, in spite of their authoritarianism (for Berkman's account see **The Bolshevik Myth** [pp. 328-31]). Their experiences in Russia, particularly after the end of the civil war, opened their eyes to the impact of Bolshevik ideology on its outcome.

Nor is it a case that anarchists have no solutions to the problems facing the Russian Revolution. As well as the negative critique that statist structures are unsuitable for creating socialism, particularly in the difficult economic circumstances that affects every revolution, anarchists stressed that genuine social construction had to be based on the people's own organisations and self-activity. This was because, as Goldman concluded, the state is a "*menace to the constructive development of the new social structure*" and "*would become a dead weight upon the growth of the new forms of life.*" Therefore, she argued, only the "*industrial power of the masses, expressed through their libertarian associations - Anarchosyndicalism - is alone able to organise successfully the economic life and carry on production*" If the revolution had been made a la Bakunin rather than a la Marx "*the result*

*would have been different and more satisfactory*" as (echoing Kropotkin) Bolshevik methods "conclusively demonstrated how a revolution should **not** be made." [Op. Cit., pp. 253-4 and p. liv]

It should also be mentioned that the standard Leninist justification for party dictatorship is that the opposition groups supported the counter-revolution or took part in armed rebellions against "soviet power" (i.e., the Bolsheviks). Rees, for example, asserts that some Mensheviks "*joined the Whites. The rest alternated between accepting the legitimacy of the government and agitating for its overthrow. The Bolsheviks treated them accordingly.*" [Op. Cit., p. 65] However, this is far from the truth. As one historian noted, while the "*charge of violent opposition would be made again and again*" by the Bolsheviks, along with being "*active supporters of intervention and of counter-revolution*", in fact this "*charge was untrue in relation to the Mensheviks, and the Communists, if they ever believed it, never succeeded in establishing it.*" A few individuals did reject the Menshevik "*official policy of confining opposition to strictly constitutional means*" and they were "*expelled from the party, for they had acted without its knowledge.*" [Leonard Schapiro, **The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 193] Significantly, the Bolsheviks annulled their June 14th expulsion of the Mensheviks from the soviets on the 30th of November of the same year, 1918. [E. H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 180]

By "*agitating*" for the "*overthrow*" of the Bolshevik government, Rees is referring to the Menshevik tactic of standing for election to soviets with the aim of securing a majority and so forming a new government! Unsurprisingly, the sole piece of evidence presented by Rees is a quote from historian E.H. Carr: "*If it was true that the Bolshevik regime was not prepared after the first few months to tolerate an organised opposition, it was equally true that no opposition party was prepared to remain within legal limits. The premise of dictatorship was common to both sides of the argument.*" [Op. Cit., p. 190] Yet this "*judgment ignores*" the Mensheviks whose policy of legal opposition: "*The charge that the Mensheviks were not prepared to remain within legal limits is part of the Bolsheviks' case; it does not survive an examination of the facts.*" [Schapiro, Op. Cit., p. 355fn]

As regards the SRs, this issue is more complicated. The right-SRs welcomed and utilised the rebellion of the Czech Legion in May 1918 to reconvene the Constituent Assembly (within which they had an overwhelming majority and which the Bolsheviks had dissolved). After the White General Kolchak overthrew this government in November 1918 (and so turned the civil war into a Red against White one), most right-SRs sided with the Bolsheviks and, in return, the Bolsheviks restated them to the soviets in February 1919. [Carr, Op. Cit., p. 356 and p. 180] It must be stressed that, contra Carr, the SRs aimed for a democratically elected government, not a dictatorship (and definitely not a White one). With the Left-SRs, it was the Bolsheviks who denied them their majority at the Fifth All-Congress of Soviets. Their rebellion was **not** an attempted coup but rather an attempt to force the end of the Brest-Litovsk treaty with the Germans by restarting the war (as Alexander Rabinowitch proves beyond doubt in his **The Bolsheviks in Power**). It would be fair to say that the anarchists, most SRs, the Left SRs and Mensheviks were not opposed to the revolution, they were opposed to Bolshevik policy.

Ultimately, as Emma Goldman came to conclude, "*what [the Bolsheviks] called 'defence of the Revolution' was really only the defence of [their] party in power.*" [Op. Cit., p. 57]

At best it could be argued that the Bolsheviks had no alternative but to impose their dictatorship, as the other socialist parties would have succumbed to the Whites and so, eventually, a White dictatorship would have replaced the Red one. This was why, for example, Victor Serge claimed he sided with the Communists against the Kronstadt sailors even though the latter had right on their side for "*the country was exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there was no reserves of any kind . . . The working-class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. . . . If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos . . . and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian.*" [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, pp. 128-9]

This, however, is sheer elitism and utterly violates the notion that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class. Moreover, it places immense faith on the goodwill of those in power - a utopian position. Equally, it should not be forgotten that both the Reds and Whites were anti-working class. At best it could be argued that the Red repression of working class protests and strikes as well as opposition socialists would not have been as terrible as that of the Whites, but that is hardly a good rationale for betraying the principles of socialism. Yes, libertarians can agree with Serge that embracing socialist principles may not work. Every revolution is a gamble and may fail. As libertarian socialist Ante Ciliga correctly argued:

*"Let us consider, finally, one last accusation which is commonly circulated: that action such as that at Kronstadt could have indirectly let loose the forces of the counter-revolution. It is possible indeed that even by placing itself on a footing of workers' democracy the revolution might have been overthrown; but what is certain is that it has perished, and that it has perished on account of the policy of its leaders. The repression of Kronstadt, the suppression of the democracy of workers and soviets by the Russian Communist party, the elimination of the proletariat from the management of industry, and the introduction of the NEP, already signified the death of the Revolution."* ["The Kronstadt Revolt", pp. 330-7, **The Raven**, no, 8, p. 333 p. 335]

So it should be stressed that no anarchist would argue that if an anarchist path had been followed then success would have automatically followed. It is possible that the revolution would have failed but one thing is sure: by following the Bolshevik path it **did** fail. While the Bolsheviks may have remained in power at the end of the civil war, the regime was a party dictatorship preceding over a state capitalist economy. In such circumstances, there could no further development towards socialism and, unsurprisingly, there was none. Ultimately, as the rise of Stalin showed, the notion that socialism could be constructed without basic working class freedom and self-government was a baseless illusion.

As we will show, the notion that objective circumstances (civil war, economic collapse, and so on) cannot fully explain the failure of the Russian Revolution. This becomes clear once the awkward fact that Bolshevik authoritarianism and state capitalist policies started before the outbreak of civil war is recognised (see [section H.6.1](#)); that their ideology inspired and shaped the policies they implemented and these policies themselves made the objective circumstances worse (see [section H.6.2](#)); and that the Bolsheviks had to repress working class protest and strikes against them throughout the civil war, so suggesting a social base existed for a genuinely socialist approach (see [section H.6.3](#)).

Finally, there is a counter-example which, anarchists argue, show the impact of Bolshevik ideology on the fate of the revolution. This is the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement (see Peter Arshinov's **The History of the Makhnovist Movement** or Alexandre Skirda's **Nestor Makhno Anarchy's Cossack** for more details). Defending the revolution in the Ukraine against all groups aiming to impose their will on the masses, the Makhnovists were operating in the same objective conditions facing the Bolsheviks - civil war, economic disruption, isolation and so forth. However, the policies the Makhnovists implemented were radically different than those of the Bolsheviks. While the Makhnovists called soviet congresses, the Bolsheviks disbanded them. The former encouraged free speech and organisation, the latter crushed both. While the Bolsheviks raised party dictatorship and one-man management to ideological truisms, the Makhnovists stood for and implemented workplace, army, village and soviet self-management. As one historian suggests, far from being necessary or even functional, Bolshevik policies "*might even have made the war more difficult and more costly. If the counter-example of Makhno is anything to go by then [they] certainly did.*" [Christopher Read, **From Tsar to Soviets**, p. 265] Anarchists argue that it shows the failure of Bolshevism cannot be put down to purely objective factors like the civil war: the politics of Leninism played their part.

Needless to say, this section can only be a summary of the arguments and evidence. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive account of the revolution or civil war. It concentrates on the key rationales by modern day Leninists to justify Bolshevik actions and policies. We do so simply because it would be impossible to cover every aspect of the revolution and because these rationales are one of the main reasons why Leninist ideology has not been placed in the dustbin of history where it belongs. For further discussion, see [the appendix on the Russian Revolution](#) or Voline's **The Unknown Revolution**, Alexander Berkman's **The Russian Tragedy** and **The Bolshevik Myth**, Emma Goldman's **My Disillusionment in Russia** or Maurice Brinton's essential **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**.

## H.6.1 Can objective factors explain the failure of the Russian Revolution?

Leninist John Rees recounts the standard argument, namely that the objective conditions in Russia meant that the "*subjective factor*" of Bolshevik ideology "*was reduced to a choice between capitulation to the Whites or defending the revolution with whatever means were at hands. Within these limits Bolshevik policy was decisive. But it could not wish away the limits and start with a clean sheet.*" From this perspective, the key factor was the "*vice-like pressure of the civil war*" which "*transformed the state*" as well as the "*Bolshevik Party itself.*" Industry was "*reduced . . . to rubble*" and the "*bureaucracy of the workers' state was left suspended in mid-air, its class based eroded and demoralised.*" [*"In Defence of October,"* pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 30, p. 70, p. 66 and p. 65]

Due to these factors, argue Leninists, the Bolsheviks became dictators **over** the working class and **not** due to their political ideas. Anarchists are not convinced by this analysis, arguing that is factually and logically flawed.

The first problem is factual. Bolshevik authoritarianism started **before** the start of the civil war and major economic collapse. Whether it is soviet democracy, workers' economic self-management, democracy in the armed forces or working class power and freedom generally, the fact is the Bolsheviks had systematically attacked and undermined it from the start. They

also, as we indicate in [section H.6.3](#) repressed working class protests and strikes along with opposition groups and parties. As such, it is difficult to blame something which had not started yet for causing Bolshevik policies.

Although the Bolsheviks had seized power under the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*," as we noted in [section H.3.11](#) the facts are the Bolsheviks aimed for party power and only supported soviets as long as they controlled them. To maintain party power, they had to undermine the soviets and they did. This onslaught on the soviets started quickly, in fact overnight when the first act of the Bolsheviks was to create an executive body, the the Council of People's Commissars (or Sovnarkon), over and above the soviets. This was in direct contradiction to Lenin's **The State and Revolution**, where he had used the example of the Paris Commune to argue for the merging of executive and legislative powers. Then, a mere four days after this seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the Sovnarkom unilaterally took for itself legislative power simply by issuing a decree to this effect: *"This was, effectively, a Bolshevik coup d'État that made clear the government's (and party's) pre-eminence over the soviets and their executive organ. Increasingly, the Bolsheviks relied upon the appointment from above of commissars with plenipotentiary powers, and they split up and reconstituted fractious Soviets and intimidated political opponents."* [Neil Harding, **Leninism**, p. 253]

The highest organ of soviet power, the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) was turned into little more than a rubber stamp, with its Bolshevik dominated presidium using its power to control the body. Under the Bolsheviks, the presidium was converted "*into the de facto centre of power within VTsIK*." It "*began to award representations to groups and factions which supported the government. With the VTsIK becoming ever more unwieldy in size by the day, the presidium began to expand its activities*" and was used "*to circumvent general meetings.*" Thus the Bolsheviks were able "*to increase the power of the presidium, postpone regular sessions, and present VTsIK with policies which had already been implemented by the Sovnarkon. Even in the presidium itself very few people determined policy.*" [Charles Duval, "*Yakov M. Sverdlov and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK)*", pp. 3-22, **Soviet Studies**, vol. XXXI, no. 1, p.7, p. 8 and p. 18]

At the grassroots, a similar process was at work with oligarchic tendencies in the soviets increasing post-October and "*[e]ffective power in the local soviets relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.*" The party was "*successful in gaining control of soviet executives in the cities and at uezd and guberniya levels. These executive bodies were usually able to control soviet congresses, though the party often disbanded congresses that opposed major aspects of current policies.*" Local soviets "*had little input into the formation of national policy*" and "*[e]ven at higher levels, institutional power shifted away from the soviets.*" [Carmen Sirianni, **Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy**, p. 204 and p. 203] In Moscow, for example, power in the soviet "*moved away from the plenum to ever smaller groups at the apex.*" The presidium, created in November 1917, "*rapidly accrued massive powers.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 166]

The Bolshevik dominated soviet executives used this power to maintain a Bolshevik majority, by any means possible, in the face of popular disillusionment with their regime. In Saratov, for example, "*as early as the spring of 1918 . . . workers clashed with the soviet*" while in the April soviet elections, as elsewhere, the Bolsheviks' "*powerful majority in the Soviet began to erode*" as moderate socialists "*criticised the nondemocratic turn Bolshevik*

*power has taken and the soviet's loss of their independence.*" [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, p. 366 and p. 368] While the influence of the Mensheviks "had sunk to insignificance by October 1917", the "unpopularity of government policy" changed that and by the "middle of 1918 the Mensheviks could claim with some justification that large numbers of the industrial working class were now behind them, and that but for the systematic dispersal and packing of the soviets, and the mass arrests at workers' meeting and congresses, their party could have one power by its policy of constitutional opposition." The soviet elections in the spring of 1918 across Russia saw "arrests, military dispersal, even shootings" whenever Mensheviks "succeeded in winning majorities or a substantial representation." [Leonard Schapiro, **The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 191]

One such technique to maintain power was to postpone new soviet elections, another was to gerrymander the soviets to ensure their majority. The Bolsheviks in Petrograd, for example, faced "demands from below for the immediate re-election" of the Soviet. However, before the election, the Bolshevik Soviet confirmed new regulations "to help offset possible weaknesses" in their "electoral strength in factories." The "most significant change in the makeup of the new soviet was that numerically decisive representation was given to agencies in which the Bolsheviks had overwhelming strength, among them the Petrograd Trade Union Council, individual trade unions, factory committees in closed enterprises, district soviets, and district non-party workers' conferences." This ensured that "[o]nly 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance" and so the Bolsheviks "contrived a majority" in the new Soviet long before gaining 127 of the 260 factory delegates. Then there is "the nagging question of how many Bolshevik deputies from factories were elected instead of the opposition because of press restrictions, voter intimidation, vote fraud, or the short duration of the campaign." The SR and Menshevik press, for example, were reopened "only a couple of days before the start of voting." Moreover, "Factory Committees from closed factories could and did elect soviet deputies (the so-called dead souls), one deputy for each factory with more than one thousand workers at the time of shutdown" while the electoral assemblies for unemployed workers "were organised through Bolshevik-dominated trade union election commissions." Overall, then, the Bolshevik election victory "was highly suspect, even on the shop floor." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, pp. 248-9, p. 251 and p. 252] This meant that it was "possible for one worker to be represented in the soviet five times . . . without voting once." Thus the soviet "was no longer a popularly elected assembly: it had been turned into an assembly of Bolshevik functionaries." [Vladimir N. Brovkin, **The Mensheviks After October**, p. 240]

When postponing and gerrymandering failed, the Bolsheviks turned to state repression to remain in power. For all the provincial soviet elections in the spring and summer of 1918 for which data is available, there was an "impressive success of the Menshevik-SR block" followed by "the Bolshevik practice of disbanding soviets that came under Menshevik-SR control." The "subsequent wave of anti-Bolshevik uprisings" were repressed by force. [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 159] Another historian also notes that by the spring of 1918 "Menshevik newspapers and activists in the trade unions, the Soviets, and the factories had made a considerable impact on a working class which was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime, so much so that in many places the Bolsheviks felt constrained to dissolve Soviets or prevent re-elections where Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had gained majorities." [Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 179]

When the opposition parties raised such issues at the VTsIK, it had no impact. In April 1918, one deputy "protested that non-Bolshevik controlled soviets were being dispersed by armed force, and wanted to discuss the issue." The chairman "refus[ed] to include it in the agenda because of lack of supporting material" and requested such information be submitted to the presidium of the soviet. The majority (i.e. the Bolsheviks) "supported their chairman" and the facts were "submitted . . . to the presidium, where they apparently remained." [Charles Duval, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 13-14] Given that the VTsIK was meant to be the highest soviet body between congresses, this lack of concern clearly shows the Bolshevik contempt for soviet democracy.

The Bolsheviks also organised rural poor committees, opposed to by all other parties (particularly the Left-SRs). The Bolshevik leadership "was well aware that the *labouring peasantry, largely represented in the countryside by the Left Socialist-Revolutionary party, would be excluded from participation.*" These committees were "*subordinated to central policy and thus willing to implement a policy opposing the interests of the mass of the peasants*" and were also used for the "*disbandment of the peasants' soviets in which Bolshevik representation was low or nil*". It should be noted that between March and August 1918 "*the Bolsheviks were losing power not only in favour of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries*" but also "*in favour of non-party people.*" [Silvana Malle, **The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918-1921**, pp. 366-7]

Unsurprisingly, the same contempt was expressed at the fifth All-Russian Soviet Congress in July 1918 when the Bolshevik gerrymandered it to maintain their majority. The Bolsheviks banned the Mensheviks in the context of political loses **before** the Civil War, which gave the Bolsheviks an excuse and they "*drove them underground, just on the eve of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets in which the Mensheviks were expected to make significant gains*". While the Bolsheviks "*offered some formidable fictions to justify the expulsions*" there was "*of course no substance in the charge that the Mensheviks had been mixed in counter-revolutionary activities on the Don, in the Urals, in Siberia, with the Czechoslovaks, or that they had joined the worst Black Hundreds.*" [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 181]

With the Mensheviks and Right-SRs banned from the soviets, popular disenchantment with Bolshevik rule was expressed by voting Left-SR. The Bolsheviks ensured their majority in the congress and, therefore, a Bolshevik government by gerrymandering it has they had the Petrograd soviet. Thus "*electoral fraud gave the Bolsheviks a huge majority of congress delegates*". In reality, "*the number of legitimately elected Left SR delegates was roughly equal to that of the Bolsheviks.*" The Left-SRs expected a majority but did not include "*roughly 399 Bolsheviks delegates whose right to be seated was challenged by the Left SR minority in the congress's credentials commission.*" Without these dubious delegates, the Left SRs and SR Maximalists would have outnumbered the Bolsheviks by around 30 delegates. This ensured "*the Bolshevik's successful fabrication of a large majority in the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets.*" [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 396, p. 288, p. 442 and p. 308] Moreover, the Bolsheviks also "*allowed so-called committees of poor peasants to be represented at the congress. . . This blatant gerrymandering ensured a Bolshevik majority. . . Deprived of their democratic majority the Left SRs resorted to terror and assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach.*" [Geoffrey Swain, **The Origins of the Russian Civil War**, p. 176] The Bolsheviks falsely labelled this an uprising against the soviets and the Left-SRs joined the Mensheviks and Right-SRs in being made illegal. It is hard not to agree with Rabinowitch when he comments that "*however understandable framed against the fraudulent composition of the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets and the ominous developments at*

*the congresses's start*" this act "offered Lenin a better excuse than he could possibly have hoped for to eliminate the Left SRs as a significant political rival." [Op. Cit., p. 308]

So before the start of the civil war all opposition groups, bar the Left-SRs, had suffered some form of state repression by the hands of the Bolshevik regime (the Bolsheviks had attacked the anarchist movement in April, 1918 [Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, pp. 184-5]). Within six weeks of it starting **every** opposition group had been excluded from the soviets. Significantly, in spite of being, effectively, a one-party state Lenin later proclaimed that soviet power "*is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic*" and pointed to the 6th Congress of Soviets in November with its 97% of Bolsheviks! [**Collected Works**, vol. 28, p. 248 and p. 303]

A similar authoritarian agenda was aimed at the armed forces and industry. Trotsky simply abolished the soldier's committees and elected officers, stating that "*the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree.*" [**How the Revolution Armed**, vol. 1, p. 47] The death penalty for disobedience was restored, along with, more gradually, saluting, special forms of address, separate living quarters and other privileges for officers. Somewhat ironically, nearly 20 years later, Trotsky himself lamented how the "*demobilisation of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war.*" For some reason he failed to mention who had introduced that very regime, although he felt able to state, without shame, that the "*commanding staff needs democratic control. The organisers of the Red Army were aware of this from the beginning, and considered it necessary to prepare for such a measure as the election of commanding staff.*" [**The Revolution Betrayed**, p. 90 and p. 211] So it would be churlish to note that "*the root of the problem lay in the very organisation of the army on traditional lines, for which Trotsky himself had been responsible, and against which the Left Communists in 1918 had warned.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 231]

In industry, Lenin, as we discussed in [section H.3.14](#), started to champion one-man management armed with "*dictatorial*" powers in April, 1918. Significantly, he argued that his new policies were **not** driven by the civil war for "[i]n the main . . . the task of suppressing the resistance of the exploiters was fulfilled" (since "(approximately) February 1918."). The task "*now coming to the fore*" was that of "*organising [the] administration of Russia.*" It "*has become the main and central task*" precisely **because** of "*the peace which has been achieved - despite its extremely onerous character and extreme instability*" and so "*the Russian Soviet Republic has gained an opportunity to concentrate its efforts for a while on the most important and most difficult aspect of the socialist revolution, namely, the task of organisation.*" This would involve imposing one-man management, that is "*individual executives*" with "*dictatorial powers (or 'unlimited' powers)*" as there was "*absolutely no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 242, p. 237, p. 267 and p. 268]

Trotsky concurred, arguing in the same speech which announced the destruction of military democracy that workplace democracy "*is not the last word in the economic constructive work of the proletariat*". The "*next step must consist in self-limitation of the collegiate principle*" and its replacement by "*[p]olitical collegiate control by the Soviets*", i.e. the state control Lenin had repeatedly advocated in 1917. However "*for executive functions we must appoint*

*technical specialists.*" He ironically called this the working class "*throwing off the one-man management principles of its masters of yesterday*" and failed to recognise it was imposing the one-man management principles of new masters. As with Lenin, the destruction of workers' power at the point of production was of little concern for what mattered was that "*with power in our hands, we, the representatives of the working class*" would introduce socialism. [How the Revolution Armed, vol. 1, p. 37 and p. 38]

In reality, the Bolshevik vision of socialism simply replaced private capitalism with state capitalism, taking control of the economy out of the hands of the workers and placing it into the hands of the state bureaucracy. As one historian correctly summarises the s-called workers' state "*oversaw the reimposition of alienated labour and hierarchical social relations. It carried out this function in the absence of a ruling class, and them played a central role in ushering that class into existence - a class which subsequently ruled not through its ownership of private property but through its 'ownership' of the state. That state was antagonistic to the forces that could have best resisted the retreat of the revolution, i.e. the working class.*" [Simon Pirani, The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24, p. 240]

Whether it is in regards to soviet, workplace or army democracy or the rights of the opposition to organise freely and gather support, the facts are the Bolsheviks had systematically eliminated them **before** the start of the civil war. So when Trotsky asserted that "[i]n the beginning, the party had wished and hoped to preserve freedom of political struggle within the framework of the Soviets" but that it was civil war which "introduced stern amendments into this calculation," he was rewriting history. Rather than being "regarded not as a principle, but as an episodic act of self-defence" the opposite is the case. As we note in [section H.3.8](#) from roughly October 1918 onwards, the Bolsheviks **did** raise party dictatorship to a "principle" and did not care that this was "*obviously in conflict with the spirit of Soviet democracy.*" Trotsky was right to state that "*on all sides the masses were pushed away gradually from actual participation in the leadership of the country.*" [The Revolution Betrayed, p. 96 and p. 90] He was just utterly wrong to imply that this process happened **after** the end of the civil war rather than before its start and that the Bolsheviks did not play a key role in so doing. Thus, "*in the soviets and in economic management the embryo of centralised and bureaucratic state forms had already emerged by mid-1918.*" [Sakwa, Op. Cit., pp. 96-7]

It may be argued in objection to this analysis that the Bolsheviks faced resistance from the start and, consequently, civil war existed from the moment Lenin seized power and to focus attention on the events of late May 1918 gives a misleading picture of the pressures they were facing. After all, the Bolsheviks had the threat of German Imperialism and there were a few (small) White Armies in existence as well as conspiracies to combat. However, this is unconvincing as Lenin himself pointed to the ease of Bolshevik success post-October. On March 14th, 1918, Lenin had proclaimed that "*the civil war was one continuous triumph for Soviet power*" and in June argued that "*the Russian bourgeoisie was defeated in open conflict . . . in the period from October 1917 to February and March 1918.*" [Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 174 and p. 428] It can be concluded that the period up until March 1918 was not considered by the Bolsheviks themselves as being so bad as requiring the adjustment of their politics. This explains why, as one historian notes, that the "*revolt of the Czechoslovak Legion on 25 May 1918 is often considered to be the beginning of full-scale military activity. There followed a succession of campaigns.*" This is reflected in Bolshevik policy as well, with war communism "*lasting from about mid-1918 to March 1921.*" [Sakwa, Op. Cit., p. 22 and p. 19]

Significantly, the introduction of one-man management was seen not as an emergency measure forced upon the Bolsheviks by dire circumstances of civil war but rather as a natural aspect of building socialism itself. In March, 1918, for example, Lenin argued that civil war "*became a fact*" on October, 25, 1917 and "[*i*n this civil war . . . victory was achieved with . . . extraordinary ease . . . The Russia revolution was a continuous triumphal march in the first months.]" [Op. Cit., pp. 88-9] Looking back at this time from April 1920, Lenin reiterated his position ("Dictatorial powers and one-man management are not contradictory to socialist democracy.") while also stressing that this was not forced upon the Bolsheviks by civil war. Discussing how, again, the civil war was ended and it was time to build socialism he argued that the "whole attention of the Communist Party and the Soviet government is centred on peaceful economic development, on problems of the dictatorship and of one-man management . . . When we tackled them for the first time in 1918, there was no civil war and no experience to speak of." So it was "not only experience" of civil war, argued Lenin "but something more profound . . . that has induced us now, as it did two years ago, to concentrate all our attention on labour discipline." [Op. Cit., vol. 30, p. 503 and p. 504] Trotsky also argued that Bolshevik policy was not conditioned by the civil war (see [section H.3.14](#)).

As historian Jonathan Aves notes, "*the Communist Party took victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of economic construction on the basis of an intensification of War Communism policies.*" [Workers Against Lenin, p. 37] In addition, this perspective flowed, as we argue in the [next section](#), from the Bolshevik ideology, from its vision of socialism, rather than some alien system imposed upon an otherwise healthy set of ideas.

Of course, this can be ignored in favour of the argument that party rule was required for the revolution to succeed. That would be a defendable, if utterly incorrect, position to take. It would, however, also necessitate ripping up Lenin's **State and Revolution** as it is clearly not relevant to a socialist revolution nor can it be considered as the definitive guide of what Leninism really stands for, as Leninists like to portray it to this day. Given that this is extremely unlikely to happen, it is fair to suggest that claims that the Bolsheviks faced "civil war" from the start, so justifying their authoritarianism, can be dismissed as particularly unconvincing special pleading. Much the same can be said for the "objective conditions" produced by the May 1918 to October 1920 civil war argument in general.

Then there is the logical problem. Leninists say that they are revolutionaries. As we noted in [section H.2.1](#), they inaccurately mock anarchists for not believing that a revolution needs to defend itself. Yet, ironically, their whole defence of Bolshevism rests on the "*exceptional circumstances*" produced by the civil war they claim is inevitable. If Leninism cannot handle the problems associated with actually conducting a revolution then, surely, it should be avoided at all costs. This is particularly the case as leading Bolsheviks all argued that the specific problems their latter day followers blame for their authoritarianism were natural results of any revolution and, consequently, unavoidable. Lenin, for example, in 1917 mocked those who opposed revolution because "*the situation is exceptionally complicated.*" He noted "*the development of the revolution itself always creates an exceptionally complicated situation*" and that it was an "*incredibly complicated and painful process.*" In fact, it was "*the most intense, furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has taken place without civil war. And only a 'man in a muffler' can think that civil war is conceivable without an 'exceptionally complicated situation.'*" "*If the situation were not exceptionally complicated there would be no revolution.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 26, pp. 118-9]

He reiterated this in 1918, arguing that "*every great revolution, and a socialist revolution in particular, even if there is no external war, is inconceivable without internal war, i.e., civil war, which is even more devastating than external war, and involves thousands and millions of cases of wavering and desertion from one side to another, implies a state of extreme indefiniteness, lack of equilibrium and chaos.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 264] He even argued that revolution in an advanced capitalist nations would be far more devastating and ruinous than in Russia. [Op. Cit., vol. 28, p. 298]

Therefore, Lenin stressed, "*it will never be possible to build socialism at a time when everything is running smoothly and tranquilly; it will never be possible to realise socialism without the landowners and capitalists putting up a furious resistance.*" Those "who believe that socialism can be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistaken: it will be everywhere built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine. That is how it must be." Moreover, "*not one of the great revolutions of history has taken place*" without civil war and "*without which not a single serious Marxist has conceived the transition from capitalism to socialism.*" Obviously, "*there can be no civil war - the inevitable condition and concomitant of socialist revolution - without disruption.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 520, p. 517, p. 496 and p. 497]

Moreover, anarchists had long argued that a revolution would be associated with economic disruption, isolation and civil war and, consequently, had developed their ideas to take these into account. For example, Kropotkin was "*certain that the coming Revolution . . . will burst upon us in the middle of a great industrial crisis . . . There are millions of unemployed workers in Europe at this moment. It will be worse when Revolution has burst upon us . . . The number of the out-of-works will be doubled as soon as barricades are erected in Europe and the United States . . . we know that in time of Revolution exchange and industry suffer most from the general upheaval . . . A Revolution in Europe means, then, the unavoidable stoppage of at least half the factories and workshops.*" The "*smallest attack upon property will bring in its train the complete disorganisation*" of the capitalist economy. This meant that society "*itself will be forced to take production in hand . . . and to reorganise it to meet the needs of the whole people.*" [The Conquest of Bread, pp. 69-70] This prediction was a common feature of Kropotkin's politics (as can be seen from, say, his "*The First Work of the Revolution*" [Act for Yourselves, pp. 56-60]).

Revolutionary anarchism, then, is based on a clear understanding of the nature of a social revolution, the objective problems it will face and the need for mass participation and free initiative to solve them. So it must, therefore, be stressed that the very "*objective factors*" supporters of Bolshevism use to justify the actions of Lenin and Trotsky were predicted correctly by anarchists decades beforehand and integrated into our politics. Moreover, anarchists had developed their ideas on social revolution to make sure that these inevitable disruptions would be minimised. By stressing the need for self-management, mass participation, self-organisation and free federation, anarchism showed how a free people could deal with the difficult problems they would face (as we discuss in the [section H.6.2](#) there is substantial evidence to show that Bolshevik ideology and practice made the problems facing the Russian revolution much worse than they had to be).

It should also be noted that every revolution has confirmed the anarchist analysis. For example, the German Revolution after 1918 faced an economic collapse which was, relatively, just as bad as that facing Russia the year before. The near revolution produced extensive political conflict, including civil war, which was matched by economic turmoil.

Taking 1928 as the base year, the index of industrial production in Germany was slightly lower in 1913, namely 98 in 1913 to 100 in 1928. In 1917, the index was 63 and by 1918, it was 61 (i.e. industrial production had dropped by nearly 40%). In 1919, it fell again to 37, rising to 54 in 1920 and 65 in 1921. Thus, in 1919, the "*industrial production reached an all-time low*" and it "*took until the late 1920s for [food] production to recover its 1912 level.*" [V. R. Berghahn, **Modern Germany**, p. 258, pp. 67-8 and p. 71] In Russia, the index for large scale industry fell to 77 in 1917 from 100 in 1913, falling again to 35 in 1918, 26 in 1919 and 18 in 1920. [Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 86]

Strangely, Leninists do not doubt that the spread of the Russian Revolution to Germany would have allowed the Bolsheviks more leeway to avoid authoritarianism and so save the Revolution. Yet this does not seem likely given the state of the German economy. Comparing the two countries, there is a similar picture of economic collapse. In the year the revolution started, production had fallen by 23% in Russia (from 1913 to 1917) and by 43% in Germany (from 1913 to 1918). Once revolution had effectively started, production fell even more. In Russia, it fell to 65% of its pre-war level in 1918, in Germany it fell to 62% of its pre-war level in 1919. However, no Leninist argues that the German Revolution was impossible or doomed to failure. Similarly, no Leninist denies that a socialist revolution was possible during the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s or to post-world war two Europe, marked as it was by economic collapse. This was the case in 1917 as well, when economic crisis had been a fact of Russian life throughout the year. This did not stop the Bolsheviks calling for revolution and seizing power. Nor did this crisis stop the creation of democratic working class organisations, such as soviets, trade unions and factory committees being formed nor did it stop mass collective action. It appears, therefore, that while the economic crisis of 1917 did not stop the development of socialist tendencies to combat it, the seizure of power by a socialist party did.

To conclude, it seems hypocritical in the extreme for Leninists to blame difficult circumstances for the failure of the Russian Revolution. As Lenin himself argued, the Bolsheviks "*never said that the transition from capitalism to socialism would be easy. It will invoke a whole period of violent civil war, it will involve painful measures.*" They knew "*that the transition from capitalism to socialism is a struggle of an extremely difficult kind*" and so "*[i]f there ever existed a revolutionary who hoped that we could pass to the socialist system without difficulties, such a revolutionary, such a socialist, would not be worth a brass farthing.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 431, p. 433 and pp. 432-3] He would have been surprised to discover that many of his own followers would be "*such a socialist!*"

Consequently, it is not hard to conclude that for Leninists difficult objective circumstances place socialism off the agenda only when they are holding power. So even if we ignore the extensive evidence that Bolshevik authoritarianism started before the civil war, the logic of the Leninist argument is hardly convincing. Yet it does have advantages, for by focusing attention on the civil war, Leninists also draw attention away from Bolshevik ideology and tactics. As Peter Kropotkin recounted to Emma Goldman this simply cannot be done:

*"the Communists are a political party firmly adhering to the idea of a centralised State, and that as such they were bound to misdirect the course of the Revolution . . . [Their policies] have paralysed the energies of the masses and have terrorised the people. Yet without the direct participation of the masses in the reconstruction of the country, nothing essential could be accomplished . . . They created a bureaucracy and officialdom . . . [which were] parasites on the social body . . . It was not the fault of*

*any particular individual: rather it was the State they had created, which discredits every revolutionary ideal, stifles all initiative, and sets a premium on incompetence and waste . . . Intervention and blockade were bleeding Russia to death, and were preventing the people from understanding the real nature of the Bolshevik regime."* [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. 99]

Obviously, if the "objective" factors do not explain Bolshevik authoritarianism and the failure of the revolution we are left with the question of which aspects of Bolshevik ideology impacted negatively on the revolution. As Kropotkin's comments indicate, anarchists have good reason to argue that one of the greatest myths of state socialism is the idea that Bolshevik ideology played no role in the fate of the Russian Revolution. We turn to this in the [next section](#).

## H.6.2 Did Bolshevik ideology influence the outcome of the Russian Revolution?

As we discussed in the [last section](#), anarchists reject the Leninist argument that the failure of Bolshevism in the Russian Revolution can be blamed purely on the difficult objective circumstances they faced. As Noam Chomsky summarises:

*"In the stages leading up to the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, there were incipient socialist institutions developing in Russia - workers' councils, collectives, things like that. And they survived to an extent once the Bolsheviks took over - but not for very long; Lenin and Trotsky pretty much eliminated them as they consolidated their power. I mean, you can argue about the justification for eliminating them, but the fact is that the socialist initiatives were pretty quickly eliminated.*

*"Now, people who want to justify it say, 'The Bolsheviks had to do it' - that's the standard justification: Lenin and Trotsky had to do it, because of the contingencies of the civil war, for survival, there wouldn't have been food otherwise, this and that. Well, obviously the question is, was that true. To answer that, you've got to look at the historical facts: I don't think it was true. In fact, I think the incipient socialist structures in Russia were dismantled before the really dire conditions arose . . . But reading their own writings, my feeling is that Lenin and Trotsky knew what they were doing, it was conscious and understandable." [Understanding Power, p. 226]*

Chomsky is right on both counts. The attack on the basic building blocks of genuine socialism started before the civil war. Moreover, it did not happen by accident. The attacks were rooted in the Bolshevik vision of socialism. As Maurice Brinton concluded:

*"there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practices of Stalinism . . . The more one unearths about this period the more difficult it becomes to define - or even to see - the 'gulf' allegedly separating what happened in Lenin's time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept . . . that the whole course of events was 'historically inevitable' and 'objectively determined'. Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period."* [The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, p. 84]

This is not to suggest that the circumstances played no role in the development of the revolution. It is simply to indicate that Bolshevik ideology played its part as well by not only shaping the policies implemented but also how the results of those policies themselves contributed to the circumstances being faced. This is to be expected, given that the Bolsheviks were the ruling party and, consequently, state power was utilised to implement their policies, policies which, in turn, were influenced by their ideological preferences and prejudices. Ultimately, to maintain (as Leninists do) that the ideology of the ruling party played no (or, at best, a minor) part hardly makes sense logically nor, equally importantly, can it be supported once even a basic awareness of the development of the Russian Revolution is known.

A key issue is the Bolsheviks support for centralisation. Long before the revolution, Lenin had argued that within the party it was a case of "*the transformation of the power of ideas into the power of authority, the subordination of lower Party bodies to higher ones.*" [Collected Works, vol. 7, p. 367] Such visions of centralised organisation were the model for the revolutionary state and, once in power, they did not disappoint. Thus, "*for the leadership, the principle of maximum centralisation of authority served more than expedience. It consistently resurfaced as the image of a peacetime political system as well.*" [Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 91]

However, by its very nature centralism places power into a few hands and effectively eliminates the popular participation required for any successful revolution to develop. The power placed into the hands of the Bolshevik government was automatically no longer in the hands of the working class. So when Leninists argue that "objective" circumstances forced the Bolsheviks to substitute their power for that of the masses, anarchists reply that this substitution had occurred the moment the Bolsheviks centralised power and placed it into their own hands. As a result, popular participation and institutions began to wither and die. Moreover, once in power, the Bolsheviks were shaped by their new position and the social relationships it created and, consequently, implemented policies influenced and constrained by the hierarchical and centralised structures they had created.

This was not the only negative impact of Bolshevik centralism. It also spawned a bureaucracy. As we noted in [section H.1.7](#), the rise of a state bureaucracy started immediately with the seizure of power. Thus "*red tape and vast administrative offices typified Soviet reality*" as the Bolsheviks "*rapidly created their own [state] apparatus to wage the political and economic offensive against the bourgeoisie and capitalism. As the functions of the state expanded, so did the bureaucracy*" and so "*following the revolution the process of institutional proliferation reached unprecedented heights . . . a mass of economic organisations [were] created or expanded.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 190 and p. 191] This was a striking confirmation of the anarchist analysis which argued that a new bureaucratic class develops around any centralised body. This body would soon become riddled with personal influences and favours, so ensuring that members could be sheltered from popular control while, at the same time, exploiting its power to feather their own nest. Overtime, this permanent collection of bodies would become the real power in the state, with the party members nominally in charge really under the control of an unelected and uncontrolled officialdom. This was recognised by Lenin in 1922:

*"If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are*

*directing that heap. To tell the truth, they are not directing, they are being directed."* [The Lenin Anthology, p. 527]

By the end of 1920, there were five times more state officials than industrial workers (5,880,000 were members of the state bureaucracy). However, the bureaucracy had existed since the start. In Moscow, in August 1918, state officials represented 30 per cent of the workforce there and by 1920 the general number of office workers "*still represented about a third of those employed in the city*" (200,000 in November, 1920, rising to 228,000 in July, 1921 and, by October 1922, to 243,000). [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 191-3] And with bureaucracy came the abuse of it simply because it held **real power**:

*"The prevalence of bureaucracy, of committees and commissions . . . permitted, and indeed encouraged, endless permutations of corrupt practices. These raged from the style of living of communist functionaries to bribe-taking by officials. With the power of allocation of scarce resources, such as housing, there was an inordinate potential for corruption."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 193]

The growth in **power** of the bureaucracy should not, therefore, come as a major surprise given that it had existed from the start in sizeable numbers. Yet, for the Bolsheviks "*the development of a bureaucracy*" was a puzzle, "*whose emergence and properties mystified them.*" It should be noted that, "[f]or the Bolsheviks, *bureaucratism signified the escape of this bureaucracy from the will of the party as it took on a life of its own.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 182 and p. 190] This was the key. They did not object the usurpation of power by the party (indeed they placed party dictatorship at the core of their politics and universalised it to a general principle for **all** "socialist" revolutions). Nor did they object to the centralisation of power and activity (and so the bureaucratisation of life). As such, the Bolsheviks failed to understand how their own politics helped the rise of this new ruling class. They failed to understand the links between centralism and bureaucracy. Bolshevik nationalisation and centralism (as well as being extremely inefficient) also ensured that the control of society, economic activity and its product would be in the hands of the state and, so, class society would continue. Unsurprisingly, complaints by working class people about the privileges enjoyed by Communist Party and state officials were widespread.

Another problem was the Bolshevik vision of (centralised) democracy. Trotsky is typical. In April 1918 he argued that once elected the government was to be given total power to make decisions and appoint people as required as it is "*better able to judge in the matter than*" the masses. The sovereign people were expected to simply obey their public servants until such time as they "*dismiss that government and appoint another.*" Trotsky raised the question of whether it was possible for the government to act "*against the interests of the labouring and peasant masses?*" And answered no! Yet it is obvious that Trotsky's claim that "*there can be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members*" is just nonsense. [**Leon Trotsky Speaks**, p. 113] The history of trade unionism is full of examples of committees betraying their membership. Needless to say, the subsequent history Lenin's government shows that there can be "*antagonism*" between rulers and ruled and that appointments are always a key way to further elite interests.

This vision of top-down "democracy" can, of course, be traced back to Marx and Lenin (see sections [H.3.2](#) and [H.3.3](#)). By equating centralised, top-down decision making by an elected government with "democracy," the Bolsheviks had the ideological justification to eliminate

the functional democracy associated with the soviets, factory committees and soldiers committees. The Bolshevik vision of democracy became the means by which real democracy was eliminated in area after area of Russian working class life. Needless to say, a state which eliminates functional democracy in the grassroots will not stay democratic in any meaningful sense for long.

Nor does it come as too great a surprise to discover that a government which considers itself as "*better able to judge*" things than the people finally decides to annul any election results it dislikes. As we discussed in [section H.5](#), this perspective is at the heart of vanguardism, for in Bolshevik ideology the party, not the class, is in the final analysis the repository of class consciousness. This means that once in power it has a built-in tendency to override the decisions of the masses it claimed to represent and justify this in terms of the advanced position of the party (as historian Richard Sakwa notes a "*lack of identification with the Bolshevik party was treated as the absence of political consciousness altogether*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 94]). Combine this with a vision of "democracy" which is highly centralised and which undermines local participation then we have the necessary foundations for the turning of party power into party dictatorship.

Which brings us to the next issue, namely the Bolshevik idea that the party should seize power, not the working class as a whole, equating party power with popular power. The question instantly arises of what happens if the masses turn against the party? The gerrymandering, disbanding and marginalisation of the soviets in the spring and summer of 1918 answers that question (see [last section](#)). It is not a great step to party dictatorship **over** the proletariat from the premises of Bolshevism. In a clash between soviet democracy and party power, the Bolsheviks consistently favoured the latter - as would be expected given their ideology.

This can be seen from the Bolsheviks' negative response to the soviets of 1905. At one stage the Bolsheviks demanded the St. Petersburg soviet accept the Bolshevik political programme and then disband. The rationale for these attacks is significant. The St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were convinced that "*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*" [quoted by Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers' interests because they were elected by the workers! The implications of this perspective became clear in 1918, as are its obvious roots in Lenin's arguments in **What is to be Done?**. As one historian argues, the 1905 position on the soviets "*is of particular significance in understanding the Bolshevik's mentality, political ambitions and modus operandi.*" The Bolshevik campaign "*was repeated in a number of provincial soviets*" and "*reveals that from the outset the Bolsheviks were distrustful of, if not hostile towards the Soviets, to which they had at best an instrumental and always party-minded attitude.*" The Bolsheviks actions showed an "*ultimate aim of controlling [the soviets] and turning them into one-party organisations, or, failing that, of destroying them.*" [Israel Getzler, "*The Bolshevik Onslaught on the Non-Party 'Political Profile' of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies October-November 1905*", **Revolutionary History**, pp. 123-146, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 124-5]

That the mainstream of Bolshevism expressed this perspective once in power goes without saying, but even dissident Communists expressed identical views. Left-Communist V. Sorin argued in 1918 that the "*party is in every case and everywhere superior to the soviets . . . The*

*soviet represent labouring democracy in general; and its interest, and in particular the interests of the petty bourgeois peasantry, do not always coincide with the interests of the proletariat.*" [quoted by Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182] As one historian notes, "[a]ccording to the Left Communists . . . the party was the custodian of an interest higher than that of the soviets." Unsurprisingly, in the party there was "a general consensus over the principles of party dictatorship for the greater part of the [civil] war. But the way in which these principles were applied roused increasing opposition." [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182 and p. 30] This consensus existed in all the so-called opposition (including the **Workers' Opposition** and Trotsky's **Left Opposition** in the 1920s). The ease with which the Bolsheviks embraced party dictatorship is suggestive of a fundamental flaw in their political perspective which the problems of the revolution, combined with lost of popular support, simply exposed.

Then there is the Bolshevik vision of socialism. As we discussed in [section H.3.12](#), the Bolsheviks, like other Marxists at the time, saw the socialist economy as being built upon the centralised organisations created by capitalism. They confused state capitalism with socialism. The former, Lenin wrote in May 1917, "*is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism*" and so socialism "*is nothing but the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly.*" It is "*merely state-capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 25, p. 359 and p. 358] A few months later, he was talking about how the institutions of state capitalism could be taken over and used to create socialism. Unsurprisingly, when defending the need for state capitalism in the spring of 1918 against the "Left Communists," Lenin stressed that he gave his "*high appreciation of state capitalism . . . before the Bolsheviks seized power.*" And, as Lenin noted, his praise for state capitalism can be found in his **State and Revolution** and so it was "*significant that [his opponents] did not emphasise this*" aspect of his 1917 ideas. [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 27, p. 341 and p. 354] Unsurprisingly, modern-day Leninists do not emphasise that element of Lenin's ideas either.

Given this perspective, it is unsurprising that workers' control was not given a high priority once the Bolsheviks seized power. While in order to gain support the Bolsheviks **had** paid lip-service to the idea of workers' control, as we noted in [section H.3.14](#) the party had always given that slogan a radically different interpretation than the factory committees had. While the factory committees had seen workers' control as being exercised directly by the workers and their class organisations, the Bolshevik leadership saw it in terms of state control in which the factory committees would play, at best, a minor role. Given who held actual power in the new regime, it is unsurprising to discover which vision was actually introduced:

*"On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the [factory] committee leaders sought to bring their model into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The result was to vest both managerial and control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them."*  
[Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 38]

Given his vision of socialism, Lenin's rejection of the factory committee's model comes as no surprise. As Lenin put it in 1920, the "*domination of the proletariat consists in the fact that the landowners and capitalists have been deprived of their property . . . The victorious proletariat has abolished property . . . and therein lies its domination as a class. The prime thing is the question of property.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 30, p. 456] As we proved in [section H.3.13](#), the Bolsheviks had no notion that socialism required workers' self-management of production

and, unsurprisingly, they, as Lenin had promised, built from the top-down their system of unified administration based on the Tsarist system of central bodies which governed and regulated certain industries during the war. The **Supreme Economic Council** (Vesenka) was set up in December of 1917, and "was widely acknowledged by the Bolsheviks as a move towards 'statisation' (*ogosudarstvleniye*) of economic authority." During the early months of 1918, the Bolsheviks began implementing their vision of "socialism" and the Vesenka began "to build, from the top, its 'unified administration' of particular industries. The pattern is informative" as it "gradually took over" the Tsarist state agencies such as the **Glakvi** (as Lenin had promised) "and converted them . . . into administrative organs subject to [its] direction and control." The Bolsheviks "clearly opted" for the taking over of "the institutions of bourgeois economic power and use[d] them to their own ends." This system "necessarily implies the perpetuation of hierarchical relations within production itself, and therefore the perpetuation of class society." [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 22, p. 36 and p. 22] Thus the Supreme Council of the National Economy "was an expression of the principle of centralisation and control from above which was peculiar to the Marxist ideology." In fact, it is "likely that the arguments for centralisation in economic policy, which were prevalent among Marxists, determined the short life of the All-Russian Council of Workers' Control." [Silvana Malle, **The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918-1921**, p. 95 and p. 94]

Moreover, the Bolsheviks had systematically stopped the factory committee organising together, using their controlled unions to come "out firmly against the attempt of the Factory Committees to form a national organisation." The unions "prevented the convocation of a planned All-Russian Congress of Factory Committees. [I. Deutscher, quoted by Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 19] Given that one of the key criticisms of the factory committees by leading Bolsheviks was their "localism", this blocking of co-ordination is doubly damning.

At this time Lenin "envisaged a period during which, in a workers' state, the bourgeoisie would still retain the formal ownership and effective management of most of the productive apparatus" and workers' control "was seen as the instrument" by which the "capitalists would be coerced into co-operation." [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 13] The Bolsheviks turned to one-management in April, 1918 (it was applied first on the railway workers). As the capitalists refused to co-operate, with many closing down their workplaces, the Bolsheviks were forced to nationalise industry and place it fully under state control in late June 1918. This saw state-appointed "dictatorial" managers replacing the remaining capitalists (when it was not simply a case of the old boss being turned into a state manager). The Bolshevik vision of socialism as nationalised property replacing capitalist property was at the root of the creation of state capitalism within Russia. This was very centralised and very inefficient:

*"it seems apparent that many workers themselves . . . had now come to believe . . . that confusion and anarchy [sic!] at the top were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic . . . Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council. . . issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs."* [William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, p. 116]

Faced with the chaos that their own politics, in part, had created, like all bosses, the Bolsheviks blamed the workers. Yet abolishing the workers' committees resulted in "a terrifying proliferation of competitive and contradictory Bolshevik authorities, each with a

*claim of life or death importance . . . Railroad journals argued plaintively about the correlation between failing labour productivity and the proliferation of competing Bolshevik authorities." Rather than improving things, Lenin's one-man management did the opposite, "leading in many places . . . to a greater degree of confusion and indecision" and "this problem of contradictory authorities clearly intensified, rather than lessened." Indeed, the "result of replacing workers' committees with one man rule . . . on the railways . . . was not directiveness, but distance, and increasing inability to make decisions appropriate to local conditions. Despite coercion, orders on the railroads were often ignored as unworkable." It got so bad that "a number of local Bolshevik officials . . . began in the fall of 1918 to call for the restoration of workers' control, not for ideological reasons, but because workers themselves knew best how to run the line efficiently, and might obey their own central committee's directives if they were not being constantly countermanaged."* [William G. Rosenberg, **Workers' Control on the Railroads**, p. D1208, p. D1207, p. D1213 and pp. D1208-9]

That it was Bolshevik policies and not workers' control which was to blame for the state of the economy can be seen from what happened **after** Lenin's one-man management was imposed. The centralised Bolshevik economic system quickly demonstrated how to **really** mismanage an economy. The Bolshevik onslaught against workers' control in favour of a centralised, top-down economic regime ensured that the economy was handicapped by an unresponsive system which wasted the local knowledge in the grassroots in favour of orders from above which were issued in ignorance of local conditions. Thus the **glavki** "did not know the true number of enterprises in their branch" of industry. To ensure centralism, customers had to go via a central orders committee, which would then pass the details to the appropriate **glavki** and, unsurprisingly, it was "*unable to cope with these enormous tasks*". As a result, workplaces often "*endeavoured to find less bureaucratic channels*" to get resources and, in fact, the "*comparative efficiency of factories remaining outside the glavki sphere increased.*" In summary, the "*shortcomings of the central administrations and glavki increased together with the number of enterprises under their control.*" [Malle, **Op. Cit.**, p. 232, p. 233 and p. 250] In summary:

*"The most evident shortcoming . . . was that it did not ensure central allocation of resources and central distribution of output, in accordance with any priority ranking . . . materials were provided to factories in arbitrary proportions: in some places they accumulated, whereas in others there was a shortage. Moreover, the length of the procedure needed to release the products increased scarcity at given moments, since products remained stored until the centre issued a purchase order on behalf of a centrally defined customer. Unused stock coexisted with acute scarcity. The centre was unable to determine the correct proportions among necessary materials and eventually to enforce implementation of the orders for their total quantity. The gap between theory and practice was significant."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 233]

Thus there was a clear "*gulf between the abstraction of the principles on centralisation and its reality.*" This was recognised at the time and, unsuccessfully, challenged. Provincial delegates argued that "[w]aste of time was . . . the effect of strict compliance of vertical administration . . . semi-finished products [were] transferred to other provinces for further processing, while local factories operating in the field were shut down" (and given the state of the transport network, this was a doubly inefficient). The local bodies, knowing the grassroots situation, "*had proved to be more far-sighted than the centre.*" For example, flax had been substituted for cotton long before the centre had issued instructions for this.

Arguments reversing the logic centralisation were raised: "*there was a lot of talk about scarcity of raw materials, while small factories and mills were stuffed with them in some provinces: what's better, to let work go on, or to make plans?*" These "expressed feelings . . . about the inefficiency of the **glavk** system and the waste which was visible locally." Indeed, "*the inefficiency of central financing seriously jeopardised local activity.*" While "*the centre had displayed a great deal of conservatism and routine thinking,*" the localities "*had already found ways of rationing raw materials, a measure which had not yet been decided upon at the centre.*" [Op. Cit., p.269, p. 270 and pp. 272-3]

This did not result in changes as such demands "*challenged . . . the central directives of the party*" which "*approved the principles on which the glavk system was based*" and "*the maximum centralisation of production.*" Even the "*admission that some of the largest works had been closed down, owing to the scarcity of raw materials and fuel, did not induce the economists of the party to question the validity of concentration, although in Russia at the time impediments due to lack of transport jeopardised the whole idea of convergence of all productive activity in a few centres.*" The party leadership "*decided to concentrate the tasks of economic reconstruction in the hands of the higher organs of the state.*" Sadly, "*the glavk system in Russia did not work . . . Confronted with production problems, the central managers needed the collaboration of local organs, which they could not obtain both because of reciprocal suspicion and because of a lack of an efficient system of information, communications and transport. But the failure of glavkism did not bring about a reconsideration of the problems of economic organisation . . . On the contrary, the ideology of centralisation was reinforced.*" [Op. Cit., p. 271 and p. 275]

The failings of centralisation can be seen from the fact that in September 1918, the Supreme Economic Council (SEC) chairman reported that "*approximately eight hundred enterprises were known to have been nationalised and another two hundred or so were presumed to be nationalised but were not registered as such. In fact, well over two thousand enterprises had been taken over by this time.*" The "*centre's information was sketchy at best*" and "*efforts by the centre to exert its power more effectively would provoke resistance from local authorities.*" [Thomas F. Remington, Op. Cit., pp. 58-9] This kind of clashing could not help but occur when the centre had no real knowledge nor understanding of local conditions:

*"Organisations with independent claims to power frequently ignored it. It was deluged with work of an ad hoc character . . . Demands for fuel and supplies piled up. Factories demanded instructions on demobilisation and conversion. Its presidium . . . scarcely knew what its tasks were, other than to direct the nationalisation of industry. Control over nationalisation was hard to obtain, however. Although the SEC intended to plan branch-wide nationalisations, it was overwhelmed with requests to order the nationalisation of individual enterprises. Generally it resorted to the method, for want of a better one, of appointing a commissar to carry out each act of nationalisation. These commissars, who worked closely with the Cheka, had almost unlimited powers over both workers and owners, and acted largely on their own discretion."* [Op. Cit., p. 61-2]

Unsurprisingly, "[r]esentment of the **glavki** was strongest where local authorities had attained a high level of competence in co-ordinating local production. They were understandably distressed when orders from central organs disrupted local production plans." Particularly given that the centre "*drew up plans for developing or reorganising the economy of a region, either in ignorance, or against the will, of the local authorities.*"

"Hypercentralisation", ironically, "multiplied the lines of command and accountability, which ultimately reduced central control." For example, one small condensed milk plan, employing fewer than 15 workers, "became the object of a months-long competition among six organisations." Moreover, the **glavki** "were filled with former owners." Yet "throughout 1919, as the economic crisis grew worse and the war emergency sharper the leadership strengthened the powers of the **glavki** in the interests of centralisation." [Op. Cit., p. 68, p. 69, p. 70 and p. 69]

A clearer example of the impact of Bolshevik ideology on the fate of the revolution would be hard to find. While the situation was pretty chaotic in early 1918, this does not prove that the factory committees' socialism was not the most efficient way of running things under the (difficult) circumstances. Unless of course, like the Bolsheviks, you have a dogmatic belief that centralisation is always more efficient. That favouring the factory committees, as anarchists stressed then and now, could have been a possible solution to the economic problems being faced is not utopian. After all rates of "*output and productivity began to climb steadily after*" January 1918 and "*[i]n some factories, production doubled or tripled in the early months of 1918 . . . Many of the reports explicitly credited the factory committees for these increases.*" [Carmen Sirianni, **Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy**, p. 109] Another expert notes that there is "*evidence that until late 1919, some factory committees performed managerial tasks successfully. In some regions factories were still active thanks to their workers' initiatives in securing raw materials.*" [Malle, Op. Cit., p. 101]

Moreover, given how inefficient the Bolshevik system was, it was only the autonomous self-activity at the base which keep it going. Thus the Commissariat of Finance was "*not only bureaucratically cumbersome, but [it] involved mountainous accounting problems*" and "*with the various offices of the Sovnarkhoz and commissariat structure literally swamped with 'urgent' delegations and submerged in paperwork, even the most committed supporters of the revolution - perhaps one should say especially the most committed - felt impelled to act independently to get what workers and factories needed, even if this circumvented party directives.*" [William G. Rosenberg, "*The Social Background to Tsektran*," pp. 349-373, **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 357] "*Requisition and confiscation of resources,*" as Malle notes, "*largely undertaken by the glavki, worked against any possible territorial network of complementary industries which might have been more efficient in reducing delays resulting from central financing, central ordering, central supply and delivery.*" By integrating the factory committees into a centralised state structure, this kind of activity became harder to do and, moreover, came up against official resistance and opposition. Significantly, due to "*the run-down of large-scale industry and the bureaucratic methods applied to production orders*" the Red Army turned to small-scale workplaces to supply personal equipment. These workplaces "*largely escaped the glavk administration*" and "*allowed the Bolsheviks to support a well equipped army amidst general distress and disorganisation.*" [Op. Cit., p. 251, p. 477 and p. 502]

Needless to say, Lenin never wavered in his support for one-man management nor in his belief in the efficiency of centralism to solve all problems, particularly the problems it itself created in abundance. Nor did his explicit call to reproduce capitalist social relations in production cause him any concern for, if the primary issue were property and not who **manages** the means of production, then factory committees are irrelevant in determining the socialist nature of the economy. Equally, if (as with Engels) all forms of organisation are inherently authoritarian then it does not fundamentally matter whether that authority is

exercised by an elected factory committee or an appointed dictatorial manager (see [section H.4](#)). And it must be noted that the politics of the leading members of the factory committee movement also played its part. While the committees expressed a spontaneous anarchism, almost instinctively moving towards libertarian ideas, the actual influence of conscious anarchists was limited. Most of the leaders of the movement were, or became, Bolsheviks and, as such, shared many of the statist and centralistic assumptions of the party leadership as well as accepting party discipline. As such, they did not have the theoretical accretion to resist their leadership's assault on the factory committees and, as a result, did integrate them into the trade unions when demanded.

As well as advocating one-man management, Lenin's proposals also struck at the heart of workers' power in other ways. For example, he argued that "*we must raise the question of piece-work and apply it and test in practice; we must raise the question of applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system*". [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 258] As Leninist Tony Cliff noted, "*the employers have at their disposal a number of effective methods of disrupting th[e] unity [of workers as a class]. One of the most important of these is the fostering of competition between workers by means of piece-work systems.*" He added that these were used by the Nazis and the Stalinists "*for the same purpose.*" [State Capitalism in Russia, pp. 18-9] Obviously piece-work is different when Lenin introduces it!

Other policies undermined working class collectivity. Banning trade helped undermine a collective response to the problems of exchange between city and country. For example, a delegation of workers from the Main Workshops of the Nikolaev Railroad to Moscow reported to a well-attended meeting that "*the government had rejected their request [to obtain permission to buy food collectively] arguing that to permit the free purchase of food would destroy its efforts to come to grips with hunger by establishing a 'food dictatorship.'*" [David Mandel, **The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power**, p. 392] Bolshevik ideology replaced collective working class action with an abstract "collective" response via the state, which turned the workers into isolated and atomised individuals. As such, the Bolsheviks provided a good example to support Malatesta's argument that "*if . . . one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government . . . it follows. . . that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, being able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing.*" [Anarchy, pp. 38-9] Can it be surprising, then, that Bolshevik policies aided the atomisation of the working class by replacing collective organisation and action by state bureaucracy?

The negative impact of Bolshevik ideology showed up in other areas of the economy as well. For example, the Leninist fetish that bigger was better resulted in the "*waste of scarce resources*" as the "*general shortage of fuel and materials in the city took its greatest toll on the largest enterprises, whose overhead expenditures for heating the plant and firing the furnaces were proportionately greater than those for smaller enterprises. This point . . . was recognised later. Not until 1919 were the regime's leaders prepared to acknowledge that small enterprises, under the conditions of the time, might be more efficient in using resources; and not until 1921 did a few Bolsheviks theorists grasp the economic reasons for this apparent violation of their standing assumption that larger units were inherently more productive.*" [Remington, Op. Cit., p. 106] Given how disrupted transport was and how scarce supplies were, this kind of ideologically generated mistake could not fail to have substantial impact.

Post-October Bolshevik policy is a striking confirmation of the anarchist argument that a centralised structure would stifle the initiative of the masses and their own organs of self-management. Not only was it disastrous from a revolutionary perspective, it was hopelessly inefficient. The constructive self-activity of the people was replaced by the bureaucratic machinery of the state. The Bolshevik onslaught on workers' control, like their attacks on soviet democracy and workers' protest, undoubtedly engendered apathy and cynicism in the workforce, alienating even more the positive participation required for building socialism which the Bolshevik mania for centralisation had already marginalised. The negative results of Bolshevik economic policy confirmed Kropotkin's prediction that a revolution which "establish[ed] a strongly centralised Government", leaving it to "draw up a statement of all the produce" in a country and "then command that a prescribed quantity" of some good "be sent to such a place on such a day" and "stored in particular warehouses" would "not merely" be "undesirable, but it never could by any possibility be put into practice." "In any case," Kropotkin stressed, "a system which springs up spontaneously, under stress of immediate need, will be infinitely preferable to anything invented between four-walls by hide-bound theorists sitting on any number of committees." [The Conquest of Bread, pp. 82-3 and p. 75]

Some Bolsheviks were aware of the problems. One left-wing Communist, Osinskii, concluded that "*his six weeks in the provinces had taught him that the centre must rely on strong regional and provincial councils, since they were more capable than was the centre of managing the nationalised sector.*" [Remington, Op. Cit., p. 71] However, Marxist ideology seemed to preclude even finding the words to describe a possible solution to the problems faced by the regime: "*I stand not for a local point of view and not for bureaucratic centralism, but for organised centralism, - I cannot seem to find the actual word just now, - a more balanced centralism.*" [Osinskii, quoted by Remington, Op. Cit., p. 71] Any anarchist would know that the word he was struggling to find was federalism! Little wonder Goldman concluded that anarcho-syndicalism, not nationalisation, could solve the problems facing Russia:

*"Only free initiative and popular participation in the affairs of the revolution can prevent the terrible blunders committed in Russia. For instance, with fuel only a hundred versts [about sixty-six miles] from Petrograd there would have been no necessity for that city to suffer from cold had the workers' economic organisations of Petrograd been free to exercise their initiative for the common good. The peasants of the Ukraina would not have been hampered in the cultivation of their land had they had access to the farm implements stacked up in the warehouses of Kharkov and other industrial centres awaiting orders from Moscow for their distribution. These are characteristic examples of Bolshevik governmentalism and centralisation, which should serve as a warning to the workers of Europe and America of the destructive effects of Statism."* [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. 253]

If Bolshevik industrial policy reflected a basic ignorance of local conditions and the nature of industry, their agricultural policies were even worse. Part of the problem was that the Bolsheviks were simply ignorant of peasant life (as one historian put it, "*the deeply held views of the party on class struggle had overcome the need for evidence.*" [Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviet, p. 225]). Lenin, for example, thought that inequality in the villages was much, much higher than it actually was, a mistaken assumption which drove the unpopular and counter-productive "Committees of Poor Peasants" (kombedy) policy of 1918. Rather than a countryside dominated by a few rich kulaks (peasants who employed wage labour),

Russian villages were predominantly pre-capitalist and based on actual peasant farming (i.e., people who worked their land themselves). While the Bolsheviks attacked kulaks, they, at best, numbered only 5 to 7 per cent of the peasantry and even this is high as only 1 per cent of the total of peasant households employed more than one labourer. The revolution itself had an equalising effect on peasant life, and during 1917 "*average size of landholding fell, the extremes of riches and poverty diminished.*" [Alec Nove, **An economic history of the USSR: 1917-1991**, p. 103 and p. 102]

By 1919, even Lenin had to admit that the policies pursued in 1918, against the advice and protest of the Left-SRs, were failures and had alienated the peasantry. While admitting to errors, it remains the case that it was Lenin himself, more than anyone, who was responsible for them. Still, there was no fundamental change in policy for another two years. Defenders of the Bolsheviks argue that the Bolshevik had no alternative but to use violence to seize food from the peasants to feed the starving cities. However, this fails to acknowledge two key facts. Firstly, Bolshevik industrial policy made the collapse of industry worse and so the lack of goods to trade for grain was, in part, a result of the government. It is likely that if the factory committees had been fully supported then the lack of goods to trade may have been reduced. Secondly, it cannot be said that the peasants did not wish to trade with the cities. They were, but at a fair price as can be seen from the fact that throughout Russia peasants with bags of grains on their backs went to the city to exchange them for goods. In fact, in the Volga region official state sources indicate "*that grain-hoarding and the black market did not become a major problem until the beginning of 1919, and that during the autumn the peasants, in general, were 'wildly enthusiastic to sell as much grain as possible' to the government.*" This changed when the state reduced its fixed prices by 25% and "*it became apparent that the new government would be unable to pay for grain procurements in industrial goods.*" [Orlando Figes, **Peasant Russia, Civil War**, p. 253 and p. 254] Thus, in that region at least, it was **after** the introduction of central state food requisition in January 1919 that peasants started to hoard food. Thus Bolshevik policy made the situation worse. And as Alec Nove noted "*at certain moments even the government itself was compelled to 'legalise' illegal trade. For example, in September 1918 the wicked speculators and meshochniki [bag-men] were authorised to take sacks weighing up to 1.5 poods (54 lbs.) to Petrograd and Moscow, and in this month . . . they supplied four times more than did the official supply organisation.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 55]

Yet rather than encourage this kind of self-activity, the Bolsheviks denounced it as speculation and did all in their power to suppress it (this included armed pickets around the towns and cities). This, of course, drove the prices on the black market higher due to the risk of arrest and imprisonment this entailed and so the regime made the situation worse: "*it was in fact quite impossible to live on the official rations, and the majority of the supplies even of bread come through the black market. The government was never able to prevent this market from functioning, but did sufficiently disrupt it to make food shortages worse.*" By January 1919, only 19% of all food came through official channels and rose to around 30% subsequently. Official sources, however, announced an increase in grain, with total procurements amounting to 30 million poods in the agricultural year 1917-18 to 110 million poods in 1918-19. [Nove, **Op. Cit.**, p. 55 and p. 54] Needless to say, the average worker in the towns saw nothing of this improvement in official statistics (and this in spite of dropping urban populations!).

In the face of repression (up to and including torture and the destruction of whole villages), the peasantry responded by both cutting back on the amount of grain planted (something

compounded by the state often taking peasant reserves for next season) and rising in insurrection. Unsurprisingly, opposition groups called for free trade in an attempt to both feed the cities and stop the alienation of the peasantry from the revolution. The Bolsheviks denounced the call, before being forced to accept it in 1921 due to mass pressure from below. Three years of bad policies had made a bad situation worse. Moreover, if the Bolsheviks had not ignored and alienated the Left-SRs, gerrymandered the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets and pushed them into revolt then their links with the countryside would not have been so weak and sensible policies which reflected the reality of village life may have been implemented.

Nor did it help that the Bolsheviks undermined Russia's extensive network of consumer co-operatives because they were associated with the moderate socialists. It should also be noted that the peasants (or "kulaks") were blamed for food shortages when problems on the transport network or general bureaucratic mismanagement was the real reason. That there is "*is little evidence to support the Leninist view*" that kulaks were behind the peasant resistance and revolts resulting from the Bolshevik food requisition policies should go without saying. [Figes, **Op. Cit.**, p. 155]

Given all this, it is not hard to conclude that alternatives existed to Bolshevik policies - particularly as even the Bolsheviks had to admit in 1919 their decisions of the previous year were wrong! The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1921 (under immense popular pressure) in conditions even worse than those in 1918, for example. Since NEP allowed wage labour, it was a step backwards from the ideas of the peasantry itself, peasant based parties like the SRs and Left-SRs as well as such rebels as the Kronstadt sailors. A more socialistic policy, recognising that peasants exchanging the product of their labour was **not** capitalism, could have been implemented much earlier but Bolshevik ignorance and disdain for the peasantry combined with a false belief that centralised state control was more efficient and more socialist ensured that this option was unlikely to be pursued, particularly given the collapse of industrial production Bolshevik state capitalist policies helped deepen.

The pre-revolution Bolshevik vision of a socialist system was fundamentally centralised and, consequently, top-down. This was what was implemented post-October, with disastrous results. At each turning point, the Bolsheviks tended to implement policies which reflected their prejudices in favour of centralism, nationalisation and party power. Unsurprisingly, this also undermined the genuine socialist tendencies which existed at the time and so the Bolshevik vision of socialism and democracy played a key role in the failure of the revolution. Therefore, the Leninist idea that politics of the Bolsheviks had no influence on the outcome of the revolution, that their policies during the revolution were a product purely of objective forces, is unconvincing. This is enforced by the awkward fact that the Bolshevik leaders "*justified what they were doing in theoretical terms, e.g. in whole books by Bukharin and Trotsky.*" [Pirani, **The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24**, p. 9]

Remember, we are talking about the ideology of a ruling party and so it is more than just ideas for after the seizure of power, they became a part of the real social situation within Russia. Individually, party members assumed leadership posts in all spheres of social life and started to make decisions influenced by that ideology and its prejudices in favour of centralisation, the privileged role of the party, the top-down nature of decision making, the notion that socialism built upon state capitalism, amongst others. Then there is the hierarchical position which the party leaders found themselves. "*If it is true that people's real social existence determines their consciousness,*" argued Cornelius Castoriadis, "*it is from*

*that moment illusory to expect the Bolshevik party to act in any other fashion than according to its real social position. The real social situation of the Party is that of a directorial organ, and its point of view toward this society henceforth is not necessarily the same as the one this society has toward itself.*" [Political and Social Writings, vol. 3, p. 97]

Ultimately, the Bolshevik's acted as if they were trying to prove Bakunin's critique of Marxism was right (see [section H.1.1](#)). Implementing a dictatorship of the proletariat in a country where the majority were not proletarians failed while, for the proletariat, it quickly became a dictatorship **over** the proletariat by the party (and in practice, a few party leaders and justified by the privileged access they had to socialist ideology). Moreover, centralisation proved to be as disempowering and inefficient as Bakunin argued.

Sadly, far too many Marxists seem keen on repeating rather than learning from history while, at the same time, ignoring the awkward fact that anarchism's predictions were confirmed by the Bolshevik experience. It is not hard to conclude that another form of socialism was essential for the Russian revolution to have any chance of success. A decentralised socialism based on workers running their workplaces and the peasants controlling the land was not only possible but was being implemented by the people themselves. For the Bolsheviks, only a centralised planned economy was true socialism and, as a result, fought this alternative socialism and replaced it with a system reflecting that perspective. Yet socialism needs the mass participation of all in order to be created. Centralisation, by its very nature, limits that participation (which is precisely **why** ruling classes have always centralised power into states). As Russian Anarchist Voline argued, state power "*seeks more or less to take in its hands the reins of social life. It predisposes the masses to passivity, and all spirit of initiative is stifled by the very existence of power*" and so under state socialism the "*tremendous new creative forces which are latent in the masses thus remain unused.*" [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 250] This cannot help have a negative impact on the development of the revolution and, as anarchists had long feared and predicted, it did.

### H.6.3 Were the Russian workers "declassed" and "atomised"?

A standard Leninist explanation for the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party (and subsequent rise of Stalinism) is based on the "*atomisation*" or "*declassing*" of the proletariat. Leninist John Rees summarised this argument:

*"The civil war had reduced industry to rubble. The working class base of the workers' state, mobilised time and again to defeat the Whites, the rock on which Bolshevik power stood, had disintegrated. The Bolsheviks survived three years of civil war and wars in intervention, but only at the cost of reducing the working class to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917 . . . The bureaucracy of the workers' state was left suspended in mid-air, its class base eroded and demoralised. Such conditions could not help but have an effect on the machinery of the state and organisation of the Bolshevik Party."* ["In Defence of October," pp. 3-82, International Socialism, no. 52, p. 65]

It should be noted that this perspective originated in Lenin's arguments that the Russian proletariat had become "declassed." In 1921 it was the case that the proletariat, "owning to

*the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed, i.e. dislodged from its class groove, and had ceased to exist as proletariat . . . the proletariat has disappeared."* [Collected Works, vol. 33, p. 66] However, unlike his later-day followers, Lenin was sure that while it "would be absurd and ridiculous to deny that the fact that the proletariat is declassed is a handicap" it could still "fulfil its task of winning and holding state power." [Op. Cit., vol. 32, p. 412] Since Lenin, this argument has been utilised repeatedly by Leninists to justify his regime as well as explaining both its authoritarianism and the rise of Stalinism.

It does, of course, contain an element of truth. The numbers of industrial workers **did** decrease dramatically between 1918 and 1921, particularly in Petrograd and Moscow (although the drop in both cities was exceptional, with most towns seeing much smaller reductions). As one historian summarises, the "*social turmoil at this time undeniably reduced the size of Russia's working class . . . Yet a substantial core of urban workers remained in the factories, and their attitudes towards the Bolsheviks were indeed transformed.*" [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, p. 348] This core was those with the least ties with the countryside - the genuine industrial worker.

Nor can it be maintained that the Russian working class was incapable of collective action during the civil war. Throughout that period, as well as before and after, the Russian workers proved themselves quite capable of taking collective action - against the Bolshevik state. Simply put, an "*atomised, individualised mass*" does not need extensive state repression to control it. So while the working class **was** "*a fraction of its former size*" it **was** able "*to exercise the collective power it had done in 1917.*" Significantly, rather than decrease over the civil war period, the mass protests **grew** in militancy. By 1921 these protests and strikes were threatening the very existence of the Bolshevik dictatorship, forcing it to abandon key aspects of its economic policies.

Which shows a key flaw in the standard Leninist account - the Russian working class, while undoubtedly reduced in size and subject to extreme economic problems, was still able to organise, strike and protest. This awkward fact has been systematically downplayed, when not ignored, in Leninist accounts of this period. As in any class society, the history of the oppressed is ignored in favour of the resolutions and decisions of the enlightened few at the top of the social pyramid. Given the relative lack of awareness of working class protest against the Bolsheviks, it will be necessary to present substantial evidence of it.

This process of collective action by workers and Bolshevik repression started before the Civil War began, continued throughout and after it. For example, "*[t]hroughout the civil war there was an undercurrent of labour militancy in Moscow . . . both the introduction and the phasing out of war communism were marked by particularly active periods of labour unrest.*" In the Moscow area, while it is "*impossible to say what proportion of workers were involved in the various disturbances,*" following the lull after the defeat of the protest movement in mid-1918 "*each wave of unrest was more powerful than the last, culminating in the mass movement from late 1920.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 94 and p. 93] This was the case across Russia, with "*periodic swings in the workers' political temper. When Soviet rule stood in peril . . . [this] spared the regime the defection of its proletarian base. During lulls in the fighting, strikes and demonstrations broke out.*" [Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 101] Workers' resistance and protests against the Bolsheviks shows that not only that a "workers' state" is a contradiction in terms but also that there was a social base for possible alternatives to Leninism.

The early months of Bolshevik rule were marked by "worker protests, which then precipitated violent repressions against hostile workers. Such treatment further intensified the disenchantment of significant segments of Petrograd labour with Bolshevik-dominated Soviet rule." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 37] The first major act of state repression was an attack on a march in Petrograd in support of the Constituent Assembly when it opened in January 1918. Early May saw "the shooting of protesting housewives and workers in the suburb of Kolpino", the "arbitrary arrest and abuse of workers" in Sestroretsk, the "closure of newspapers and arrests of individuals who protested the Kolpino and Sestroretsk events" and "the resumption of labour unrest and conflict with authorities in other Petrograd factories." This was no isolated event, as "violent incidents against hungry workers and their family demanding bread occurred with increasing regularity." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, pp. 229-30] The shooting at Kolpino "triggered a massive wave of indignation . . . Work temporarily stopped at a number of plants." In Moscow, Tula, Kolomna, Nizhnii-Novoprod, Rybinsk, Orel, Tver' and elsewhere "workers gathered to issue new protests." In Petrograd, "textile workers went on strike for increased food rations and a wave of demonstrations spread in response to still more Bolshevik arrests." This movement was the "first major wave of labour protest" against the regime, with "protests against some form of Bolshevik repression" being common.

[William Rosenberg, **Russian Labor and Bolshevik Power**, pp. 123-4]

This general workers' opposition generated the Menshevik inspired, but independent, Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates (EAD). "The emergence of the EAD", Rabinowitch notes, "was also stimulated by the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees, and soviets . . . were no longer representative, democratically run working-class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies. There was ample reason for this concern." To counter the EAD, the Bolsheviks organised non-party conferences which, in itself, shows that the soviets had become as distant from the masses as the opposition argued. District soviets "were deeply concerned about their increasing isolation . . . At the end of March . . . they resolved to convene successive nonparty workers' conferences . . . in part to undercut the EAD by strengthening ties between district soviets and workers." This was done amidst "unmistakable signs of the widening rift between Bolshevik-dominated political institutions and ordinary factory workers." The EAD, argues Rabinowitch, was an expression of the "growing disenchantment of Petrograd workers with economic conditions and the evolving structure and operation of Soviet political institutions". [Op. Cit., p. 224, p. 232 and p. 231]

Anarchists should be not too surprised that the turning of popular organisations into parts of a state soon resulted in their growing isolation from the masses. The state, with its centralised structures, is simply not designed for mass participation - and this does doubly for the highly centralised Leninist state.

These protests and repression continued after the start of the civil war. "At the end of May and beginning of June, a wave of strikes to protest the lack of bread swept Nivskii district factories" and "strikes followed by bloody clashes between workers and Soviet authorities had erupted in scattered parts of central Russia." On June 21, a general meeting of Obukhov workers "seized control of the plant" and the next day the assembled workers "resolved to demand that the EAD should declare political strikes . . . to protest the political repression of workers." Orders were issued by the authorities "to shut down Obukhov plant" and "the neighbourhood surrounding the plant was placed under martial law." [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 231 and pp. 246-7] However "workers were not so readily pacified. In scores of

*additional factories and shops protests mounted and rapidly spread along the railways."* [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 126-7]

Faced with this mounting pressure of spontaneous strikes, the EAD declared a general strike for the 2nd of July. The Bolshevik authorities acted quickly: "*Any sign of sympathy for the strike was declared a criminal act. More arrests were made. In Moscow, Bolsheviks raided the Aleksandrovsk railroad shops, not without bloodshed. Dissidence spread.*" On July 1st, "*machine guns were set up at main points throughout the Petrograd and Moscow railroad junctions, and elsewhere in both cities as well. Controls were tightened in factories. Meetings were forcefully dispersed.*" [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 127] Factories were warned "*that if they participated in the general strike they would face immediate shutdown, and individual strikes were threatened with fines or loss of work. Agitators and members of strike committees were subject to immediate arrest.*" Opposition printing presses "*were sealed, the offices of hostile trade unions were raided, martial law on lines in the Petrograd rail hub was declared, and armed patrols with authority to prevent work stoppages were formed and put on twenty-four hour duty at key points around the city.*" Perhaps unsurprisingly, given "*the brutal suppression of the EAD's general strike*", it was not successful. [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 254 and p. 259]

Thus "[b]y the early summer of 1918" there were "*widespread anti-Bolshevik protests. Armed clashes occurred in the factory districts of Petrograd and other industrial centres.*" [William Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 107] It should also be noted that at the end of September of that year, there was a revolt by Baltic Fleet sailors demanding (as they did again in 1921) a "*return to government by liberated, democratic soviets - that is, 1917-type soviets.*" As after the more famous 1921 revolt, the Left-SR controlled Kronstadt soviet had been disbanded and replaced by a Bolshevik revolutionary committee in July 1918, during the repression after the Left-SR assassination of the German ambassador. [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 352 and p. 302]

As well as state repression, the politics of the opposition played a role in its defeat. Before October 1918, both the Mensheviks and SRs were in favour of the Constituent Assembly and Dumas as the main organs of power, with the soviets playing a minor role. This allowed the Bolsheviks to portray themselves as defenders of "soviet power" (a position which still held popular support). Understandably, many workers were unhappy to support an opposition which aimed to replace the soviets with typically bourgeois institutions. Many also considered the Bolshevik government as a "soviet power" and so, to some degree, their own regime. With the civil war starting, many working class people would also have been uneasy in protesting against a regime which proclaimed its soviet and socialist credentials. After October 1918, the Mensheviks supported the idea of (a democratically elected) soviet power, joining the Left-SRs (who were now effectively illegal after their revolt of July - see [section H.6.1](#)). However, by then it was far too late as Bolshevik ideology had adjusted to Bolshevik practice and the party was now advocating party dictatorship. Thus, we find Victor Serge in the 1930s noting that "*the degeneration of Bolshevism*" was apparent by that time, "*since at the start of 1919 I was horrified to read an article by Zinoviev . . . on the monopoly of the party in power.*" [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, p. 188] It should be noted, though, that Serge kept his horror well hidden throughout this period - and well into the 1930s (see [section H.1.2](#) for his public support for this monopoly).

As noted above, this cycle of resistance and repression was not limited to Petrograd. In July 1918, a leading Bolshevik insisted "*that severe measures were needed to deal with strikes*" in

Petrograd while in other cities "*harsher forms of repression*" were used. For example, in Tula, in June 1918, the regime declared "*martial law and arrested the protestors. Strikes followed and were suppressed by violence*". In Sormovo, 5,000 workers went on strike after a Menshevik-SR paper was closed. Violence was "*used to break the strike.*" [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, p. 105]

Similar waves of protests and strikes as those in 1918 took place the following year with 1919 seeing a "*new outbreak of strikes in March*", with the "*pattern of repression . . . repeated.*" One strike saw "*closing of the factory, the firing of a number of workers, and the supervised re-election of its factory committee.*" In Astrakhan, a mass meeting of 10,000 workers was fired on by Red Army troops, killing 2,000 (another 2,000 were taken prisoner and subsequently executed). [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, p. 109] Moscow, at the end of June, saw a "*committee of defence (KOM) [being] formed to deal with the rising tide of disturbances.*" The KOM "*concentrated emergency power in its hands, overriding the Moscow Soviet, and demanding obedience from the population. The disturbances died down under the pressure of repression.*" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 94-5] In the Volga region, delegates to a conference of railroad workers "*protested the Cheka's arrest of union members, which the delegates insisted further disrupted transport. It certainly curbed the number of strikes.*" [Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 371] In Tula "*after strikes in the spring of 1919*" local Menshevik party activists had been arrested while Petrograd saw "*violent strikes*" at around the same time. [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 19 and p. 23] As Vladimir Brovkin argues in his account of the strikes and protests of 1919:

*"Data on one strike in one city may be dismissed as incidental. When, however, evidence is available from various sources on simultaneous independent strikes in different cities an overall picture begins to emerge. All strikes developed along a similar timetable: February, brewing discontent; March and April, peak of strikes: May, slackening in strikes; and June and July, a new wave of strikes . . .*

*"Workers' unrest took place in Russia's biggest and most important industrial centres . . . Strikes affected the largest industries, primarily those involving metal: metallurgical, locomotive, and armaments plants . . . In some cities . . . textile and other workers were active protesters as well. In at least five cities . . . the protests resembled general strikes."* ["*Workers' Unrest and the Bolsheviks' Response in 1919*", pp. 350-373, **Slavic Review**, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 370]

These strikes raised both economic and political demands, such as "*free and fair elections to the soviets.*" Unsurprisingly, in all known cases the Bolsheviks' "*initial response to strikes was to ban public meetings and rallies*" as well as "*occup[ying] the striking plant and dismiss[ing] the strikers en masse.*" They also "*arrested strikers*" and executed some. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 371 and p. 372]

1920 saw similar waves of strikes and protests. In fact, strike action "*remained endemic in the first nine months of 1920.*" Soviet figures report a total of 146 strikes, involving 135,442 workers for the 26 provinces covered. In Petrograd province, there were 73 strikes with 85,642 participants. "*This is a high figure indeed, since at this time . . . there were 109,100 workers*" in the province. Overall, "*the geographical extent of the February-March strike wave is impressive*" and the "*harsh discipline that went with labour militarisation led to an increase in industrial unrest in 1920.*" [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 69, p. 70 and p. 80]

Saratov, for example, saw a wave of factory occupations break out in June and mill workers went out in July while in August, strikes and walkouts occurred in its mills and other factories and these "*prompted a spate of arrests and repression.*" In September railroad workers went out on strike, with arrests making "*the situation worse, forcing the administration to accept the workers' demands.*" [Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 375] In January 1920, a strike followed a mass meeting at a railway repair shop in Moscow. Attempts to spread were foiled by arrests. The workshop was closed, depriving workers of their rations and 103 workers of the 1,600 employed were imprisoned. "*In late March 1920 there were strikes in some factories*" in Moscow and "*[at] the height of the Polish war the protests and strikes, usually provoked by economic issues but not restricted to them, became particularly frequent . . . The assault on non-Bolshevik trade unionism launched at this time was probably associated with the wave of unrest since there was a clear danger that they would provide a focus for opposition.*" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 95] The "*largest strike in Moscow in the summer of 1920*" was by tram workers over the equalisation of rations. It began on August 12th, when one tram depot went on strike, quickly followed by others while workers "*in other industries joined in to.*" The tram workers "*stayed out a further two days before being driven back by arrests and threats of mass sackings.*" In the textile manufacturing towns around Moscow "*there were large-scale strikes*" in November 1920, with 1000 workers striking for four days in one district and a strike of 500 mill workers saw 3,000 workers from another mill joining in. [Simon Pirani, **The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24**, p. 32 and p. 43]

In Petrograd the Aleksandrovskii locomotive building works "*had seen strikes in 1918 and 1919*" and in August 1920 it again stopped work. The Bolsheviks locked the workers out and placed guards outside it. The Cheka then arrested the SRs elected to the soviet from that workplace as well as about 30 workers. After the arrests, the workers refused to co-operate with elections for new soviet delegates. The "*opportunity was taken to carry out a general round-up, and arrests were made*" at three other works. The enormous Briansk works "*experienced two major strikes in 1920*", and second one saw the introduction of martial law on both the works and the settlement it was situated in. A strike in Tula saw the Bolsheviks declare a "*state of siege*", although the repression "*did not prevent further unrest and the workers put forward new demands*" while, in Moscow, a strike in May by printers resulted in their works "*closed and the strikers sent to concentration camps.*" [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 41, p. 45, p. 47, pp. 48-9, pp. 53-4 and p. 59]

These expressions of mass protest and collective action continued in 1921, unsurprisingly as the civil war was effectively over in the previous autumn. Even John Rees had to acknowledge the general strike in Russia at the time, stating that the Kronstadt revolt was "*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 61] Significantly, he failed to note that the Kronstadt sailors rebelled in solidarity with those strikes and how it was state repression which "*resolved*" the strikes. Moreover, he seriously downplays the scale and importance of these strikes, perhaps unsurprisingly as "*[b]y the beginning of 1921 a revolutionary situation with workers in the vanguard had emerged in Soviet Russia*" with "*the simultaneous outbreak of strikes in Petrograd and Moscow and in other industrial regions.*" In February and March 1921, "*industrial unrest broke out in a nation-wide wave of discontent or volynka. General strikes, or very widespread unrest*" hit all but one of the country's major industrial regions and "*workers protest consisted not just of strikes but also of factory occupations, 'Italian strikes', demonstrations, mass meetings, the beating up of communists and so on.*" Faced with this massive strike wave, the Bolsheviks did what many ruling elites do: they called it something else. Rather than admit it was a strike, they "*usually*

*employed the word volynka, which means only a 'go-slow'". [Aves, Op. Cit., p. 3, p. 109, p. 112, pp. 111-2]*

Mid-February 1921 saw workers in Moscow striking and "*massive city-wide protest spread through Petrograd . . . Strikes and demonstrations spread. The regime responded as it had done in the past, with lock-outs, mass arrests, heavy show of force - and concessions.*" [Remington, Op. Cit., p. 111] As Paul Avrich recounts, in Petrograd these "*street demonstrations were heralded by a rash of protest meetings*" workplaces On the 24th of February, the day after a workplace meeting, the Trubochny factory workforce downed tools and walked out the factory. Additional workers from nearby factories joined in. The crowd of 2,000 was dispersed by armed military cadets. The next day, the Trubochny workers again took to the streets and visited other workplaces, bringing them out on strike too. In the face of a near general strike, three-man Defence Committee was formed. Zinoviev "*proclaimed martial law*" and "*[o]vernight Petrograd became an armed camp.*" Strikers were locked out and the "*application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities*" was "*indispensable in restoring order*" (as were economic concessions). [Kronstadt 1921, pp. 37-8, p. 39, pp. 46-7 and p. 50]

In Moscow, "*industrial unrest . . . turned into open confrontation and protest spilled on to the streets*", starting with a "*wave of strikes that had its centre in the heart of industrial Moscow.*" Strikes were "*also spreading outside Moscow city itself into the surrounding provinces*" and so "*Moscow and Moscow province were put under martial law*". [Aves, Op. Cit., p. 130, p. 138, p. 143 and p. 144] This strike wave started when "*[m]eetings in factories and plants gathered and criticised government policies, beginning with supply and developing into general political criticism.*" As was typical, the "*first response of the civil authorities to the disturbances was increased repression*" although as "*the number of striking factories increased some concessions were introduced.*" Military units called in against striking workers "*refused to open fire, and they were replaced by the armed communist detachments*" which did. "*That evening mass protest meetings were held . . . The following day several factories went on strike*" and troops were "*disarmed and locked in as a precaution*" by the government against possible fraternising. February 23rd saw a 10,000 strong street demonstration and "*Moscow was placed under martial law with a 24-hour watch on factories by the communist detachments and trustworthy army units.*" The disturbances were accompanied by factory occupations and on the 1st of March the soviet called on workers "*not to go on strike.*" However, "*wide-scale arrests deprived the movement of its leadership.*" March 5th saw disturbances at the Bromlei works, "*resulting in the now customary arrest of workers. A general meeting at the plant on 25 March called for new elections to the Moscow Soviet. The management dispersed the meeting but the workers called on other plants to support the calls for new elections. As usual, the ringleaders were arrested.*" [Sakwa, Op. Cit., pp. 242-3, p. 245 and p. 246]

The events at the Bromlei works were significant in that the march 25th mass meeting passed an anarchist and Left-SR initiated resolution supporting the Kronstadt rebels. The party "*responded by having them sacked en masse*". The workers "*demonstrated through*" their district "*and inspired some brief solidarity strikes.*" Over 3000 workers joined the strikes and about 1000 of these joined the flying picket (managers at one print shop locked their workers in to stop them joining the protest). While the party was willing to negotiate economic issues, "*it had no wish to discuss politics with workers*" and so arrested those who initiated the resolution, sacked the rest of the workforce and selectively re-employed them. Two more strikes were conducted "*to defend the political activists in their midst*" and two mass

meetings demanded the release of arrested ones. Workers also struck on supply issues in May, July and August. [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 83-4]

While the Kronstadt revolt took place too late to help the Petrograd strikes, it did inspire a strike wave in Ekaterinoslavl (in the Ukraine) in May, 1921. It started in the railway workshops and became "*quickly politicised*," with the strike committee raising a "*series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels*" (many of the resolutions put to the meeting almost completely coincided with them). The strike "*spread to the other workshops*" and on June 1st the main large Ekaterinoslavl factories joined the strike. The strike was spread via the use of trains and telegraph and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The strike was finally ended by the use of the Cheka, using mass arrests and shootings. Unsurprisingly, the local communists called the revolt a "*little Kronstadt*." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 171-3]

Saratov also saw a mass revolt in March 1921, when a strike by railroad workers over a reduction in food rations spread to the metallurgical plants and other large factories "*as workers and non-workers sent representatives to the railroad shops*." They forced the Communists to allow the setting up of a commission to re-examine the activities of all economic organs and the Cheka. During the next two days, "*the assemblies held at factories to elect delegates to the commission bitterly denounced the Communists*." The "*unrest spilled over into Pokrovsk*." The commission of 270 had less than ten Communists and "*demanded the freeing of political prisoners, new elections to the soviets and to all labour organisations, independent unions, and freedom of speech, the press, and assembly*." The Communists "*resolved to shut down the commission before it could issue a public statement*" and set up a Provincial Revolutionary Committee which "*introduced martial law both in the city and the garrison*" as well as arresting "*the ringleaders of the workers' movement*." The near general strike was broken by a "*wave of repression*" but "*railroad workers and dockworkers and some printers refused to resume work*." [Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 388-9]

**Post-volynka**, workplaces "*that had been prominent in unrest were particularly hit by . . . purges . . . The effect on the willingness of workers to support opposition parties was predictable*." However, "*the ability to organise strikes did not disappear*" and they continued to take place throughout 1921. The spring of 1922 saw "*a new strike wave*." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182 and p. 183] For example, in early March, "*long strikes*" hit the textile towns around Moscow. At the Glukhovskaia mills 5000 workers struck for 5 days, 1000 at a nearby factory for 2 days and 4000 at the Voskresenskaia mills for 6 days. In May, 1921, workers in the city of Moscow reacted to supply problems "*with a wave of strikes. Party officials reckoned that in a 24-day period in May there were stoppages at 66 large enterprises*." These included a sit-down strike at one of Moscow's largest plants, while "*workers at engineering factories in Krasnopresnia followed suit, and Cheka agents reported 'dissent, culminating in strikes and occupation' in Bauman*." August 1922 saw 19,000 workers strike in textile mills in Moscow region for several days. Tram workers also struck that year, while teachers "*organised strikes and mass meetings*". Workers usually elected delegates to negotiate with their trade unions as well as their bosses as both were Communist Party members. Strike organisers, needless to say, were sacked. [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 82, pp. 111-2 and p. 157]

While the strike wave of early 1921 is the most famous, due to the Kronstadt sailors rebelling in solidarity with it, the fact is that this was just one of many strike waves during the 1918 and 1921 period. In response to protests, "*the government had combined concessions with severe repression to restore order*" as well as "*commonly resort[ing] to the lock out as a*

*means of punishing and purging the work force." Yet, "as the strike waves show, the regime's sanctions were not sufficient to prevent all anti-Bolshevik political action."* [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, p. 111, p. 107, and p. 109] In fact, repression "did not prevent strikes and other forms of protest by workers becoming endemic in 1919 and 1920" while in early 1921 the Communist Party "faced what amounted to a revolutionary situation. Industrial unrest was only one aspect of a more general crisis that encompassed the Kronstadt revolt and the peasant rising in Tambov and Western Siberia." This "industrial unrest represented a serious political threat to the Soviet regime . . . From Ekaterinburg to Moscow, from Petrograd to Ekaterinoslav, workers took to the streets, often in support of political slogans that called for the end of Communist Party rule . . . soldiers in many of the strike areas showed themselves to be unreliable [but] the regime was able to muster enough forces to master the situation. Soldiers could be replaced by Chekists, officer cadets and other special units where Party members predominated." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187, p. 155 and p. 186]

Yet, an "atomised" and powerless working class does not need martial law, lockouts, mass arrests and the purging of the workforce to control it. As Russian anarchist Ida Mett succinctly put it: *"And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?"* [**The Kronstadt Rebellion**, p. 81] The end of the civil war also saw the Bolsheviks finally destroy what was left of non-Bolshevik trade unionism. In Moscow, this took place against fierce resistance of the union members. As one historian concludes:

*"Reflecting on the determined struggle mounted by printers, bakers and chemical workers in Moscow during 1920-1, in spite of appalling economic conditions, being represented by organisations weakened by constant repression . . . to retain their independent labour organisations it is difficult not to feel that the social basis for a political alternative existed."* [Jonathan Aves, *"The Demise of Non-Bolshevik Trade Unionism in Moscow: 1920-21"*, pp. 101- 33, **Revolutionary Russia**, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 130]

Elsewhere, Aves argues that an "examination of industrial unrest after the Bolshevik seizure of power . . . shows that the Revolution had brought to the surface resilient traditions of organisation in society and had released tremendous forces in favour of greater popular participation . . . The survival of the popular movement through the political repression and economic devastation of the Civil War testifies to its strength." [**Workers Against Lenin**, p. 186] The idea that the Russian working class was incapable of collective struggle is hard to defend given this series of struggles (and state repression). The class struggle in Bolshevik Russia did not stop, it continued except the ruling class had changed. All the popular energy and organisation this expressed, which could have been used to combat the problems facing the revolution and create the foundations of a genuine socialist society, were wasted in fighting the Bolshevik regime. Ultimately, though, the *"sustained, though ultimately futile, attempts to revive an autonomous workers' movement, especially in mid-1918 and from late 1920, failed owing to repression."* [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 269] Another historian notes that *"immediately after the civil war"* there was *"a revival of working class collective action that culminated in February-March 1921 in a widespread strike movement and the revolt at the Kronstadt naval base."* As such, the position expounded by Rees and other Leninists *"is so one-sided as to be misleading."* [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 7 and p. 23]

Nor is this commonplace Leninist rationale for Bolshevik rule particularly original, as it dates back to Lenin and was first formulated *"to justify a political clamp-down."* Indeed, this

argument was developed in response to rising working class protest rather than its lack: "As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin . . . began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated . . . workers had become 'declassed.'" However, there "is little evidence to suggest that the demands that workers made at the end of 1920 . . . represented a fundamental change in aspirations since 1917." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 18, p. 90 and p. 91] So while the "working class had decreased in size and changed in composition, . . . the protest movement from late 1920 made clear that it was not a negligible force and that in an inchoate way it retained a vision of socialism which was not identified entirely with Bolshevik power . . . Lenin's arguments on the declassing of the proletariat was more a way of avoiding this unpleasant truth than a real reflection of what remained, in Moscow at least, a substantial physical and ideological force." [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 261]

Nor can it be suggested, as the Bolsheviks did at the time, that these strikes were conducted by newly arrived workers, semi-peasants without an awareness of proletarian socialism or traditions. Links between the events in 1917 and those during the civil war are clear. Jonathan Aves writes that there were "*distinct elements of continuity between the industrial unrest in 1920 and 1917 . . . As might be anticipated, the leaders of unrest were often to be found amongst the skilled male workers who enjoyed positions of authority in the informal shop-floor hierarchies.*" Looking at the strike wave of early 1921 in Petrograd, the "*strongest reason for accepting the idea that it was established workers who were behind the volynka is the form and course of protest. Traditions of protest reaching back through the spring of 1918 to 1917 and beyond were an important factor in the organisation of the volynka*". In fact, "*an analysis of the industrial unrest of early 1921 shows that long-standing workers were prominent in protest.*" [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39, p. 126 and p. 91] As another example, "*although the ferment touched all strata of Saratov workers, it must be emphasised that the skilled metalworkers, railroad workers, and printers - the most 'conscious' workers - demonstrated the most determined resistance.*" They "*contested repression and the Communists' violation of fair play and workplace democracy.*" [Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 376] As Ida Mett argued in relation to the strikes in early 1921:

*"The population was drifting away from the capital. All who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside.*

*"This fact must be emphasised, in order to nail the official lies seeking to attribute the Petrograd strikes . . . to peasant elements, 'insufficiently steeled in proletarian ideas.' The real situation was the very opposite . . . There was certainly no exodus of peasants into the starving towns! . . . It was the famous Petrograd proletariat, the proletariat which had played such a leading role in both previous revolutions, that was finally to resort to the classical weapon of the class struggle: the strike."* [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 36]

As one expert on this issue argues, while the number of workers did drop "*a sizeable core of veteran urban proletarians remained in the city; they did not all disappear.*" In fact, "*it was the loss of young activists rather than of all skilled and class-conscious urban workers that caused the level of Bolshevik support to decline during the Civil War. Older workers had tended to support the Menshevik Party in 1917*". Given this, "*it appears that the Bolshevik Party made deurbanisation and declassing the scapegoats for its political difficulties when the party's own policies and its unwillingness to accept changing proletarian attitudes were*

*also to blame.*" It should also be noted that the notion of declassing to rationalise the party's misfortunes was used before long before the civil war: "*This was the same argument used to explain the Bolsheviks' lack of success among workers in the early months of 1917 - that the cadres of conscious proletarians were diluted by nonproletarian elements.*" [Diane P. Koenker, "Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War", pp. 81-104, **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 96, p. 95, p. 100 and p. 84]

While there is still much research required, what facts that are available suggest that throughout the time of Lenin's regime the Russian workers took collective action in defence of their interests. This is not to say that workers did not also respond to the problems they faced in an individualistic manner, often they did. However, such responses were, in part (as we noted in the [last section](#)), because Bolshevik policy **itself** gave them little choice as it limited their ability to respond collectively. Yet in the face of difficult economic circumstances, workers turned to mass meetings and strikes. In response, the Bolshevik's used state repression to break resistance and protest against their regime. In such circumstances it is easy to see how the Bolshevik party became isolated from the masses they claimed to be leading but were, in fact, ruling. This transformation of rebels into a ruling elite comes as no great surprise given that Bolshevik's aimed to seize power themselves in a centralised and hierarchical institution, a state, which has always been the method by which ruling classes secured their position (as we argued in [section H.3.7](#), this perspective flowed from the flawed Marxist theory of the state). Just as they had to, first, gerrymander and disband soviets to regime in power in the spring and summer of 1918, so the Bolsheviks had to clamp down on any form of collective action by the masses. As such, it is incredulous that latter day Leninists justify Bolshevik authoritarianism on a lack of collective action by workers when that authoritarianism was often driven precisely to break it!

So the claim by John Rees that the "*dialectical relationship between the Bolsheviks and the working class was broken, shattered because the working class itself was broke-backed after the civil war*" leaves a lot to be desired. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 22] The Bolsheviks did more than their fair share of breaking the back of the working class. This is unsurprising for a government which grants to the working class the greatest freedom undermines its own power by so doing. Even a limited relaxation of its authority will allow people to organise themselves, listen to alternative points of view and to act on them. That could not but undermine the rule of the party and so could not be supported - nor was it.

For example, in his 1920 diatribe against Left-wing Communism, Lenin pointed to "*non-Party workers' and peasants' conferences*" and Soviet Congresses as means by which the party secured its rule. Yet, if the congresses of soviets were "**democratic institutions, the like of which even the best democratic republics of the bourgeois have never known**", the Bolsheviks would have no need to "*support, develop and extend*" non-Party conferences "*to be able to observe the temper of the masses, come closer to them, meet their requirements, promote the best among them to state posts*". [**The Lenin Anthology**, p. 573] How the Bolsheviks met "*their requirements*" is extremely significant - they disbanded them, just as they had with soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities in 1918. This was because "[d]uring the disturbances" of late 1920, "*they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies.*" Their frequency was decreased and they "*were discontinued soon afterward.*" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 203]

In the soviets themselves, workers turned to non-partyism, with non-party groups winning majorities in soviet delegates from industrial workers' constituencies in many places. This was the case in Moscow, where Bolshevik support among "industrial workers collapsed" in favour of non-party people. Due to support among the state bureaucracy and the usual packing of the soviet with representatives from Bolshevik controlled organisations, the party had, in spite of this, a massive majority. Thus the Moscow soviet elections of April-May 1921 "provided an opportunity to revive working-class participation. The Bolsheviks turned it down." [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 97-100 and p. 23] Indeed, one Moscow Communist leader stated that these soviet elections had seen "a high level of activity by the masses and a striving to be in power themselves." [quoted by Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 101]

1921 also saw the Bolshevik disperse provincial trade unions conferences in Vologda and Vitebsk "because they had anti-communist majorities." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 176] At the All-Russian Congress of Metalworkers' Union in May, the delegates voted down the party-list of recommended candidates for union leadership. The Central Committee of the Party "disregarded every one of the votes and appointed a Metalworkers' Committee of its own. So much for 'elected and revocable delegates'. Elected by the union rank and file and revocable by the Party leadership!" [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 83]

Another telling example is provided in August 1920 by Moscow's striking tram workers who, in addition to economic demands, called for a general meeting of all depots. As one historian notes, this was "significant: here the workers' movement was trying to get on the first rung of the ladder of organisation, and being knocked off by the Bolsheviks." The party "responded to the strike in such a way as to undermine workers' organisation and consciousness" and "throttled independent action" by "repression of the strike by means reminiscent of tsarism." The Bolshevik's "dismissive rejection" of the demand for a city-wide meeting "spoke volumes about their hostility to the development of the workers' movement, and landed a blow at the type of collective democracy that might have been better able to confront supply problems." This, along with the other strikes that took place, showed that "the workers' movement in Moscow was, despite its numerical weakness and the burdens of civil war, engaged with political as well as industrial issues . . . the working class was far from non-existent, and when, in 1921, it began to resuscitate soviet democracy, the party's decision to make the Moscow soviet its 'creature' was not effect but cause." [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 32, p. 33, p. 37 and p. 8]

When such things happen, we can conclude that Bolshevik desire to remain in power had a significant impact on whether workers were able to exercise collective power or not. As Pirani concludes:

*"one of the most important choices the Bolsheviks made . . . was to turn their backs on forms of collective, participatory democracy that workers briefly attempted to revive [post civil war]. [Available evidence] challenges the notion . . . that political power was forced on the Bolsheviks because the working class was so weakened by the civil war that it was incapable of wielding it. In reality, non-party workers were willing and able to participate in political processes, but in the Moscow soviet and elsewhere, were pushed out of them by the Bolsheviks. The party's vanguardism, i.e. its conviction that it had the right, and the duty, to make political decisions on the workers' behalf, was now reinforced by its control of the state apparatus. The working class was politically expropriated: power was progressively concentrated in the party, specifically in the party elite."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 4]

It should also be stressed that fear of arrest limited participation. A sadly typical example of this occurred in April 1920, which saw the first conference of railway workers on the Perm-Ekaterinburg line. The meeting of 160 delegates elected a non-Party chairman who "demanded that delegates be guaranteed freedom of debate and immunity from arrest." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 44] A Moscow Metalworkers' Union conference in early February 1921 saw the first speakers calling "for the personal safety of the delegates to be guaranteed" before criticisms would be aired. [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 244] Later that year dissidents in the Moscow soviet demanded "that delegates be given immunity from arrest unless sanctioned by plenary session of the soviet." Immediately afterwards two of them, including an anarcho-syndicalist, were detained. It was also proposed that delegates' freedom of speech "included immunity from administrative or judicial punishment" along with the right of any number of delegates "to meet and discuss their work as they chose." [Pirani, **Op. Cit.** p. 104] Worse, "[b]y the end of 1920 workers not only had to deal with the imposition of harsh forms of labour discipline, they also had to face the Cheka in their workplace." This could not help hinder working class collective action, as did the use of the Cheka and other troops to repress strikes. While it is impossible to accurately measure how many workers were shot by the Cheka for participation in labour protest, looking at individual cases "suggests that shootings were employed to inspire terror and were not simply used in the occasional extreme case." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 35] Which means, ironically, those who had seized power in 1917 in the name of the politically conscious proletariat were in fact ensuring their silence by fear of the Cheka or weeding them out, by means of workplace purges and shooting.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, but definitely significantly, of the 17,000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40,913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Needless to say, Lenin failed to mention this aspect of his system in **The State and Revolution** (a failure shared by later Leninists). Ultimately, the contradictions between Bolshevik rhetoric and the realities of working class life under their rule was closed by coercion.

Such forms of repression could not help ensure both economic chaos and push the revolution away from socialism. As such, it is hard to think of a more incorrect assertion than Lenin's 1921 one that "[i]ndustry is indispensable, democracy is not. Industrial democracy breeds some utterly false ideas." [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 27] Yet without industrial democracy, any development towards socialism is aborted and the problems of a revolution cannot be solved in the interests of the working masses.

This account of workers' protest being crushed by the so-called workers' state raises an important theoretical question. Following Marx and Engels, Lenin asserted that the "*state is nothing but a machine for the suppression of one class by another*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 28, p. 259] Yet here is the working class being suppressed by "its" state. If the state is breaking strikes, including general strikes, by what stretch of the imagination can it be considered a "workers' state"? Particularly as the workers, like the Kronstadt sailors, demanded free soviet elections, **not**, as the Leninists then and now claim, "soviet without Communists" (although one soviet historian noted with regards the 1921 revolt that "*taking account of the mood of the workers, the demand for free elections to the soviets meant the implementation in practice of the infamous slogan of soviets without communists.*" [quoted by Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 123]). If the workers are being repressed and denied any real say in the

state, how can they be considered the ruling class? And what class is doing the "suppression"? As we discussed in [section H.3.8](#), Bolshevik ideology adjusted to this reality by integrating the need for party dictatorship to combat the "wavering" within the working class into its theory of the state. Yet it is the party (i.e., the state) which determines what is and is not wavering. This suggests that the state apparatus has to be separate from the working class in order to repress it (as always, in its own interests).

So anarchists argue that the actual experience of the Bolshevik state shows that the state is no mere "*machine*" of class rule but has interests of its own. Which confirms the anarchist theory of the state rather than the Marxist (see [section H.3.7](#)). It should be stressed that it was **after** the regular breaking of working class protest and strikes that the notion of the dictatorship of the party became Bolshevik orthodoxy. This makes sense, as protests and strikes express "wavering" within the working class which needs to be solved by state repression. This, however, necessitates a normal state power, one which is isolated from the working class and which, in order to enforce its will, **must** (like any state) atomise the working class people and render them unable, or unwilling, to take collective action in defence of their interests. For the defenders of Bolshevism to turn round and blame Bolshevik authoritarianism on the atomisation required for the party to remain in power and enforce its will is staggering.

Finally, it should be noted that Zinoviev, a leading Bolshevik, tried to justify the hierarchical position of the Bolshevik party arguing that "*[i]n time of strike every worker knows that there must be a Strike Committee - a centralised organ to conduct the strike, whose orders must be obeyed - although this Committee is elected and controlled by the rank and file. Soviet Russia is on strike against the whole capitalist world. The social Revolution is a general strike against the whole capitalist system. The dictatorship of the proletariat is the strike committee of the social Revolution.*" [**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 2, p. 929]

In strikes, however, the decisions which are to be obeyed are those of the strikers. They should make the decisions and the strike committees should carry them out. The actual decisions of the Strike Committee should be accountable to the assembled strikers who have the real power (and so power is **decentralised** in the hands of the strikers and not in the hands of the committee). A far better analogy for what happened in Russia was provided by Emma Goldman:

*"There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviks to silence criticism.*

*"It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been **locked out** and that the Bolshevik State - even as the bourgeois industrial master - uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviks this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party."* [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlvi]

The isolation of the Bolsheviks from the working class was, in large part, required to ensure their power and, moreover, a natural result of utilising state structures. "*The struggle against*

*oppression - political, economic, and social, against the exploitation of man by man*" argued Alexander Berkman, "is always simultaneously a struggle against government as such. The political State, whatever its form, and constructive revolutionary effort are irreconcilable. They are mutually exclusive." Every revolution "faces this alternative: to build freely, independently and despite of the government, or to choose government with all the limitation and stagnation it involves . . . Not by the order of some central authority, but organically from life itself, must grow up the closely knit federation of the industrial, agrarian, and other associations; by the workers themselves must they be organised and managed." The "very essence and nature" of the socialist state "excludes such an evolution. Its economic and political centralisation, its governmentalism and bureaucratisation of every sphere of activity and effort, its inevitable militarisation and degradation of the human spirit mechanically destroy every germ of new life and extinguish the stimuli of creative, constructive work." [The Bolshevik Myth, pp. 340-1] By creating a new state, the Bolsheviks ensured that the mass participation required to create a genuine socialist society could not be expressed and, moreover, came into conflict with the Bolshevik authorities and their attempts to impose their (essentially state capitalist) vision of "socialism".

It need not have been that way. As can be seen from our discussion of labour protest under the Bolsheviks, even in extremely hard circumstances the Russian people were able to organise themselves to conduct protest meetings, demonstrations and strikes. The social base for an alternative to Bolshevik power and policies existed. Sadly Bolshevik politics, policies and the repression they required ensured that it could not be used constructively during the revolution to create a genuine socialist revolution.