

Throwing Marx Out with the Bathwater?

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a review of

The Tyranny of Theory: A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism by Ronald D. Tabor. Black Cat Press, 2013, 349 pages, \$30.00

In *The Tyranny of Theory*, Ronald Tabor is adamant that anarchists need to hold Marxists accountable for the historical record of Marxist regimes. He writes, “these regimes represent the underlying logic of Marxism, and the efforts of Marxists and Marxist organizations to create revolutionary societies in the future (should they get a chance) will, in all likelihood, lead to similar systems.”

Having worked with the Revolutionary Socialist League before joining the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, Tabor is able to provide us with an inside and outside perspective on Marxist theory and practice.

The book is more than a warning that anarchists should be wary of collaboration with Marxist political organizations. It is also a call for us to develop alternative theoretical frameworks for understanding capitalism. Otherwise, we will continue to find ourselves tacitly supporting regimes and projects that compromise our fundamental principles of liberty, autonomy and voluntary association.

Yet, it is not sufficient to simply dismiss Marxist ideas wholesale. Anarchists (at least some of us) need to directly engage with the theory in order to clearly delineate its limitations and identify what aspects resonate with critics of capitalism and the state with which we share affinity. If anarchists fail to provide better explanations, potential comrades will continue to be drawn to an outdated, contradictory, and ultimately dangerous ideology touted as science.

This is no easy task: Marx developed many sophisticated concepts that have tremendous explanatory power and political appeal. Moreover, many of these concepts are so deeply entrenched in the anti-capitalist narrative that we couldn't dispense with them, even if we wanted to.

For instance, the Marxist theory of exploitation, based on the premise that capitalists extract surplus value from workers by paying them less than what they contribute, is an elegant and compelling description of the raw deal that is work. The concept of reproductive labor as that portion of labor which is dedicated solely to maintaining the workforce is a powerful starting point for many feminist analyses of household work and the institution of the patriarchal family.

The foundational premise of Marx's historical materialism is that the emergence of class society and the development of social institutions, culture, and ideology, all revolve around the creation and distribution of a material surplus. For anthropologists of all stripes, this remains one of the most popular explanations for the origin and spread of civilization.

In Tabor's words: “Marxism has many features that make it extremely attractive to people angry at the injustices of capitalism ... it offers a detailed analysis of capitalism that has never been approached ... in its cogency, breadth and depth. In addition, Marxism provides a moral indictment of the capitalist system, along with a vision of a just society and a strategy and a set of tactics to achieve it.

Finally, it offers a unified conception of history and of human nature and seems to answer all the fundamental questions that have consumed the minds of human beings for millennia.”

The primary objective of an anarchist critique of Marxism, then, is to demonstrate that one can utilize some of Marx’s ideas and concepts without having to accept his totalizing world-view. Furthermore, it should be able to challenge and redefine the meanings of the concepts that it does find worth retaining. Indeed, this is the basis of critical thinking and it’s frustrating that we continuously need to remind Marxists that the process of scientific inquiry is not to develop the correct theory, but to continuously challenge existing theories in order to develop new and better ones.

Tabor’s book is an excellent contribution to this critique. He begins by positioning Marxism as a currently vulnerable ideology and stressing the importance of kicking it while it’s down. Lacking its once powerful ‘material foundation’ (the Communist bloc), fewer Marxists are willing to claim the historic inevitability of their vision of communism.

As a result, anarchism has become a major contender, as it was prior to the October Revolution. Tabor sees this as an opportunity to attack Marxism on all fronts. His first task is to demonstrate that the Marxist political program is a fundamentally statist project, calling bullshit on the suggestion that a Dictatorship of the Proletariat, based on the central command of economic and social life, and administered by way of bourgeois coercive institutions, will simply “wither away” once the bourgeoisie has been fully expropriated.

Many anarchists will already be familiar with these arguments and I don’t want to spend too much time on them here. One can find much of the theoretical content of these chapters by dusting off old copies of Bakunin or see these predictions borne out in the first-hand accounts of Goldman and Berkman in Bolshevik Russia. Nevertheless, Tabor’s synthesis of this information is well worth the read and there are many important nuances that set the stage for the deeper level of critique in the remainder of his book.

This brings us to the more interesting, and more contentious, claim of this book: “one cannot separate Marx’s analytical ideas (his theory) from his practical program and still have Marxism.” Such a statement will immediately put many anarcho-communists, syndicalists and council communists on the defensive. It’s not polite to pull the theoretical rug from under their feet.

Notwithstanding the appeal (and usefulness) of important concepts such as the ones listed above, Marx’s analysis of capitalism is quite simply wrong. Here, Tabor holds Marxists accountable not only for Marxist regimes, but for Marxist economic analysis itself. He demonstrates that Marx had a very clearly defined conception of labor, capital and the “laws of motion of capitalism.”

For well over a hundred years, bourgeois and socialist thinkers alike have identified the logical inconsistencies in this theory and demonstrated that capitalism has most definitely not followed the historical trajectory predicted by Marx.

In response to these critiques, many Marxists have twisted his words, turning precise concepts into vague generalizations, claiming that logical fallacies merely reflect the complexities and contradictions of dialectics (much the same way that a Christian would respond to inconsistencies in the bible by claiming that “God works in mysterious ways”). We are told that we cannot take Marx’s words at face value, that we cannot possibly understand *Das Kapital* without reading Hegel. Marxism is a complicated hieroglyphics that can only be fully deciphered by the priesthood. Unfortunately, too many anarchists repeat these platitudes.

Tabor provides us with the information and tools to dissect these claims. While arguing with a Trotskyist pamphleteer on these terms will still be frustrating, they will prove quite useful to anarchists who are flirting with Marxist theory in their attempts to find satisfactory explanations for the world in which they live.

In addition to a comprehensive critique of Marx’s theory of capital and the state, Tabor also questions the deterministic aspects of the materialist conception of history and provides a philosophical challenge to the notion that Marxism can be considered scientific in the first place.

Unfortunately, the reader is left conflicted by a book that begs us to move beyond Marx, but constantly reminds us that we can’t avoid him. Nevertheless, the greatest shortcoming of this book is also one of its greatest appeals: Tabor doesn’t give us any easy answers as to what aspects of Marxism should be retained and what aspects should be thrown in the dustbin along with the historical Communist regimes.

In a sense, though, that is indicative of the anarchist antidote to ideology: you're going to have to figure that out for yourself!

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