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Confronting the Question of Power

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Should the Oppressed Take Power?

Many antiauthoritarians oppose the aim of "taking power." They advocate a gradual replacement of capitalism by alternate institutions. Alternately, Marxist-Leninists propose replacing the state by a new "workers' state." Instead revolutionary anarchists should advocate the goal of replacing the state by a federation of councils, but not by a new state.

Key questions of politics revolve around the issue of power. Shall the working class and all oppressed people accept the existing power of the state? Or should they consider themselves in opposition to it and aim to eventually overthrow it? Should they aim to establish their own power in some form? If so, should they aim to establish a new state or to establish some other, nonstate, institutions? For those on the Left, our opinions about power and the state determine whether we are liberals or radicals, reformists or revolutionaries, state socialists or socialist anarchists.

Anarchists are frequently accused of being ambiguous, at best, about the question of power. Instead, liberals and reform socialists speak of the need to accommodate to the existing centers of power in society. They advocate working their way up into positions of power, permeating government bodies, through elections or appointment. On the other hand, "A Marxist-Leninist would say, 'Anarchists are able to bring about disorder but cannot seize power'." (Meltzer, 1996, p. 35) Marxist-Leninists seek to overturn the existing state and to replace it with a new state. A dictatorial "workers' state" is necessary, they claim, to oppose the armed forces of the counterrevolution as well as antisocial criminals — at least for a "transitional period," after which the state will "wither away," or so they promise.

For example, Victor Serge became disappointed with individualist anarchism in 1917 when he decided that the Spanish anarchists had no "plan" beyond street fighting. Conversely he was attracted to the Russian Leninists due to their ruthless willingness to seize power. "Serge was disillusioned with the anarchists' inability to confront the question of power, and impressed by this very characteristic of the Bolsheviks." (Weissman, 2001, p. 12) Desiring to "confront the question of power," he abandoned anarchism for Bolshevism (mistakenly, I think).

Many anarchists have expressed opposition to taking power. The British anarchist Albert Meltzer writes of anarchists, "Their task is not to 'seize power' (. . .) but to abolish the bases of power. Power to all means power to nobody in particular. . . Anarchists form organizations to bring about revolutionary change. . . but. . . such bodies cannot and should not take over the social and economic means of life." (1996, pp. 35–36)

There are several confusions expressed here. In the course of a revolution and the period afterwards, power would not be "to all," since the capitalists would

not keep power. Instead they would have their power to exploit taken away from them by the formerly oppressed and exploited. Meltzer also seems confused between the program of the working class seizing power and that of anarchist organizations (composed of a revolutionary minority) seizing power. This would become a party-dictatorship, something quite different from the idea of anarchists urging the working class as a whole to take power. Finally, he makes no distinction between the working class establishing its power as a class and the program of taking STATE power, that is, setting up a new state. Anarchists are against taking state power, but are we necessarily against establishing the power of the working class and oppressed as a whole? (What this might mean I will discuss in a moment.)

Working class power, in some form, is needed to overturn the capitalist state and to dismantle all capitalist institutions. Popular power is needed to rebuild society on a self-managed, communitarian, basis. Revolutionary power is needed to resist counterrevolutionary armies — internal armies (as in a civil war) and/or international armies (from still-imperialist countries). Communal power is needed to control demoralized, damaged, antisocial individuals ("criminals") who have been created by our loveless society, and who will not all have suddenly changed after a revolution.

(Sometimes opponents of "power" seek to change the debate into one over "violence." Violence is abhorrent and to be avoided if possible, but, 99.999 . . . % of the world's people believe that sometimes it is necessary. Everyone but absolute pacifists believes that violence is sometimes needed for self-defense. The question here is not "violence" in the abstract but the necessity for class power. Power might or might not include the use of violence, depending on various circumstances.)

Meltzer was a revolutionary, class struggle, anarchist. More perniciously, this opposition to any concept of "taking power" is widely held by reformist anarchists. They advocate building alternate institutions (mis-called "dual power") such as cooperatives, communes, info shops, etc. Gradually and peacefully these would supposedly displace the state and the capitalist corporations. Society would evolve from capitalism to libertarian socialism. The proponents of this gradualist strategy sometimes call themselves "revolutionary" because they aim for a total transformation of society; but they propose to achieve it by gradual reforms, by doing an end run around the state. With this strategy, they claim, there is no need to contest for power. Naively they believe that the capitalist state will let itself be replaced. But the state is not neutral. If its leaders felt that the wealth and power of its ruling class was threatened,they would use its powers of regulation and taxation to clamp down on the alternate institutions. (I am not criticizing the formation of cooperatives or info shops, which are good in themselves. Nor am I criticizing coops as auxiliaries to the struggle. I am criticizing this as the

STRATEGY for overcoming capitalism. See my Anarkismo.net essay, "Parecon and the Nature of Reformism".)

In a discussion of the New Left in 1965: "The attempt to find a course outside the Establishment but not in collision with the Establishment has not been successful . . . [This is] the notion of parallel or dual-power institutions as the road to revolutionary social change. According to this idea, you do not have to come into a headlong collision with the existing institutions of the Establishment; you create your own independent dual institutions and build up its power to the point where it can eventually supplant the other. (Once again, you do not march against the Establishment, you go off at right angles.) . . . The outcome is and has to be elitist and antidemocratic in practice . . . " (Draper, 1992, p. 122) Elitist and antidemocratic because it does not organize the people to fight in theirr own interests against their rulers.

Rather than a brand new idea, as some think, this strategy goes back at least to the early utopian socialists, who sought to establish communist communes, and to Proudhon's mutual banking scheme. Faced with the forces of the capitalist marketplace, such attempts have often failed. Where they have succeeded, such as the Rochdale consumer coops or the credit unions (cooperative banks), they have been absorbed into the capitalist system (they fail by success). Then there are the Israeli kibbutz communes, subsidized by the Zionist state, which have served to occupy Palestinian land . . . Revolutions have succeeded or failed, but alternate institutions have never threatened capitalism.

What Can Replace the State?

Instead of a state, the working class and other oppressed people could run society — directly. The possibility of this appears in the history of revolutions. "From the largely medieval peasant wars of the sixteenth-century Reformation to the modern uprisings of industrial workers and peasants, oppressed peoples have created their own popular forms of community association — potentially the popular infrastructure of a new society — to replace the oppressive states that ruled over them . . . During the course of the revolutions, these associations took the institutional form of local assemblies, much like town meetings, or representative councils of mandated recallable deputies." (Bookchin,1996, p. 4)

In ancient Athens, the free workers and peasants overthrew the aristocracy and created a system of direct democracy. The U.S. revolution was built on directly-democratic New England town meetings and other popular committees. The French revolution created the direct democracy of the Parisian sections. The 1871 Paris Commune set up a system of recallable representatives which has

inspired socialists ever after. The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 established soviets (councils) of recallable deputies, rooted in the direct democracy of factory councils, peasant communities, and soldier committees. Revolutionary workers' councils sprung up in Germany, Hungary, and Italy after World War I and in Italy after World War II. Factory and peasant councils appeared in Spain during its 1930s revolution/civil war. During the Cold War, factory councils appeared in Eastern Europe in the struggle against Stalinism, in Hungary, East Germany, and Poland. They appeared in embryo in France in 1968 and in Italy in the 70s. Workers, peasant, and neighborhood councils have appeared in Latin America and elsewhere repeatedly in our time, including the Iranian shoras during the revolution against the Shah.

Anarchists have sometimes conceived of replacing the state by direct face-to-face democracy wherever people are gathered together with common interests — such as the workplace or the community. These popular councils would federate together by sending representatives to central councils, which might send representatives to higher federal levels. Delegates would be elected in the popular assemblies, be immediately recallable if popular opinion changed, and would rotate in office. (For a discussion of one way a councilist system might work, from the point of view of Participatory Economics — "parecon" — see Shalom, 2004. For further discussion of this and related issues, see O'Brien, 2006.)

It may be objected that the "workers" and "oppressed" cannot take power, by definition, since once the capitalists are expropriated there will no longer be a special class of exploited "workers" nor anyone who is still "oppressed." But this is only true in tendency. It will take a lengthy period of struggle before capitalism is completely defeated, classlessness is fully achieved, and there is no more oppression. Meanwhile the (more-or-less former) workers and oppressed must hold power.

At least at the beginning of a revolution, working people will have different opinions and will organize themselves into different political organizations to express their points of view. Some groupings will work together — even merge — to work for common opinions. Others will compete with each other, fighting for alternate ideas of what the councils should do. Such groupings may call themselves "parties," but anarchist organizations will struggle to prevent any group or groups from "taking over" and ruling ("administering") the councils. People must have the right to organize for their opinions, but it must be the councils — working people as a whole — which are in power.

During the 1930s Spanish struggle against fascism, the main anarchist federation (the F.A.I., which dominated a union federation, the C.N.T.) joined the liberal Republican capitalist government, betraying its antistatist program. They were

criticized for this collaboration with their class enemies. A Spanish anarchist minority which called itself the Friends of Durruti Group declared that the anarchists should have instead led in creating a federation of democratic organs of working class and peasant power, an alternative to both the Republican state and Franco's fascist state. They felt that this would require a modification of anarchist theory, or at least, of the theory which dominated in Spain at that time.

In their 1938 document, Towards a Fresh Revolution, the Friends of Durruti Group wrote, "We are introducing a slight variation in anarchism into our program. The establishment of a revolutionary Junta . . . or National Defense Council. This body to be organized as follows: members of the revolutionary Junta will be elected by democratic vote in the union organizations." (1978, p. 42) An account of their politics by a Bordighist claims that the Friends of Durruti were in effect going over to a Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, interpreted to mean the rule of a vanguard party (as Bordiga advocated; Guillamon,1996). But as can be seen from the quotation, what they had in mind was a democratic council elected from the mass workers' unions. The international tendency of Platformist (pro-organizational) anarchists today identifies with the Friends of Durruti Group.

To enforce its will against armed counterrevolution or foreign invasion, the council federation would rely on the armed working people. This would be a popular militia, rooted in workplaces and communities, with at least lower officers elected by the ranks, and directed overall by the federation of councils. (In ancient Athens, when the male citizens voted on war in the assembly, they did not vote to send someone else into battle; they knew that war would mean going home and sharpening their own weapons.) The concept of defense by a popular militia (including guerrilla war methods) has a long history, from the U.S. bourgeois-democratic revolution to national anti-imperialist resistance in many countries today. Similarly, most crime-control could be done by parts of the popular militia, with many people taking turns in patrolling neighborhoods and keeping the peace. (A full discussion of how antisocial actions might be controlled under a decentralized socialism is beyond the scope of this essay.)

There is No "Workers State"

Marxists sometimes argue that what I am describing — a federation of workers' councils with a popular, working class, militia — would be a "workers' state." This is not so.

To Marx and Engels, the state (the basic framework of the government) only arose with the beginning of class-divided society; for most of human existence

there were no states. The state is a socially-alienated bureaucratic-military machine which stands over and above the rest of society, serving the interests of an exploiting minority. In The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, Engels wrote that the state includes "a special public force . . . ; it consists not merely of armed men but also of material appendages, prisons and coercive institutions of all kinds . . . Officials now present themselves as organs of society standing above society . . . Representatives of a power which estranges them from society . . . it is normally the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class . . . " (1972, pp. 230 — 231) Most anarchists, I think, could accept this description of the state. (Of course, much more could be said about the modern capitalist state; this is its skeleton.)

Two conclusions can be drawn from this description of the core of the state. One is that reformism would not work. Reforms may be won through struggle, but the existing state cannot be used to get rid of its ruling class. Nor will it stand neutral while alternate, "dual-power" institutions are growing up to replace capitalism and the state itself. Reformists have pointed out that democratic states have passed minimum wage laws or antidiscrimination laws. However, this does not prove that the state is not a capitalist machine. The management of any large corporation may have internal conflicts over how to deal with its workers, whether to beat them back or whether to grant them some reforms (such as slightly higher wages or anti-discrimination agreements). They do this under pressure from the workers. But this does not change corporate management from what it is, an organ of capital. And the same is true of the capitalist state. Under certain conditions some reforms can be won from it. But never a change in social system.

The other conclusion is that there can be no such thing as a "workers' state." The working class cannot rule through such bureaucratic-military-police machinery. To use the state to overthrow a ruling class is only to lay the basis for a new exploitative ruling class: state capitalism. As history has shown.

The working class in power would be different from all other ruling classes in history. Partially in its goals: its aim should be not to maintain its power but to build a classless society where people are not divided into specialized layers with differing economic roles. But also, all other ruling classes needed a state because they were minorities who had to hold down the big majority of the population. But the working class — and its allies among the oppressed, such as peasants and women — is the big majority. It needs power in order to hold down the minority, the capitalists and their agents. It does not need and cannot use a state.

Paul Mattick was a spokesperson for the antistatist Marxist trend of Council Communism. In his view, the Marxism of Marx and Engels rejected the state. (Whether his interpretation of Marxism is "correct" is not my subject here. It

is one interpretation and is consistent with anarchism. Also note that he used the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" NOT to mean a "workers' state" but simply to mean "the workers having taken power." Arguably, this may be what Marx and Engels meant by it. However, the term has come to mean a one-party totalitarianism, which was not Mattick's meaning. We should not use the term today.)

"The victorious working class would neither institute a new state nor seize control of the existing state, but exercise its dictatorship [class power — WP]. . . Although assuming functions previously associated with those of the state, this dictatorship is not to become a new state,but a means to the elimination of all suppressive measures through the ending of class relations. There is no room for a 'socialist state' in socialism. . . The socialized economy. . . is itself a part of the organization of the associated producers and not an independent entity set against them. . . It is not through the state that socialism can be realized, as this would exclude the self-determination of the working class, which is the essence of socialism. State rule perpetuates the divorce of the workers from the means of production, on which their dependence and exploitation rests, and thus also perpetuates social class relations." (Mattick, 1983, pp. 160 — 161) Completely correct.

Power Corrupts?

We anarchists cite Lord Acton's dictum, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." This is why we urge direct democracy, decentralization, representation (when necessary) to be by controllable and recallable deputies, pluralism, rotation in office, a coperative society, and freedom of speech, of the press, and of association. By such means, the power of a class will not result in the corruption of individuals. Over time, the eventual development of a classless and oppressionless society will achieve Meltzer's previously cited goal, a world where "power to all means power to nobody in particular."

But it is also true that "powerlessness corrupts!" The lack of power of the exploited and oppressed leads to mass demoralization, defeatism, emotional dysfunction, and cynicism. Those who are currently on the bottom of society need to win power — on a radically democratic basis.

Our class and our allies among the oppressed should aim to get rid of the state and all other institutions of capitalism, and to take democratic power for ourselves. We should aim not to create a new state but to create a nonstate federation of workers' and community councils, backed by ourselves in arms. Revolutionary anarchists should advocate this program to the rest of our class and to all those

oppressed. Revolutionary anarchists should oppose all varieties of reformism. This includes proposals to use the existing state to transform society and also proposals to try to ignore the state, to work around it, and gradually build up alternate institutions to replace capitalism. The state is not neutral and will not permit this to work. It will have to be directly confronted and eventually defeated.

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