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Review of "An Introduction to Marxism and Anarchism" by Alan Woods (2011)
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Slogans printed in the pamphlet state "Fight for a Labor Party!" "For a Mass Party of Labor!" These are the program of Woods' US group (the WIL). The implication of such a political orientation is that the workers could legally and peacefully take over the existing state, by electing "Labor Party" representatives to office (known as the "parliamentary road to socialism"). I doubt that Woods or his supporters really believe this, but that is what this program indicates. The workers would passively watch as their "representatives" act politically FOR them.

In the late 1870s, the First International split in a factional conflict between the Marxists and the anarchists. Leaving aside personal conflicts and secondary issues, the one major issue was electoralism. Marx wanted the sections of the International to sponsor workers' parties to run in elections wherever possible. He stated that in some countries (such as Britain or the US), workers' parties might peacefully and legally take over the state. The anarchists opposed this strategy, wanting to focus on labor union struggles and other nonelectoral efforts. They felt that electoral methods would be corrupting and useless. (Woods does not discuss this debate.) Now we have the advantage of hindsight; we know how the Marxist social democratic parties degenerated, as did the later Eurocommunist parties. Britain did develop a Labour Party. It has been elected to office at times; its pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist record is well known. There is little doubt that the anarchist perspective was correct.

Woods criticizes anarchism because "*Above all, there is very little in the way of an actually viable solution to the crisis of capitalism. . . .One is inevitably left asking: 'but what is to replace capitalism'?*" (p. 2). This is an odd thing to raise, since Marxism is widely criticized because it does not provide a vision of an alternate, post-capitalist, society. Marx's attitude seems to have been, let the workers take power and then we will see. Woods limits himself to quoting some libertarian-sounding statements from Lenin, combined with false descriptions of the early Communist state as extremely democratic. In fact he supports Lenin's police state and accepts Stalinist regimes as "workers' states." Meanwhile, it is the revolutionary class struggle anarchists who have consistently advocated a self-managed federation of working people's associations to replace capitalism, the state, and all oppressions.

Contents

The "Workers' State"?

Having accepted the concept of a "workers' state," the Trotskyists open themselves to increasingly authoritarian interpretations. The "workers' state" was originally like the radically-democratic Paris Commune or association of soviets. Then it meant the one-party police state established by Lenin and Trotsky. Then it meant the bureaucratic, totalitarian, rule of Stalin (the Trotskyists sought to overthrow Stalin's rule, but still regarded it as a form of "workers' state"). To his dying day, Trotsky regarded the Soviet Union as a "degenerated workers' state," to be supported against Western capitalism. His argument was that the Soviet Union still had a nationalized, planned, economy, and that is what made it a "workers' state," even if the workers had absolutely no power under it. This analysis made the nationalized property more important than the rule of the workers in defining a "workers' state."

After Trotsky, the Trotskyists split into two wings. One, unorthodox, wing agreed that the Soviet Union had been a workers' state under Lenin and in the early days of Stalin, but believed that the bureaucracy turned into a new ruling class somewhere in the late 20s or 30s (i.e., the view of the International Socialist Organization). The other, "orthodox" or "Soviet defensist" wing, believes that the Soviet Union remained a "workers' state" up to the end (1981). It believes that all the other Communist Party-ruled states (Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, etc.) were also "workers' states" of some sort. It accepted that none of these states had working class revolutions (as opposed to invading Russian armies or peasant-based armies controlled by urban elites) and that none had workers' democracy. It knew that they had killed millions of workers and peasants. But these states had had nationalized, state-planned, economies, and that was what was essential (they were called "deformed workers' states").

Alan Woods' International Marxist Tendency is part of this second wing of Trotskyism. Frankly, to me this makes most of Woods' arguments rather pointless. He criticizes anarchism for this or that weakness or fallacy, while he is accepting murderous totalitarian regimes as "workers' states"!? He claims to be for workers' self-rule but he will accept a one-man dictatorship if it nationalizes industry.

From the beginning, the Communists began to centralize the soviet regime. They set up a government over which the soviets had little to no control. They gerrymandered and packed local soviets to guarantee their party a majority. They set up a political police force, the Cheka. The Cheka had the power to arrest people and jail them, and to kill them, without trial or any other supervision. The Communists abolished factory committees and replaced worker management with the rule of appointed individual bosses. Unions were completely under the control of the party. A top-down planning bureaucracy was set in place. (See Brinton 2004; Farber 1990; Pirani 2008; Rabinowitch 2007; Sirianni 1982.)

By 1921, the Communists had outlawed all other political parties and organizations. This included those who had supported the "red" side in the civil war and were willing to abide by soviet legality, such as the Left SRs, the Left Mensheviks, and the anarchists. They abolished the right to form opposition caucuses within the one legal party. There had been a series of Communist Party oppositions, which had once believed in Lenin's apparent program of a "semi-state;" they were all repressed. Workers' strikes were forcibly put down. A rebellion at the Kronstadt naval base, which called for the revival of democratic soviets, was suppressed and its defeated sailors were slaughtered in batches. An alliance with Makhno's anarchist-led army in the Ukraine was betrayed and Makhno's officers murdered.

By 1921 at the latest, Lenin and Trotsky had established a one-party police state. They did not regard this as a temporary condition but made a principle out of it. Even in opposition to Stalin, Trotsky continued to support one-party rule, until the Russian Trotskyists were completely destroyed. This is all well-known.

Usually Trotskyists blame "objective conditions." The country was technologically backward; the big majority of the working population were impoverished peasants; the country went through a world war followed by a civil war; the revolution did not succeed in spreading to Germany; etc. All of which is true. But this does not justify banning all other socialist parties and groups, setting up an uncontrolled secret police, and replacing worker management of industry with top-down planning. Nor does it justify repeating the lie that "it was the most democratic state that ever existed."

Review of work by international Trotskyist leader

The leader of the International Marxist Tendency has written an attack on anarchism from his Trotskyist perspective. He makes some correct criticisms of some versions of anarchism, in relation to those who reject revolution or political organization. But he attempts to defend the idea of a "workers' state" by limited quotes from Lenin and by mistating the history of the Russian revolution. [Italiano]

Why should anarchists read about a Trotskyist attack on anarchism? For that matter, why should anyone learn about a point of view with which they know they disagree? There are at least two reasons. First, we anarchists will have to work with Trotskyists, discuss with Trotskyists, and debate with Trotskyists. They are all over movements of opposition! We should know what they think. We may have to argue with them in front of other people who are deciding between Trotskyism and anarchism. We may discuss with Trotskyists who might be open to changing their minds. I have known quite a few people who have gone from Trotskyism to anarchism–and some who have gone the other way. (I myself have gone from anarchist-pacifism to an unorthodox Trotskyism to revolutionary anarchism.)

Second, there is no better way to explore the weaknesses in our own views than to argue with a political opponent. Many times I have discussed with someone I strongly disagreed with, to find them pointing out difficulties in my opinions. By considering the points they raised, I have been able (I hope) to improve my own views.

Why Anarchism Now?

There are many versions of Trotskyism (and even more varieties of Marxism). Alan Woods is the British leader of one international Trotskyist organization, the International Marxist Tendency. Their US group is the Workers International League, which puts out "Socialist Appeal." This pamphlet was written as the introduction to a collection of writings on anarchism and Marxism. So Woods should know what he is talking

about, at least about Marxism. About anarchism is another matter. For example, he does not acknowledge that there are also many varieties of anarchism. He treats anarchism as a homogeneous block, so that the weaknesses he finds in one tendency applies to all of anarchism.

Woods pats anarchists on the head for their militancy and activism in today's conditions. He also writes of the US union historically most influenced by anarchism, "*The IWW was consistently revolutionary and based itself on the most intransigent class struggle doctrines*," (p. 8). Yet he denounces anarchists as believing in "*confusion, organizational amorphousness, and the absence of ideological definition*" (p. 4).

Why then have many militants found anarchism attractive? Woods treats this question as old-hat; young radicals just have not read the historical documents. "The question of Marxism vs. anarchism has long been discussed" (p. 3). He declares (paraphrasing an argument of Lenin's), "*anarchist trends have been growing as a result of the bankruptcy of the reformist leaders of the mass workers' organizations*" (p. 6). In other words, many activists have been disgusted by the sell-out, pro-capitalist, ineffective, approaches of liberal Democrats, union officials, "Communists", and reformist "democratic socialists"—and therefore turned to the militant, thoroughly oppositional approach of anarchism. This is certainly true.

But it has been some time since Lenin made this point. There is another important reason activists are attracted to anarchism. Since those good old days, Marxists have not only been "reformists." Following Lenin's lead, they have overthrown existing states in countries all over the world, built up their own states, and nationalized their countries' economies. The results have been totalitarian monstrosities, extreme exploitation of the workers and peasants, the killing of millions of working people, and an accumulation of inefficiencies which eventually caused these systems to break down and return to traditional capitalism. Woods admits this, referring to "*Stalinism—that bureaucratic, undemocratic, totalitarian caricature of socialism*" (p. 3).

At the time of Marx, anarchists, such as Bakunin, warned against Marx's program (which is the program of Trotsky and Woods) of a new "workers' state" which would nationalize and centralize the economy. Anarchists predicted it would result in state capitalism managed by a

the revolution? Or as running things behind the scenes? He does not say. If people have political disagreements, will they be free to organize themselves to fight for their ideas in political associations (whether called "parties" or not)? Or does he assume that politics will have ended?

Third, how does his reference to "*the direct initiative of the people . . . in their local areas*" fit in with his general commitment to centralization? In Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, and elsewhere, Marx had said nothing about the value of direct, face-to-face, democracy. Lenin's focus had always been for increasing centralism, politically and economically. How does this fit with popular self-management? Anarchists have advocated federations rooted in local direct democracy.

Fourth, what about industry and economics? In State & Revolution and other works of this period, Lenin repeatedly made clear that his model was the war-time state-directed capitalist economy of Germany. The difference was, he wrote, that these highly centralized industries would be run (at the top) not by capitalists or bureaucrats but by delegates from their elected soviets. Meanwhile everyone would work under bosses giving orders. The point is that, even when Lenin was at his most libertarian-democratic, his conception was centralistic and top-down.

The Russian Revolution

The final point is that Woods would have us believe that Lenin was guided by this radical democratic perspective when he led the Russian revolution. He claims that "*the Bolshevik revolution [established] the democratic rule of the workers themselves . . . The Russian workers took the state power into their own hands*" (p. 9). "*Before the Stalinist bureaucracy usurped control from the masses, it was the most democratic state that ever existed*" (p. 25).

This is not true. To begin with, the Russian revolution of October 1917 was not the "Bolshevik revolution." It was made by a coalition of forces, not only the Bolsheviks (Leninists) but also Left Social Revolutionaries (peasant populists) and anarchists. The earliest Soviet government was a coalition of the Bolsheviks (now Communists) and the Left SRs, supported by the anarchists.

(patriarchy, white supremacy, etc.)—and to replace them with radically democratic institutions of communal self-management. Creating such institutions and building a new society may be called "taking power." But it is not "taking state power," not building a new state machine.

What kind of institutions would replace the capitalist state? Woods presents his answer, "*the genuine Marxist conception of a workers' state*" (p. 27). He quotes a long passage from Lenin about the post-revolutionary state, written before his party took power. At that time, Lenin was inspired by the soviets (elected councils), factory committees, peasant assemblies, and soldier councils. The quotation is worth looking at for its almost-anarchist vision:

"*This power is of the same type as the Paris Commune of 1871. . . .(1) the source of power is . . . the direct initiative of the people from below, in their local areas . . .; (2) the replacement of the police and the army . . . by the direct arming of the whole people; order in the state under such a power is maintained by the armed workers and peasants themselves; . . . .(3) officialdom, the bureaucracy, are either similarly replaced by the direct rule of the people themselves or at least placed under special control; they not only become elected officials but are also subject to recall at the people's first demand . . .*" Lenin refers to this as "*a special type of state*," "*a semi-state*," "*so constituted that it will at once begin to die away . . .*" due to expanding popular participation (pp 26–27).

This compares to the anarchist vision of a federation of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and popular militias (so long as these are necessary). The differences with Lenin may seem to be minor, a matter of hair-splitting. But there are some issues:

First, why does Lenin call his program a "state" at all? It is not a bureaucratic-military-police, socially-alienated, machine standing over and above the rest of society—which is what a state is (in Marxist and anarchist theory). Again, this may seem like quibbling. The danger is that, once we have accepted the category of a revolutionary "workers' state," the possibility arises of filling it with a more authoritarian content than that of a super-democratic Commune or association of soviet councils (see below).

Second, Lenin says nothing here about the role of the party (his life's main work). Does he see the revolutionary party as dissolving after

bureaucratic ruling class. In 1910, Kropotkin wrote, "*To hand over to the State all the main sources of economic life . . . would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the power of bureaucracy and capitalism*" (Capouya & Tompkins 1975; pp. 109–110).

Marx had important insights (I think his analysis of how capitalism works is very useful for anarchists (see price 2013). But the anarchists were proven right in the area of program. THAT is the main reason for the growth of anarchism instead of Marxism today!

The Revolutionary Minority

Woods points out—correctly—that the ruling class is organized to maintain its power. Aside from its police and military, "*The state has at its disposal the services of an army of hardened bureaucrats, cynical politicians, smart lawyers, lying journalists, learned academics, and cunning priests: all united to defend the status quo in which they have a vested interest*" (p. 12).

To counter these forces, he believes, it is necessary to build a revolutionary vanguard party. He claims that anarchists are against any kind of counter-organization to fight the bourgeoisie. It is true that many anarchists are against any organization more complex than a local collective or journal publishing group. But this is not the only anarchist opinion. From Bakunin onwards, there have been anarchists who advocated building federations of revolutionary class-struggle anarchists. This has included Malatesta, Makhno, the Spanish FAI, the platformists and the Latin American especifistas.

They have understood that the entire population does not become anarchists all at once. People become radicalized in small groups and layers. The minority which sees the need for an anarchist revolution may come together in a democratic federation. It may work to educate its members, to coordinate their activities, and to fight for its views among broader sections of the population (in movements, unions, community groups, etc.). It has its own opinions of which it seeks to persuade the majority. This is an integral part of the self-organization of the working people and oppressed.

The federation would not be a "party" because it would not aim to "take power" for itself—to become the new rulers, through elections or a coup. Its aim is to encourage the working class and its allies among the oppressed to rely on themselves. It teaches them to distrust authoritarian parties that do want to take over.

Instead of a democratic federation, Woods declares, "*the working class and its vanguard must possess a powerful, centralized, and disciplined organization*" (p. 11). It should be composed of knowledgeable experts in revolutionary theory–specialists, comparable, he writes, to dentists or plumbers in their fields (on p. 12).

It is vital for members of a revolutionary organization to learn history and previous theory, and to develop their own theory, to guide them in their activities. But it is important to remember that, in the field of human relations, unlike dentistry, everyone is potentially an "expert." We all relate to people and live in this social system.

It is also necessary to remember that there is no way to know the "absolute truth" (not even in dentistry). No one has all the answers. We can always learn from others. Even the best revolutionary grouping should constantly be in dialogue with the people and with other political trends. Given the size and complexity of, say, North America, it is unlikely that one revolutionary organization will have all the right ideas and all the best activists. There is no contradiction between building an organization with the best program possible at the time, and being open to learning from others.

Because they did not understand this, Lenin and Trotsky led their "powerful, centralized, and disciplined" party to power, assumed that it knew the way forward without any question, built a state around it–and laid the basis for Stalinist totalitarianism. At a certain point they became dismayed at what they had created. Trotsky, in particular, tried to fight to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy, until it murdered him. But neither Lenin nor Trotsky ever understood how they had contributed to the creation of Stalinism or what to do about it.

"Taking Power" vs. "Taking State Power"

Woods criticizes the anarchists for treating "*the question of state power*" as "*irrelevant*"–as something to be "*ignore[d]*" (p. 15). This is true for a great many anarchists. For example Rebecca Solnit (2014) quotes from "*the great anarchist thinker David Graeber*" (p.114; undoubtedly Graeber is an influential anarchist). In this quotation, Graeber rejects, for today, the historical concept of "*Revolutions [as] seizures of power by popular forces aiming to transform the very nature of the political, social, and economic system . . .*" (quoted on p. 114). Instead, he gives the example of "*the world revolution of 1968—which . . . seized power nowhere, but nevertheless changed everything*" (quoted on p. 115).

The issue is not merely that, in the 60s, the radicalized students, workers, and peasants throughout the world "seized power nowhere." It is that the old ruling classes remained in power everywhere. The capitalist class kept its industries, banks, mass media, and vast wealth. It kept its states, with their military, police, spies, bureaucracies, courts, legislatures, prisons, professional politicians, and lobbyists. The people continue to work for, and go into debt to, these capitalists. Workers continue to be subject to their police, courts, and prisons. People's minds are filled with propaganda from their mass media.

Certainly the 60's led to many changes, cultural and otherwise. In the US, legal segregation was smashed (although African-Americans are still kept at the bottom of society), the Vietnam war was ended (but US wars of aggression continue), women's rights vastly expanded (but reproductive rights are now under fierce attack), and GLBT rights have advanced (although there is still much prejudice). But to claim that the non-revolutionary "world revolution . . . changed everything" is fatuous. Since then we have faced sharp economic crises, attacks on the working class in all countries, and a spreading ecological cataclysm—because the world capitalist class is still in power.

From the time of Bakunin, the mainstream of anarchism has been revolutionary. It has supported struggles for temporary, limited, reforms. But its aim has been for the workers and other oppressed to eventually overturn the capitalist class and its state. Its goal has been the dismantling of the state, of capitalism, and of all other institutions of oppression