

Pick up a brick and throw it at a cop: Beyond the anarchist/Marxist divide

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Where would we be today without those 'defeats', from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism ... There is but one condition. The question of why each defeat occurred must be answered. R. Luxemburg (1919)

It is no coincidence that the Paris commune of 1871, the split in the First International, Russia 1917 and Spain 1936 are all key reference points for modern Marxist and anarchist theory. Similarly, the historical conflicts between anarchists and Marxists cannot be understood in isolation from these events. They are rooted in the experiences and lessons drawn from a real, continuing tradition of class-struggle. Whilst it is true that the polemics exchanged between Marxists and anarchists have often degenerated into caricature, the better of these have always dealt in the common currency of history. In light of this, it is the purpose of this study to explore a peculiar condition of theorists of in a revolutionary tradition in the West, in a period of advanced capitalism. For Luxemburg and other traditional proponents of revolutionary theory, the question was clear-cut: what was the most appropriate analysis to be derived from the failures, and limited successes, of the working class movement? However, in our age, the line between what the working class movement has gained and what it has lost is becoming ever more blurred.

This blurring is due to recuperation, capitalism's ability to incorporate and contain radical movements. In the United Kingdom, radical ideas have never been so accessible. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of the early pioneers of anti-capitalist criticism. Following the revolutions of 1848 Marx was periodically exiled from most mainland European states due to his radical activity and writings, Bakunin would spend six years rotting in the infamous Peter and Paul fortress for his part in the May insurrection in Dresden (1849), while Kropotkin was able to escape arrest in 1876 only to spend forty-one years in exile from his native land. All three experienced censorship, suppression and often incarceration because of their writings and activity in the revolutionary movement. Nowadays the teachings of all of these, and many others, can be found throughout University courses in Sociology, Art, Economics, Political Science, Philosophy and others. Even school students studying in the UK, whose experience typically contrasts with the critical thought encouraged at undergraduate level, can be taught, for example, how the anarchist view of the state differs from the Marxist one or the Marxist approach to religion (Mcnaughton, 2009). Our ideas have not only become acceptable, they are state-sanctioned.

In light of this, this essay intends to explore a number of key questions; What do these developments mean for us as revolutionary theorists and for our capacity for social criticism? Is it even possible to be a revolutionary theorist? Can and do we pose a critical challenge to the existing social order?

Materially, nothing substantive has changed in the condition of the vast majority of working people across the globe. Capitalism still exists, exploitation still exists, waged labour exists and the state and class violence still exists. If anything the permissibility of radical ideas in the academic sphere has accompanied an equivalent intolerance, even outright attack upon, basic notions of workplace solidarity, critique and political dissent in the “real world”. Permissibility in academia has also not been without its costs. Marxism and anarchism have become institutionalised to fit the mould of existing and acceptable bourgeois systems of education. It is no longer necessary (or desirable) to elaborate these ideas in the spirit of their original context - as a guide for revolutionary action. Instead they merely represent a commentary, an added perspective, which serves to augment understandings of existing social phenomena such as class, economics and political authority. Their key quality, their ability to mobilise, has been stripped away.

It is true to say that this process in itself, is not a unique phenomenon. There has, after all, been a long tradition of bourgeois intellectuals writing, discussing and utilising radical ideas. In fact, the sociologist Von Stein was to comment as early as 1850 that,

It is the great merit of socialism to have made us aware for the first time of the relationship of labour to the free personality and to have discovered the existence and the power of the social order over men, as well as the contradiction between the social order and the free personality.
(Von Stein, 1850: 279)

This was the language of what Marx and Engels would describe as “Bourgeois” or “conservative socialism” in the *Communist Manifesto*. That is, it represented efforts by the bourgeois intelligentsia to redress social grievances caused by capitalism while still preserving its privileged class status. Moreover, academia has traditionally been the forum in which these ideas have been articulated. However as Cleaver (1983) has noted, bourgeois reformism does not simply consist of what Marx (1848: 43) identified as “hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind” working their thought into “complete systems”, but there has also been a wider tendency towards the appropriation of profitable aspects of Marxist and anarchist theory itself. As Cleaver is also keen to emphasise, neither should this be understood simply as an exercise in Marcusean “repressive tolerance” whereby insurgent ideas can be safely contained within the academy. These social ideas, albeit in a distorted form, can play a real role in the maintenance and continuation of bourgeois hegemony. In the West, Dauvé is keen to emphasise the university structure as integral to this process:

One of the natural channels of this evolution is the university, since the apparatus in which it is a part backs a considerable part of the research on the modernization of capital. Official “revolutionary” thought is the scouting party of capital. Thousands of appointed functionaries criticize capitalism from every direction. (Dauvé, 1979)

Marx's analysis of economic cycles, crises and surplus value are widely incorporated into many modern courses in economics. Any savvy stockbroker will be sure to have a copy of *Capital Vol. 1* alongside the *Wealth of Nations* on his bookshelf. Cleaver (1983) even points to the role of explicitly anti-capitalist thought in bolstering the analysis of the business community, as evidenced by the increasing space given over in professional economic journals to radical ideas.

This process is also apparent in more subtle ways. For example, much of the Green movement in Europe has its origins in the radicalism and radical movements of the 1960s. Yet the revolutionary social ecology pioneered by anarchists such as Murray Bookchin is becoming increasingly marginal and with it the centrality of an anti-capitalist critique. The Green challenge that is posed today is not one that calls for the abolition of the capitalist system but, by-and-large, a reform of it into a carbon-free economy. A conflict between two competing alternatives – a Green, sustainable system vs. a carbon-based one – in fact masks a shared goal: the continued, stable functioning of the capitalist system. Equivalent developments can be seen in the contra-globalisation movement. The autonomism of Italian Marxists such as Negri and Tronti, “filtered via Deleuze and Guattari” (Wright, 2002: 2) has resulted in key components of anti-capitalist criticism, for example, the class relationship, the capitalist state etc. being replaced with more ambiguous concepts such as “global power” and the “multitude”. The result of which is to replace a theoretical narrative that was originally concerned chiefly with class power on the factory floor, with one that has as its central concern the *regulation* of global economic development in all of its excesses - summitry, unchecked free trade, sweatshop labour, lack of accountability etc. Simultaneously, Marxism and anarchism can be, and have been, utilised as ideological “friend” and “enemy” of the political order while leaving the base cause of injustice - the *social* order – untouched by their criticism.

So, for example, if we look at the history of Marxism, while Marx's intention to develop a critical and revolutionary theory of political economy is central to understanding his contribution, equally, to fully grasp the revolutionary *potential* of his theory, its subsequent recuperation cannot be ignored. Dauvé shows this problem at work in two key areas. Firstly, in Marx's tendency to outline the functioning of the economy “in-itself”, that is to attribute the economic system with certain laws of motion that lead to a teleological reading of history or a conception of history which is essentially “agent-less”. Secondly, in Marx's tendency, despite his insistence on the need for an explicitly communist movement, to articulate reformist demands, i.e. those later associated with the parties of Social Democracy. So, for example, the programme of *the Communist Manifesto* includes, “a heavy progressive or graduated income tax”, “free education for all children in public schools” and the “centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state” etc.¹ Crump (1976) situates these tendencies in their historical context. He points particularly to the commentary of Engels in *Marx and the Neue Rheinische Zeitung (1848-9)*;

¹ It should be noted that Bakunin and other anarchists of the period were also equally prone to such reformist demands throughout their lifetime.

If we did not desire to take up the movement from its already existing, most advanced, actually proletarian side and push it further, then nothing remained for us to do but to preach communism in a little provincial sheet and to found a tiny sect instead of a great party in action. But we had already been spoilt for the role of preachers in the wilderness; we had studied the utopians too well for that. We had not drafted our program for that. (Engels, 1884)

While Marx's prime objective was to put forward an adequately scientific analysis that privileged class struggle within an international socialist movement dominated by the ideology of bourgeois reformism this, in practice, was no easy task. Marx and Engels were caught, on the one hand, between their own communist principles and, on the other, the actual reformist behaviour, and involvement in the bourgeois revolutions of Europe, of the majority of the working class.² What resulted was a mixture of "stary-eyed romanticism and hard-headed realism", the worst aspects of which were seized and recuperated by practitioners of bourgeois theory. Something which can be seen most concretely in the development of "dialectical materialism" as an ideological by-product of this vulgarized Marxist theory;

Dialectical analysis was a method of critique common amongst Marx's generation and can be clearly traced from the radical discussion circles that emerged around Hegel's thought and German Romanticism. However, Marx himself, in comparison to some of the other issues he wrote about, rarely gave the dialectical method space to match the weight and import that it had in his seminal works. He devoted a chapter of his economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 to a materialist critique of Hegel's philosophy and emphasised the utility of the dialectic as a method for comprehending the reproduction of humanity's alienation by labour. He raised this again in his critique of Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the dialectical character of economic development continually resurfaced as a metaphysics of political economy throughout his works. However, the ontological status of this dialectic was largely unqualified aside from a few short remarks in his correspondence. It was, Engels, not Marx who attempted to reach a positive resolution of this issue in *Anti-Dühring* (1877) and later in his posthumously published *Dialectics of Nature* (1883). This was the first articulation of what came to be known as, "dialectical materialism". This meant that, as Callinicos (1976) explains,

interpreting the dialectic not simply as providing the structures specific to Marx's analysis of social formations like capitalism, but as actually representing the laws immanent in all reality, natural as well as social and in the reflection of thought ... For Engels, then, the dialectic laws Hegel had discovered were the general governing nature, history and thought. Marx's worth

²Crump (1976) attributes this problem specifically with the impossibility of communist revolution in Europe during the Eighteenth century. This is an analysis that I believe does require greater critical evaluation relying as it does on certain teleological assumptions on technological and historical development. On a discursive level, however, I do agree with Crump that we can say with certain authority that radical theorists do now have, "the opportunity of constructing a theory of communism with minds which are relatively uncluttered with the baggage which belongs to the bourgeois revolution".

was the triumphant application of these laws to history. (12-13)

Philosophically, this was the completion of the Enlightenment project – the application of rationality to all living things – and, consequently, to use Marx’s own critique of idealist thought, a reproduction within Marxism of the continued alienation of humanity as *subject to* not *master of* the laws of their social universe. Politically, such an interpretation, served as a legitimising discourse for the social democratic programme of the Second International. The intellectuals of the German SPD in particular – Bernstein, Kautsky and Plekhanov – who arguably exercised a hegemonic influence over the Western European workers’ movement were able to utilise Engel’s formulation to justify an incremental and reformist strategy. If “dialectic laws” predicted the inevitable victory of the proletariat through a pre-ordained course of historical development then the task of the Marxist party was to forward the so-called “bourgeois revolution”, even if this aim happened to conflict with those of the proletarian class. The leaders of the Second International were effectively able to contain the aspirations of their proletarian members while diverting their efforts towards capitalist development as part of a “bourgeois revolution”. This was “starry-eyed romanticism and hard-headed realism” taken together and to their extreme. Marxist theorists could justify the continued preservation, even the active development, of capitalist society as justified by a theoretically abstract vision of communism that had little relation to human endeavour and everything to do with the progressive development of hidden, scientific laws. The theory of Lenin and his followers during the Russian revolution was merely the strategic application of these principles to a moment of class insurgency. The theory and the goals elaborated by the Second International were essentially retained, advocating state-capitalist reforms and preaching theoretical leadership of the party over the working class. Although Lenin would engage in many sustained polemics against Kautsky and his followers he would never deviate from the original philosophy and political goals of the second International (Dauvé, 1977). The innovations forced by the Russian context and the conditions of heavy repression under the Tsar merely led to a particularly authoritarian brand of communist organisational practice. Moreover, after the Bolshevik seizure of power it became almost immediately clear that the factory councils’ and peasant committees’ desire for workers’ self-management over production would conflict with Lenin’s understanding of workers’ control as

a national, all-embracing, omnipresent, extremely precise and extremely scrupulous *accounting* [emphasis in original] of the production and distribution of goods. (Lenin, 1917)³

It is this role that “revolutionary thought” has historically played as an ideological smokescreen for

³For a comprehensive history see “The Bolsheviks and Workers Control” In: Brinton, M. (2004) *For Worker’s Power* (AKPress: Oakland, USA)

capitalist development that leads Debord in his *Society of the Spectacle* to make the distinction between revolutionary *theory* and revolutionary *ideology*. It should be made clear, however, that such a distinction has not come as the result of persistent “mistakes” made by radical intellectuals and academics or the existence of deviant doctrines. It is rather a natural consequence of the continued functioning of capitalism and the continuing expression of class interests. As a consequence, to attempt to seek a methodological remedy to this problem, as many radical intellectuals have done, actually misses a far more fundamental issue. Capitalism is, after all, a real living system containing conflicting interests and, as Marx once observed, in every epoch, the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class. Accordingly, as much as radicals operating within the academic sphere may hope to escape or evade it, they cannot ignore the material conditions that frame, mutate and transform the products of intellectual labour.

The rehabilitation of radical theorists is a seemingly rational goal in the face of a social system that has continually recuperated and vulgarised revolutionary thought. Faced with these theoretical failures an intuitive response is to re-assert the original qualities that were so integral to the “true” Marx, Bakunin, Kropotkin etc. However, ultimately, without any appreciation of the material and historical conditions that framed these theories in their original context this is an exercise in futility. What weighs upon us now as revolutionary theorists is not simply the historical failure of anarchist and Marxist theory, but the accumulated experience of the repeated failures of proletarian revolution.

Recuperation is, after all, a defensive mechanism. Only after revolutionary actions have failed and the ideas that accompanied them have lost their material substance is it possible for them to become a useful tool for the bourgeoisie. The “original” Marx, Bakunin, Kropotkin are useless to us precisely because their teachings have been absorbed into the ideological apparatus of the state and the bourgeoisie. In this respect, it is no surprise that Marxism and anarchism are now on the school curriculum; they are both components in the ideological management of the proletariat. That which cannot be absorbed and used in the practical management of the working classes, i.e. in economics, management theory and in the provision of social reforms, can instead be safely diffused within the universalistic grasp of bourgeois history or ethics. Students may come to a more critical appraisal of the role of the state, even the functioning of the class system, but ultimately they are dealing with relics of failed revolutionary projects – dead theory.

Recuperation is just an expression in ideas of what has already occurred in practice. It is an indication of how and why revolutionary projects have already failed. Subsequently, while it is important to recognise the distinction between ideology and theory and the interests they serve, to attempt to limit or even cut off aspects of revolutionary thought from recuperation, as the situationists attempted to, represents as fruitful course of action as attempting to think oneself out of capitalism.

Radical writers and intellectuals may work outside of a revolutionary context, but it is only in a revolutionary context, or at least in an analysis of past episodes, that their work has true critical value. It is only in unity with the working class movement that the work of theoreticians can be understood to be genuinely revolutionary. Theorists, in other words, should accept recuperation for what it is and instead of

desperately attempting to keep the revolutionary flame alight during periods of reaction they focus instead on critically evaluating the limited successes of the working movement. The role of communist theorists therefore is to

represent and defend the general interests of the movement. In all situations, they do not hesitate to express the whole meaning of what is going on, and to make practical proposals. If the expression is right and the proposal appropriate, they are parts of the struggle of the proletariat and contribute to build the "party" of the communist revolution. (Dauvé and Martin, 1974)

Our ideal should be of a permanent bank of revolutionary theorists whose ideals are brought into unity with the progressive development of the communist movement.

To concentrate more specifically on what this offers in terms of the capacity of revolutionary theory I think it opens up a number of points for development. The utility of this approach is ultimately on taking head on the often awkward position that theorists have to negotiate between their capacity to forward social change and the constraints that are put upon them by their given circumstances, an idea that Marx famously expressed in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

From this position it is possible to understand recuperation as an indication of the far more serious constraints that weigh upon us both historically and materially. The ideological forces of the state and the bourgeois class will always attempt to divert and contain revolutionary ideas, and recuperation is the successful end product of this process. It is also necessary to recognise theorists and actors (for want of a better word) as elements of the same process. It is critical to reject the Leninist formulation of socialist intellectuals outside and somehow immune to the alienating effects of the class system. In many respects, this is an idea that has been common currency in anarchism for some time, The Dielo Truda group, for example, state in the *Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)* that,

Anarchism ... developed, not from the abstract reflections of some scientist or philosopher, but out of the direct struggle waged by the working people against capital, out of their needs and requirements, out of their psychology, their desire for freedom and equality, aspirations

that become especially vivid in the most heroic stages of the working masses' life and struggle. Anarchism's outstanding thinkers - Bakunin, Kropotkin, and others - did not invent the idea of anarchism, but, having discovered it among the masses, merely helped develop and propagate it through the power of their thought and knowledge. (Dielo Truda Group, 1926)

It is nonetheless an important point for unity. In doing so, we reaffirm the original sentiment of early pioneers of both anarchism and Marxism that it is activity – solidarity, organisation and education – that is the revolutionary component of revolutionary theory.

The kind of Marxism and anarchism that those operating from this perspective hope to develop is one based on a continual and evolving dialogue between intellectuals and working class militants. Practically, this has to be rooted in the grassroots conditions of every historical struggle, building from concrete experiences upwards. We should see it as possible at all times to continually critically re-appraise the condition of our theory in communication with the existing, most advanced expressions of anti-capitalist resistance, however minor these may seem. Moreover, Anarchism and Marxism need this relationship to avoid stagnation. Without it there may be anarchists and Marxists, but there won't be revolutionaries. So many attempts to address recuperation have proceeded from a flawed assumption, that it is somehow possible to articulate *the* perfect theory, immune from co-option, relentless in its criticism and articulate in its guide for revolutionary action. However, such an endeavour starts from an idealist perspective - that somehow theory is a force in itself that can be shaped and moulded by intellectual effort alone. Theory, however, is nothing but a relic of past struggles. Whether this is in the form of the terms and concepts we draw from, the historical events at the core of our analysis or even the recuperated terms and notions we have to struggle against, they are all essentially material in character. The corpses in our mouths are those of murdered revolutionaries. If we are truly to take on the magnitude of recuperation then we also have to acknowledge that the only theory that has true critical value is one that is rooted in real and continuing social struggles.

We have, therefore, to take alternative courses of action. On the one hand, we can wait, speculate, analyse and anticipate. On the other, we can participate. Education is a powerful weapon, it no coincidence that it has historically been such a central component of socialist organising. Self-education has always been an important base of our movement. The difference now is that, in the West, contemporary students of anarchism and Marxism are not only confronted with traditional obstacles - poverty, lack of time and resources – but also the added difficulty of having to surpass the vulgar Marxism and anarchism that is taught in mainstream education.

When early agitators conceived their task as “bringing revolution to the masses” they made an error.

Their task was not simply to disseminate anarchism and Marxism amongst the working classes, but also to learn from them. Revolutionaries, whether they concede the idea or not, are representatives of a continuing tradition of class struggle, they are the past meeting the present confrontation with capitalism. Our criticism should not be seen as taking place between theoretically privileged “outsiders” and naive “insiders” (as is the case with much positivistic social science), but as equals within the same struggle. We outline critical perspectives as developed from our own principles while simultaneously forwarding a wider discourse as based upon our collective experience. It is correct to criticise intellectuals for agonising over their “relationship” to the working class. The fact is that there is no relationship, they are components of the same movement or they are not. This is a perspective, even just looking briefly at some contemporary events, that is desperately lacking in our discipline.

On the afternoon of Saturday 6th September 2008, Greek police shot dead a 15-year-old student in the central Exarchia district in Athens. Police routinely clashed with immigrant and working class youths throughout the poorer districts of the capital, however, this time the confrontation would turn fatal. The events that followed came to be known in the mainstream media as part of the “Greek December”. Public outrage at the police, along with continuing attacks on working conditions following the economic crisis, caused widespread mobilisations. Police stations burned, luxury shops were ransacked, roads blockaded and the centre of Athens saw continuous running battles with aggressive riot police. The first work to come out of academia on this subject was from the Hellenic Observatory in LSE. They published a collection of essays on the riots titled, *The Return of Street Politics?* in April 2009. The contributors were varied, from professors and economists throughout the UK and Europe to journalists and professional analysts, they even managed to squeeze in a few radical post-structuralists. Yet, despite the variety of political positions that were being drawn from there was a single methodological aim displayed throughout the collection. Every writer struggled to describe the events through the lens of their own ideological narrative, whether this meant seeing the events as an indication of the awakening of a democratic “multitude”, a mass psychological display of youthful rebellion, a nihilist glimpse into a bleak future or even a cry for privatisation and freer economic markets. Not one of the authors chose to give those participating in the rebellion a voice. This was, even for those defending the actions of the rioters, an entirely one-way process. Even the analysis of so-called revolutionaries resorted to simple and arbitrary abstractions. For the Leninists it was the age-old “crisis of leadership” resurfacing, as naive and “insurrectionary” youth were “betrayed” by the failure of the political Left and the trade unions to take up the mantle. In the end, the most articulate expression of the energy behind the events was not to come from the sociologists, political scientists or even the radical theorists of European universities. It was to come from inside the insurrection, from the testimony of a “hot-headed” youth,

Until I turned eighteen, they thought I was on their side. Excellent behaviour, excellent marks, certificates in foreign languages, you know, all these make them call you a “good girl”. Meaning

that you will attend a good college, you will have a good job, you will make a nice family be a peace-loving individual. On Saturdays you will be going to the supermarket and on Sundays for a drive to the countryside. They have dug their own grave. A great slap was necessary for me to wake up. And here it is. I'm sorry, all you dearest. But you'll find me against you once again. I am just 1.70 of height and 55kg. But you don't have the slightest clue of what I am capable of.

- A good student girl

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