

Against Revolutionary Cynicism

for Anarchist Consciousness

Simoun Magsalin

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If you took the most ardent revolutionary, vested him with absolute power, within a year he would be worse than the Tsar.

—Mikhail Bakunin

Modern fiction is replete with stories of revolt and failure. The setting might be a brutal dictatorship, maybe it is a medieval fantasy or a cyberpunk dystopia, but the ending is similar. The usual tropes are presented: violence of policing, spy agencies and brutal military forces, all of whom perpetrate torture, disappearances and murders.

Opposing the brutal dictatorship in these stories are the plucky rebel heroes. The specifics are not important. There is a great battle that becomes a revolution and the dictatorship is overthrown. But after the ashes clear, all is not well.

The hated dictator is gone, but the institutions they built up are kept in place. The heroes won the revolution and change has arrived, but the new order feels disturbingly similar to the old one, sometimes worse. The tyrant's stick is replaced by the people's stick—to borrow a phrase from Bakunin.

The online wiki, TV Tropes, calls this "Full-Circle Revolution." We can see this in texts such as *The Hunger Games*, *Dragon Age*, *Far Cry 4*, and even in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

This perspective is promoted as sadly realistic and inevitable. The rebel heroes might have been sincere, but later are corrupted by power. The revolutionary leaders might have turned out to be no different from the dictators they replaced. Or, perhaps there were cynical bastards behind the scenes working to help the heroes succeed and then take charge after the victory.

The message that we should expect societal change to generally lead to betrayal and a situation worse than the previous one can be characterized as revolutionary cynicism. It is a profoundly cynical view of the potential of individual human beings and social solidarity. It upholds the argument that there is no realistic alternative to the established order, that fighting for a better society is basically futile. In this way, revolutionary cynicism is profoundly liberal in how it upholds the status quo in favor of only gradual change.

As with all narratives, revolutionary cynicism is rooted in some reality and lived experiences. The English popular Revolution which began in 1642 was followed by Cromwell's dictatorship. The 1789 French Revolution ended in the Napoleonic Empire.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 also started as a popular insurgency but was taken over by the vanguardist Bolshevik party. Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued that one-man rule with "unquestioning obedience to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader," was compatible with the workers democracy.

If top-down rule and centralized decree was compatible with democracy as Lenin understood it, then various demonstrations of the police function of the Bolshevik state were similarly justified. And indeed, the Bolshevik consolidation of power led to a more centralized and systematically brutal domination over individuals and groups than the Tsarist regime was ever able to accomplish.

What is consistently misunderstood or misrepresented by authoritarians is precisely the problem of authority. The construction of authority through statist means, like centralization and hierarchies, concentrates power and agency in that authority rather than enabling the autonomy of those not part of the elite. To confuse representatives or the State with those they claim to represent is an error that justifies the empowerment of representatives and the State, and the disempowerment of the rest of the people.

Among socialists and anarchists, there is also often talk of betrayal of the revolution, where it became authoritarian rather than liberatory, as in England, France, Russia, China or Vietnam. There is substantial truth in the criticisms and charges of betrayal of these revolutions. Vanguardist factions overwhelmed the truly revolutionary actors, and new authoritarian powers gained ascendancy.

The authoritarian leftist conception of revolution has been that revolutionary change is impossible without authority and dictatorship, which are needed to defeat forces of counter-revolution. This is justified as revolutionary realism, the other side of the coin of revolutionary cynicism.

Anarchists should reject both of these conclusions while recognizing there were situations that occurred in the past which might have given people reason to believe in their validity. It is important to ask why these narratives exist. Why is it that some revolutions have resulted in authoritarianism and dictatorship? To this complex query there are a plurality of answers.

One of the reasons is the lack of discussion and debate about the dangers of hierarchy and concentrated power. Perhaps promoting deeper discussions might help develop an anarchist consciousness that enables revolutionary optimism to counter cynicism/realism.

Libertarian consciousness is based on the understanding that the betrayals of previous revolutionary movements are due precisely to hierarchy and concentrated power.

Revolutionary optimism flows from this analysis, the idea that things not only could have turned out differently, but that, going forward, better outcomes can be achieved. While there are no blueprints for a free society, anarchist consciousness enables us to move past authoritarians' dead-end realism to experiment with creating viable and free ways of revolutionizing life.

Where do we go from here?

As anarchists conscious of the problem of authority, we are not like the Marxists who conclude that the solution is to preach the gospel of Saint Marx to the masses. We are aware of the already existing potentialities for an anarchist life, such as seen in the mutualistic tendencies present in cultures or communities dealing with problems for generations without the State.

It is important to nurture these potentialities into intentional self-consciousness. People's awareness of their own autonomy can help counter cynicism and false realism.

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