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Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

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Between Anarchism and Marxism : Confusion and "Bad Faith" in Revolutionary Thinking and Practice (1)

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A central question in contemporary revolutionary thinking is how to draw the best from past experience while overcoming political reflexes tied to debates that no longer (or should no longer) exist. Historical knowledge is absolutely necessary for informed thinking and acting, but partial historical understanding can perpetuate doctrinal disputes that further limit and rigidify perspectives. At the same time, partial knowledge of individual motivationsâ€”especially our ownâ€”can amplify the effects of the ignorance and confusion in which everyone participates in some way.

From this perspective, it is necessary to confront the motive bases of dogma and confusion. By dogma I mean defined and received certainties that are often founded in personal insecurities but projected onto perceived adversaries or heretics. Confusion may be best defined as misunderstandings that arise from either lack of knowledge or understanding, and that tend to be reinforced by individual interests and their conscious or unconscious defense. The history of the conflict between the proponents of "Anarchism" and "Marxism" is perhaps the best example of how dogma and confusion have limited the effectiveness of revolutionary struggle since the mid-nineteenth century.

A supposed conflict between two doctrinal tendencies has largely hidden from view the existence of an alternative current that has attempted to draw upon all expressions of transcendent social philosophy and action. There is, indeed, a fundamental division of the revolutionary movement, but it is a division that exists artificially in that it has been willed into existence and has obstructed perception and knowledge of alternatives. There is, in fact, no reason to juxtapose in a binary way what real libertarian socialism represents. In reality, there is no implicit contradiction in a nuanced synthesis of the most directly democratic and egalitarian ideas and practices called into existence by opposition to the industrial capitalist system.

Historical origins of the Great Misunderstanding

The division of the revolutionary left into "Marxist" and "anarchist" camps might be called the "Great Misunderstanding". As it is well known, the idea and reality of such a division emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century, splitting the movement calling for free, egalitarian social relations into two parts, each with its own symbols, hallowed texts and authority figures. The backdrop of this antagonismâ€”called the "Great Schism" by James Jollâ€”long preceded the clash between the "Marxists" and the "Bakuninists" in the early 1870s. The political strife manifest during the establishment of the First International Working Men’s Association was perhaps an inevitable development rooted in the multifaceted reaction against the growth of industrial capitalism that is most largely conceived of within the context of the Romantic Movement.

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In other words, it was the "humanistic" rejection, on both emotional and intellectual grounds, of the de-humanizing civilization and mentalities produced by capitalist social relations that most fundamentally gave rise to modern revolutionary movements. Such activity expressed a will to go beyond existing social and mental structures towards those that would somehow liberate human creative potential and facilitate the "pursuit of human happiness". In North America, for example, this general movement was rightly called "transcendentalist".

To "transcend", to accede to a qualitatively different state of being, is to realize revolutionary change. Throughout the nineteenth century, the social revolutionary dimension of this impulse became progressively more evident, and it was given inspiration and formulation by thinkers of the European Enlightenment of the previous centuryâ€”Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, William Godwin, G.W.F. Hegel and others. However, ideas are one thing, and the realization of them is another. Attempts to realizeâ€”to createâ€”free and equal social relations on a practical basis raise the most difficult questions of all.

The thinkers at the origins of libertarian socialism agreed as to the ultimate expression of transcendence of the capitalist mode of production and its corresponding civilization. But the way of transcendence was the problem. Even then, however, when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels spoke of the "dictatorship" of the proletariat, it was not because they approved dictatorship as a mode of political governance or social control ; it was rather to emphasize that the reign of social-class domination must be thoroughly eliminated. When Marx so cruelly ridiculed Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (in Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*), it was not to say that Proudhon was an agent of the capitalist system, but rather to expose how what he perceived as idealist confusion is a dangerous foundation for an anti-capitalist revolutionary movement.

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Still, we know that the conflict was more than this, even if these are its principled, philosophical bases. If Marx believed that a proletarian revolution would be liberation from wage slavery and class domination, and if he dedicated his life to the struggle for this liberation, it is nevertheless clear that his personality was that of an authoritarian. And it is important to say it because, firstly, his authoritarian cast of mind combined with the perception that working-class revolution was imminent gave rise to the centralized, exclusionary power relations that Marx promoted in the First International. Secondly, in response, Mikhail Bakunin opposed what he called Marx's "authoritarian communism" with what is, in effect, "libertarian socialism"â€”the idea that only the creation of autonomous, local administrative bodies can ensure *non* coercive social relations. For Bakunin, the strategy and tactics of revolutionary struggle must *directly*, that is to say immediately, contribute to the creation of non-authoritarian social relations.

What is remarkable, and it relates fundamentally to our perception of the socially libertarian current of revolutionary struggle, is how this split between the so-called "Marxists" and the so-called "Anarchists" has persisted to the present day. "Marxism" continues to be synonymous with authoritarian political practice, not only in the delusions of capitalist ideologists but also in the rhetoric of far-too-many self-proclaimed anarchists. This is the case in spite of the fact that Bakunin repeatedly expressed his greatest admiration for Marx's analysis of the capitalist system in all its aspects. Bakunin, at least, was an anarchist who knew how to distinguish between theory and practice. But this confusion between the analytical, theoretical corpus of Marx's intellectual work, on the one hand, and, on the other, his organizational intrigues, created unnecessary, but long-lasting barriers within the revolutionary movement. And the confusion between anti-capitalist analysis and political practice quickly congealed into sectarian ideologies.

Long before the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, the possibility of appropriating of existing governance by a "vanguard" political formation and the subsequent exercise of power was a widely held idea. Marxist dogma about the difference between "utopian socialism" and "scientific socialism" reinforced the expectation. By the same token, the debate between the Marists and the Narodniks in Russia in the 1880s tended to valorize the privileging of "objective", "structural" and, thus, "scientific" factors over the types of human agency privileged by the Russian Populists. In the context of nineteenth-century European culture, the positivistic, "scientistic" character of Marx's intellectual work (but especially that of those people he so influencedâ€”the "Marxists") had a distinct advantage over more prosaically practical or common-sensical visions of revolutionary social change. The practical exigencies of class struggle seemed to require rigorous organization and discipline, including a clear hierarchy of leadership. This perception lent credence to the more authoritarian mindset seemingly made necessary by the ferocity of the counter-revolutionary forces [1].

The dominance of authoritarian socialism lasted precisely one century, from the creation of the Second Socialist

International to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. As long as the Soviet Union existed, the Third and Fourth Communist internationals remained powerful machines for recruitment and indoctrination in the pursuit of authoritarian revolutionary socialism.

During this century, there was little debate between the proponents of libertarian and authoritarian revolutionary socialism. The Leninists, like Marx, did not attempt to reason with their opponents on the revolutionary Left, but rather worked to destroy them, to discredit them by any and all means. Even *within* Leninist parties, the techniques of humiliation, forced submission, exclusion and, if need be, physical modes of "liquidation" were standard operating procedure. Within such a movement, the "humanistic" impulse was bound to become an object of scorn and relegated to the category of "bourgeois" mentality.

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[1] Which is likely the reason Jack London named, in *The Iron Heel* (1907), his quintessential revolutionary Earnest Everhard.