

Anarchy and the Left

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

In recent months, we have been critical of a number of anarchists, through correspondence and in person, on the question of working politically with marxist-leninists on specific projects of joint interest. Those we have been in contact with on these matters include an anarchist draft resister in California and several young people in Detroit working with the anti-war front group of an authoritarian communist party, an anarchist newspaper which supports Leftist political prisoners, and an anarchist activist joining with a small socialist group to co-sponsor meetings and demonstrations.

On the face of it, these do not seem like particularly horrendous acts, but if we are to take anti-authoritarian ideas seriously, a discussion of the consequences of these choices may be in order. We welcome readers' ideas on this subject.

A discussion of anarchy and the Left should proceed from the observation that we are in a period where revolt is in the air world-wide.

In Paris, after weeks of militant demonstrations late last year over something as seemingly mild as opposing changes in the university system, the students declared, "We are not political," all the while carrying out the most political act of all—confronting the state. In response, French cops launched sustained assaults against them including murdering one of their number.

In China, a nation-wide oppositionist movement demanding democracy developed inadvertently after being set in motion by the Communist rulers who thought they could manipulate a student group for their own ends.

In Spain, it was the education policies of the Socialist government which sent students into the streets for months of action this Winter and, as in France, the mere numbers involved created a context of revolt which went beyond the original goals.

In the U.S., where the Reagan imperial regime is suffering a richly deserved period of apoplectic crisis, the social quietism ascribed to the era which bears the president's name may still seem to prevail. But like Reaganism itself, this turns out to be so much media hype. The Carter years of the late 1970s were a much greater period of political lethargy than have been the ones since the advent of the Reagan administration. In fact, the 1980 elections signaled the beginning of a steadily expanding opposition which continues today.

Collapse of Public Spirit

Since the inception of the alleged era of conservatism and on to the present, there has developed an immense underground of autonomous projects, small publications, and a variety of organized and unorganized opposition to a wide-range of government policies. This has run in tandem with a virtually unchronicled collapse of public spirit and confidence in the body politic which is reflected in a plethora of statistics of social disintegration. [1]

Organized left/liberal/labor/religious political activity in the Reagan era, while nowhere near the level of the 1960s, still involves hundreds of thousands in a wide range of reform issues such as nuclearism, apartheid, war,

racism and poverty. The level of militancy is such that 9,000 people have been jailed in this country for protesting U.S. institutions which support South Africa's racist system. High numbers of arrests for civil disobedience also mark actions around opposition to intervention in Central America and to nuclearism.

This is not to assert that any of these acts of conscience, militant demands for reform or spontaneous resistance are inherently revolutionary or that they even necessarily possess the potential. Rather, it is to note there is a generalized social ferment here and abroad and what it will all come to is yet to be seen. It may take only an unexpected spark or a particular issue which will cause it all to ignite.

The Dead Hand of the Past

The previously mentioned remark of professed apoliticality from the French students came in part as a result of their not wanting to be associated with the traditional parties of the Left whose existence and activity come into sharp focus at points of social explosions. What the students either knew directly or felt viscerally is that the Left represents the dead hand of the past—a shadowy remnant of the traditional socialist and communist opposition to capital which either was repressed or capitulated just prior to World War II. The Left exists now, in all of its 57 varieties, purely in zombie form—dead, but not buried. (We are referring to the small, oppositionist sects, both here and in Europe, not the racketized forms of the ruling parties in the Eastern bloc of capital or those which run the labor rackets in countries such as France and Italy. Although similar in many respects, they deserve a separate essay to assess their service to capital.)

Not only is the Left an anachronism rife with concepts that were inadequate to challenge the despotism of capital in a previous age, it exists today as an impossibility. It is part of the bureaucratic landscape of modern society, presenting itself as a false negativity—having the appearance of authentic opposition, but instead affirming, in Camatte's phrase, "industrial society and its appendix, the society of consumption." [2] Hence, the Left, despite its lofty intentions, never achieves a radicalism worthy of the name. Unable to develop a theoretical critique which goes to the core of commodity society, it remains trapped within capitalist political economy and engages in an obscene debate with other gangs on how best to administer the world as it is.

The parties, then, by virtue of this inadequacy, all seek to conquer the state. Camatte says further, "Capital is no longer seen as a social mode of production and life, but as a mode of management (my italics), bureaucratic, democratic, etc..."

From this point of view, it is vital that the revolution no longer becomes the overthrow of one existence and the affirmation of another, but a politico-statist process, and the organization is the key problem."

This concept is fleshed out simply and eloquently in Bob Black's *The Abolition of Work* [3] where he places work, not the state, at the center of domination. Camatte agrees, stating, "The economy reduces politics (the ancient art of organization) to a pure and simple epiphenomenon of its real process." He continues, "Capital as a social mode of production realizes its real (FE: *total*) domination when it succeeds in replacing all social and. natural presuppositions by the correct forms of organization which mediate the submission of the whole of physical life to its real needs of valorization."

Whew! Heady stuff, but important if we are to realize why all of the socialist and communist revolutions have failed to produce utopia, but rather, centralized, authoritarian labor systems.

When the Left speaks of "seizing power" or "workers to power" they mean the ascension to the command positions of the state by their party leaders. The proletariat—that abstraction of human labor created by capital—rather than being abolished after a socialist revolution, as predicted by Marx, is enshrined as a permanent institution and is put to work, often at a pace and level of exploitation which exceeds that of the old regime. (This expectation is heard in the joke, about the Socialist Workers Party: if those socialists ever get in power, they'll party while we work.)

The historic project of the Left has never been anything other than the capture of the state's repressive mechanism and the creation of a modern, industrial economy. When the Bolshevik counterrevolution seized the Russian state in its 1917 coup, its first act was the establishment of its dreaded secret police, the Cheka, which immediately began murdering workers designated as "enemies of the state" by the new leaders of the Soviet government,

themselves almost all of whom were from the Russian middle-classes. With the repressive mechanism in place, the Bolsheviks' next task was to establish autocratic control of the labor process through the destruction of the autonomous forms of life created by revolutionary workers and peasants. [4]

Catastrophic Defeat

The self-aggrandizing braggadocio of the Left sects—in other words, their public relations image—notwithstanding, the history of the party is a dismal one. For all of their boasts of being the efficient general staff of proletarian revolution, the role of the Left in the 20th Century has been either to bring about catastrophic defeat for the unlucky working class whose fortunes were tied to it, [5] or, when “successful,” to create what Murray Bookchin describes in “Listen, Marxist!” [6] as “bureaucracy, centralization and the state.” He notes further that the party “preserves the very conditions which ‘necessitate’ the existence of a state—and a party to ‘guard it.’”

One wonders, given such a history, with the gulag and the secret police as the dominant image of Leftism, what visions of utopia animate these party militants. Maybe it's pathological. The party itself seems wholly uninviting, acting more as microcosm of this society, displaying its deadliest traits of authoritarianism, submission, sacrifice, obsessional work, instrumentalism, and representation utilized as power, rather than acting as a model of a new society. In power, the party functions as it did in its gang phase.

In many ways it could be argued that the grandiose claims of the tiny Left groups should not be taken seriously since there is no reason to think they will ever leave the plane of squabbling little gangs comprised of “useful idiots” who, at a minimum are active in opposing the worst abuses of capitalism—war, racism, etc. However, an anti-authoritarian perspective seems to demand a special critique of these hierarchical formations, particularly since several of the parties have been “intervening” in the anarchist milieu lately.

Since the recent expansion of anarchism, particularly among youth, prisoners and in the punk scene, Left sects have been buzzing around seeking new recruits—fresh blood for their tired cadres. Whether intervening directly or through “front” groups, they approach us with much of their authoritarian baggage (and apologies for the mass murderers they admire—Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao) hidden from view, insisting they just want to deal with the “issues”—anti-war, Soviet dissidents, etc.

Anarchists are Fertile Ground

The question of authoritarian/antiauthoritarian admixture is one that has plagued the revolutionary movement since its inception in the 19th century. Mikhail Bakunin, speaking of the problem, assessed it thusly (quoted in the current issue of *Social Anarchism*), “An alliance concluded between two different parties turns to the advantage of the more reactionary of the two; this alliance necessarily enfeebles the more progressive party by diminishing and distorting its program.”

In today's world, the damage from these alliances may be even more severe. Our contention is that such functional unity obliterates the anti-authoritarian critique which sees the Left as the counter-revolution; it reduces anarchy to merely a matter of taste among a competition in the shopping mall of Leftism.

After we've made our criticisms, the responses we often get are, “Oh, they never try to run their stuff on us” or “They're really easy to work with.”

These naive conceptions miss entirely how these parties function. Each of the parties without exception has as a covert, but primary goal, the recruitment of new members no matter what “issue” they are addressing. Each organization has decided within its upper echelons, the Central Committee, that anarchists are fertile ground for recruitment and a specific strategy has been created for the task. Usually, so-called “fraction” meetings are held in advance of participation in actions or larger gatherings, where party members are assigned such details as what potential recruits to concentrate their efforts on, where to sit in a meeting so as not to look conspicuously like a bloc, how to vote, what group you are to say you represent (the party or a front), what slogans to shout at a demonstration, and, in some cases, even what dress styles to affect so as to “fit in” with a certain “scene” such as punks or workers.

When you talk to a party member, you literally are not talking to a fellow human being at the time, but an apparatchik—a functionary of the apparatus—who is on assignment. All of the normal signals of human solidarity—the polite conversation, the interest in your ideas, even the smiles—are the salesman’s techniques, preconceived modes to sell papers and win recruits.

Also, it is sometimes forgotten that all of the Left parties are bound by the leninist technique of “democratic centralism,” whereby members are required by internal and hence, secret regulations to spout only the political line of the majority when speaking to non-members. Even in a case where particular individuals may agree with you, if it contradicts the official position of their party, loyal members will follow organizational discipline and dutifully argue what they don’t believe in their attempts to recruit you.

Shatter The State

Some of the groupuscules have realized that tying their image to long-past European revolutions and personages hasn’t gotten them very far (Can anyone really imagine calling themselves a “trotskyist?”). Several of the groups have entered a phase of modernization where they have dropped (or are “re-examining”) the official trappings of marxism/leninism while essentially retaining all of the authoritarian features of the party intact. Non-leninist parties and organizations should be of no more interest to anarchists than leninist ones. They all dream of transcending their isolated gang status and becoming full-fledged rackets on the order of those which rule in the Eastern bloc states or command sections of the working class such as the communist parties of Western Europe. [7]

Surely, their plans have nothing to do with the dream of a free life ushered in by a revolution which would shatter the power of the state, abolish capitalism, end industrialism, decentralize life and make possible the re-establishment of human communities.

The degree to which the sects make inroads within the anti-authoritarian milieu corresponds to our own lack of power of imagination and will to re-invent the world, discover appropriate forms of revolt and create the conditions for genuine freedom. There are certainly many more serious obstacles than the Left on the road to revolution, but it might be the easiest one to kick into the waste basket of history before we start tackling the tougher ones.

Notes

1. One exception to this has been the work of John Zerzan which has appeared in this newspaper over the last decade. John cites the statistics of social disintegration to support his thesis that the core of radicality is in the revolt against daily life.

2. Jacques Camatte’s *On Organization* provides the source of the quotes in this section, His insights often are masked by dense thicket of Hegelianism, but a determined approach to get through them to the gems he provides is worth the effort. The pamphlet is available from our book service for \$1.

3. Available through our book service.

4. If there are still those who doubt this process, Maurice Brinton’s *Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, 1917–21*, tells the whole sad story. Available from our book service for \$1.50

5. The failure of the “genius” of leninist leadership is candidly examined in a Third International document entitled *Armed Insurrection* by several communist military strategists including Ho Chi Minh which may be still available from St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Ave., NYC.

6. The complete essay, “Listen, Marxist!,” may be found in Bookchin’s *Post Scarcity Anarchism*. An abridged version appeared as “Myth of the Party: Bolshevik Mystification and Counter-Revolution” (FE #272, May 1976), and is available free for the asking as a reprint.

7. Michael Velli’s *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*, compiled for Black & Red by Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, gives advice and cites sources for the aspiring Leftist, but somehow it all falls apart. Available from our book service for \$3.75.

See letter responses in FE #326, Summer, 1987 .

fifth Estate

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
Anarchy and the Left

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/325-spring-1987/anarchy-and-the-left-2>
Fifth Estate #325, Spring, 1987

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)