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**Marxism and Anarchism Revisited**

I am a Marxist and also an anarchist. But mostly I am a communist. What this means is that I find Karl Marx's theory of supreme utility in understanding capitalism and, more importantly, its overcoming by communism. But in practical matters, I agree with some anarchists as much as I disagree with some other Marxists. None of these terms are particularly well-defined. They are so capacious that I might as well reject all three terms as accept them. Or perhaps I could pile up descriptors until I am satisfied? Why not, if I identify with terms that lump me together with Stalinists and egoists, social democrats and mutualists?

In their 2014 book, recently translated and published in English as *Revolutionary Affinities: Toward a Marxist-Anarchist Solidarity,* Michael Löwy and Olivier Besancenot prefer the term *libertaire,* essentially untranslatable into contemporary English, given extant usage of the term “libertarian.” As the translator David Campbell tells us, “*libertaire* is a broader term than anarchist, and describes anyone, anarchist or not, who is skeptical of authority, and while anarchists could be said to fit within the libertaire tradition, not all libertaires favor the complete abolition of the state, as anarchists do. Generally speaking, *anarchist* and *libertaire* can be thought of as interchangeable for the purposes of this book” (p. xix). Hence the French subtitle—*Pour une solidarité entre marxistes et libertaires*—becomes in English “Marxist-Anarchist Solidarity.”

This says as much about the strategic orientation of the book as it does about the differences between French and English; libertaire marks out a middle ground between the apparently irreconcilable adjectives “Marxist” and “anarchist,” a space where their contradictions might be reconciled without resulting in the betrayals of the twentieth century. The writers are therefore libertaires but not anarchists. They are, as they say, “libertarian Marxists,” but the term they often prefer for their own position is “revolutionary Marxist,” which seems to be more or less a cryptonym for “Trotskyist,” a tendency not discussed explicitly within the book but from which both authors hail. In a chapter on self-management and planning, for example, they write that “revolutionary Marxists have the greatest admiration for the experiment in agrarian and industrial collectivization by the National Confederation of Labor–Iberian Anarchist Federation during the Spanish Revolution of 1936-1937” (p. 137). In a subsequent chapter, “Direct and Representative
Democracy,” they write that “revolutionary Marxists are in agreement with the anarchists that it is not through [electoral] institutions that we will be able to transform society. Should they, under these conditions, participate in the electoral spectacle, present candidates, vote and be elected? For Marxists, yes, insofar as electoral campaigns—with their obvious limits—are a rare occasion for them to present their analysis and proposals to the wider population” (pp. 142-43). This has the effect of rather homogenizing Marxists and Marxism, not to mention “revolutionary” Marxists. In the twentieth century, many explicitly revolutionary Marxists drew rather different conclusions about participation in elections.

Marxism and anarchism are neither mutually exclusive nor the same kind of term. Marxism is above all a theoretical corpus, whose chief conclusions derive from Marx’s critique of political economy and a theory of the functioning of capitalism. Anarchism is not a body of theory but the name for a certain political orientation, one that is often as antipolitical as it is antitheoretical. By opposing anarchism to Marxism, the authors make Marxism the name for a particular socialist program that self-designated Marxists themselves have disputed. Since the time of Marx’s death, Marxists have suggested that their fellow Marxists were not really so but, in fact, anarchists, because they supported syndicalism, the general strike, or workers’ councils, or because they opposed work with socialist parties and trade unions. One can say that anarchism rejects “seizing state power,” but one makes an error when one says that Marxism recommends it, given the complexity of Marx’s own views and the views of those he inspired, not to mention the difficulty of defining the state, as the authors themselves recognize. In the chapter “The First International and the Paris Commune,” the authors show that the positions of Marx and Mikhail Bakunin regarding the Paris Commune were hard to distinguish, with Marx’s antistatism often indiscernible from Bakunin’s conspiratorial voluntarism. Adjectives fail us here.

The point of a book such as this, however, is not historiography as much as it is the catalyzation of new affinities. Marxist-libertaire affinities provide the basis for a new political subjectivity. In the preface to the English edition, the authors name “the revolutionary experience in Rojava” as one contemporary example of this libertaire subjectivity and the gilets jaunes movement in France as another (p. xiii). These are important examples because they are neither Marxist nor anarchist in their orientation but rather combine elements of both into a disposition that is, arguably, libertaire as much as anything, skeptical of authority but by no means entirely allergic to it. They also refer to the Zapatista movement in Mexico, which likewise combines elements of both anarchism and Marxism and much else besides. The book they have written is not a history of Marxism and anarchism but what Walter Benjamin called “a constellation,” descriing new shapes in the arrangement of old stars. Or rather it is a series of constellations, a libertaire Zodiac.

Löwy and Besancenot’s book is divided into four sections: “Points of Solidarity,” “Points of Conflict,” “A Few Libertarian Marxist Thinkers,” and “Policy Issues.” In the first, they treat historical events during which Marxists and libertaires found common ground (from the Spanish Civil War to May ’68 and Occupy Wall Street); in the second, they treat libertaires and anarchists who are particularly interesting to them (from syndicalist Pierre Monat to Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos); in the third, they detail some of the major scissions between Marxists and anarchists, devoting particular attention to the Kronstadt uprising; in the fourth, they offer biographies of noteworthy “libertarian Marxists” (Daniel Guerin, Walter Benjamin, and Andre Breton); and in the fifth, they develop a libertaire vision of communism and revolution that synthesizes anarchist and Marxist position on key questions, such as
“autonomy and federalism” and “direct and representative democracy.” From these constellations, they derive that “the revolutionary culture of the future, that of twenty-first-century emancipatory struggles, will be both Marxist and anarchist” (p. 159).

This prophecy is of course derived from observations about contemporary struggles, from Occupy Wall Street to Rojava, which can only really be called libertaire. Contemporary movements are skeptical about authority, their own especially. They are often antipolitical without necessarily being anti-state. Registration of such a fact cannot be separated from a sober-eyed assessment of the effects of such movements, which often come and go without a trace. They may be Marxist and anarchist but not in the right way, apparently. What they lack is the “revolutionary” part of “revolutionary Marxism,” which is to say that what they lack is communism.

“Communism” is a term almost as abused as “libertarian.” Fourth Internationalists like Löwy and Besancenot often prefer the term “revolutionary socialism” so as to avoid confusion with Stalinism. But communism also names another potential point of convergence for Marxists and anarchists. Not all Marxists and anarchists are communists, actually, but the best ones are. While Bakunin and his associates within the First International were not exactly communist, imagining some role for trade, later anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin and Errico Malatesta were much clearer about their programmatic communism and often better at laying out what it would look like than contemporary Marxists. Unlike libertaire, communism names something to be for, not just something to be against. It names, in their best moments, the aspirations of the present movements and not just their limits. This is where, famously, anarchists and many Marxists have disagreed in order to agree—sharing an end but choosing different means. In the nineteenth century, this goal seemed much closer than it does in ours: classless, stateless, moneyless society, such was the destiny of capitalism and the struggles it had produced. If there is any hope for the twenty-first century, it will come through the revival of the communist movement, under one name or another.

The most interesting section of the book, “Policy Issues,” is devoted to an exploration of questions central to communist revolution and communism. “Communism,” they write, “intends to entrust as many powers as possible to the base and to foster local initiatives” (p. 132). They quote Ernst Mandel, who writes of the “the universal character of the workers’ tendency to seize their businesses and reorganize the economy and society on the basis of principles that correspond to their self-determination needs.” If this is true, then such self-organization must be the very basis of communism, and not just the revolution against capitalism. But there is a problem, they acknowledge, with the self of self-organization. Are the businesses that workers seize really their businesses? As they acknowledge, the “decision to shut down a nuclear power plant cannot be solely made by the workers at that establishment” (p. 139). Rather, all those who have a stake in such a decision must be allowed to participate in it. Thus, they suggest that self-management finds its necessary counterpart in democratic economic planning where “the whole of society would be free to democratically choose which lines of production to encourage and the level of resources to be invested in education, health, or culture” (p. 138). As they acknowledge, democracy of this sort is at odds with self-management because it implies majority rule, which often as not overrides local initiative or decision. It also implies some means of enforcing majority decision upon the minority, which is lacking for revolutionary forces, lest they equip themselves with police powers. Where labor has become a right as much as a responsibility, where managers cannot discipline workers with the threat of dismissal and starvation, one cannot
execute an economic plan without the voluntary commitment of its participants.

Democracy presupposes dictatorship. The authors imagine a state of affairs in which workplace councils and regional councils coordinate production and distribution, broadly similar to the vision outlined by many anarchists and anti-state communists, Marxist or not. Inasmuch as such a process is democratic, it is also dictatorial, excluding from the start those who are practically opposed to the institutions of communism. A proposal to return to producing for profit must be rejected out of hand, for example, since it undermines the very basis for common action. Communism emerges then neither through democracy nor dictatorship but through the production of a communist consensus, a common sense connected to common production for common use. This can only emerge where interests have become truly common. This may involve the use of force (exclusion) or democratic procedure (reconciliation) but cannot be identified with these. The kinds of general democratic procedure that they discuss—referenda on production targets, for example—would most likely best be done through iterative processes of survey that seek out a solution acceptable to all or most, based on existing capacities and resources. A decision voted in by all that is impossible to execute is no decision at all.

If such communist revolution were to emerge, it will have to have been in some miniscule way affected by books like Revolutionary Affinities. Libertaire, then, names the space of such a communist consensus in advance. Why not just call it communist then?

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