

Table of Contents

1	1
2	3
3	4

Anarchy and Scientific Communism

Bukharin, Nikolai
1918

Written by Bukharin during his left communist phase. From
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1918/ps.htm>.

Economic ruin, the decline of production, are undeniably accompanied by the decline of healthy proletarian psychology; all of which – tending to drag the proletariat down to the level of a ragged mob and turning outstanding worker elements, with a record of productive activity, into declassed individuals – makes for a situation that more or less favours anarchist tendencies. On top of that, the social democrats have obscured and created confusion about anarchy with their adulteration of Marx. As a result, it is our belief that there is a need to spell out what separates marxist, or scientific, communism from anarchist teachings.

1

Let's begin with our own "final objective" and that of the anarchists. According to the way the problem is posed at present, communism and socialism presuppose the conservation of the state, whereas "anarchy," eliminates the state. "Advocates" of the state, as against "adversaries" of the state: that is how the "contrast" between marxists and anarchists is usually depicted.

One must recognise that such an impression of the "contrast" is not the work of the anarchists alone. The social democrats are also very much to blame for it. Talk about "the state of the future" and "the people's state" has had widespread currency in the realm of ideas and the phraseology of democracy. Furthermore, some social democrat parties always strive to lay special emphasis on their "statist" nature. The catchphrase of Austrian social democracy used to be "We are the true representatives of the state." That sort of thinking was spread by others, too, apart from the Austrian party. In a way, it was a commonplace at an international level, and still is to this day, insofar as the old parties have not yet been thoroughly liquidated. And of course this "state learning" has nothing to do with the revolutionary communist teachings of Marx.

Scientific communism sees the state as the organisation of the ruling class, an instrument of oppression and violence, and it is on these grounds that it does not countenance a "state of the future." In the future there will be no classes, there will be no class oppression, and thus no instrument of that oppression, no state of violence. The "classless state" – a notion that turns the heads of social democrats – is a contradiction in terms, a nonsense, an abuse of language, and if this notion is the spiritual nourishment of the social democracy it is really no fault of the great revolutionaries Marx and Engels.

Communist society is, as such, a STATELESS society. If this is the case – and there is no doubt that it is – then what, in reality, does the distinction between

anarchists and marxist communists consist of? Does the distinction, as such, vanish at least when it comes to examining the problem of the society to come and the “ultimate goal?”

No, the distinction does exist; but it is to be found elsewhere; and can be defined as a distinction between production centralised under large trusts and small, decentralised production.

We communists believe not only that the society of the future must free itself of the exploitation of man, but also that it will have to ensure for man the greatest possible independence of the nature that surrounds him, that it will reduce to a minimum “the time spent of socially necessary labour;” developing the social forces of production to a maximum and likewise the productivity itself of social labour.

Our ideal solution to this is centralised production, methodically organised in large units and, in the final analysis, the organisation of the world economy as a whole. Anarchists, on the other hand, prefer a completely different type of relations of production; their ideal consists of tiny communes which by their very structure are disqualified from managing any large enterprises, but reach “agreements” with one another and link up through a network of free contracts. From an economic point of view, that sort of system of production is clearly closer to the medieval communes, rather than the mode of production destined to supplant the capitalist system. But this system is not merely a retrograde step: it is also utterly utopian. The society of the future will not be conjured out of a void, nor will it be brought by a heavenly angel. It will arise out of the old society, out of the relations created by the gigantic apparatus of finance capital. Any new order is possible and useful only insofar as it leads to the further development of the productive forces of the order which is to disappear. Naturally, further development of the productive forces is only conceivable as the continuation of the tendency of the productive process of centralisation, as an intensified degree of organisation in the “administration of things” that replaces the by-gone “government of men.”

Well now – the anarchist will reply – the essence of the state consists precisely of centralisation and since you keep the centralisation of production, you must also keep the state apparatus, the power of violence, in short “authoritarian relations.”

That reply is incorrect, for it presupposes an unscientific but, rather, wholly infantile conception of the state. The state, just like capital, is not an object but a relationship between social classes. It is the class relationship obtaining between he who rules and he who is ruled. This relationship is the very essence of the state. Should this relationship cease, the state would cease to exist. To see in centralisation an essential feature of the state is to make the same mistake as is made by those who regard the means of production as capital. The means of production become capital only when they are a monopoly in the hands of one class and serve to exploit another class on the basis of wage labour, that is to say, when these means of production are the expression of the social relationships of class oppression and class economic exploitation. In themselves, the means of production are something to be admired, the instruments of man’s struggle against nature. It is understood, then, that not only will they not vanish in the society of the future, but, for the first time ever, they will enjoy the place they deserve.

Of course, there was a time in the labour movement when the workers were not yet clear on the difference between the machine as a means of production and the machine as capital, that is, as a means of oppression. Nonetheless, at that time the workers tended not to do away with private ownership of the machines, but to destroy the machines themselves, so as to return to primitive manual means of labour.

There is an analogy here with the position of anarchists “who are class conscious” on the centralisation of production. Seeing that capitalist centralisation is a method of oppression, they protest, in their simplicity, against all centralisation of production in general; their infantile naivety confuses the essence of the thing with its social, historical, outward form.

And so the distinction between us communists and the anarchists with regard to bourgeois society lies not in that we are for the state and they are against the state, but rather in that we favour production being centralised in large units, fitted to the maximum development of productive forces, whereas anarchists favour small, decentralised production which cannot raise, but only lower, the level of these productive forces.

2

The second essential issue that divides communists and anarchists is their attitude to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In between capitalism and “the society of the future” lies a whole period of class struggles, the period during which the last remains of bourgeois society will be rooted out, and the class attacks provoked by the bourgeoisie – already fallen, but still resisting – fought off. The experience of the October revolution ¹ has shown that, even after it has been “thrown on its back on the ground,” the bourgeoisie still uses what resources remain to it, to go on fighting against the workers; and that, ultimately, it relies on international reaction in such a way that the final victory of the workers will be possible only when the proletariat has freed the whole world of the capitalist rabble and completely suffocated the bourgeoisie.

For this reason, it is quite natural that the proletariat makes use of an organisation for its struggle. The bigger, the stronger and the more solid this organisation is, the more rapidly will the final victory be won. Such a transitional organisation is the proletarian state, the power and the rule of the workers, their dictatorship.

Like all power, the power of the proletarians is likewise organised violence. Like all states, the proletarian state is likewise an instrument of oppression. Of course, there is no need to be so circumspect about the question of violence. Such circumspection is best left to the good Christian or the Tolstoyan, not the revolutionary. In coming down for or against violence, there is a need to see who it is directed against. Revolution and counter-revolution are acts of violence in equal measure, but to renounce revolution for that reason would be nonsensical.

The same thing applies when we come to the question of power and the proletariat’s authoritarian violence. Certainly, this violence is a means of oppression, but one employed against the bourgeoisie. That implies a system of reprisals, but these reprisals in their turn are likewise directed against the bourgeoisie. Whenever the class struggle reaches its point of maximum tension and becomes civil war, one cannot go around talking about individual liberty; rather, one must talk about the need to systematically repress the exploiter class.

The proletariat must choose between two things: either it crushes the dislodged bourgeoisie once and for all and defends itself against their international allies, or it does not. In the first instance, the work must be organised, conducted in a systematic fashion and taken as far as resources allow. To do this the proletariat needs an organised force, whatever the cost. That force is the state power of the proletariat.

¹ According to the Russian calendar, which is thirteen days behind ours; November to us. (Note by the Italian editors.)

Class differences do not vanish from the world at the stroke of a pen. The bourgeoisie does not vanish as a class after it loses political power. Similarly, the proletariat is always proletariat, even after its victory. Of course, it has assumed its position as ruling class. It has to maintain that position or merge with the rest of society, which is profoundly hostile towards it. That is the problem as it arises historically and there are no two ways of resolving it. The sole solution is this: as the motive force behind the revolution, the proletariat has a duty to hold on to its dominant position until it has succeeded in remoulding other classes in its image. Then – and only then – the proletariat dismantles its state organisation and the state “dies out.”

The anarchists take a different stand on the question of this transitional period and the difference between us and them boils down, in effect, to being for or against the PROLETARIAN COMMON-STATE, for or against the DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT.

For anarchists all power, let alone general power, is unacceptable whatever the circumstances because it amounts to oppression even if directed against the bourgeoisie. For this reason, and at the current stage in the development of the revolution, anarchists are at one with the bourgeoisie and collaborationist parties in raising a furore against the power of the proletariat. Whenever anarchists cry out against the power of the proletariat they cease to be the “leftists” or “radicals” they are usually labelled; on the contrary, they turn into bad revolutionaries, unwilling to lead an organised systematic class struggle against the bourgeoisie. In renouncing the dictatorship of the proletariat, they deprive themselves of the most valid weapon in the struggle; in fighting against that dictatorship, they disorganise the proletariat’s forces, snatching their weapons from their grasp and, objectively, give succour to the bourgeoisie and its agents the social traitors.

It is easy to detect just what the fundamental notion is that accounts for the anarchists’ stance on the society of the future and their stance on the dictatorship of the proletariat; it boils down to their aversion – as a matter of principle, so to speak – to the technique of systematic, organised mass action.

It follows from anarchist theory that the consistent anarchist must be averse to soviet power and fight against it.² But, given that such a stance would be clearly absurd for workers and peasants, the number of anarchists whose principles lead them to such a position is not great; on the contrary, there are anarchists quite satisfied to take a seat in the supreme legislature and executive of the state power of the proletariat, namely in the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet.

That this is a contradiction is obvious, a departure from the true anarchist viewpoint. But it is understood that the anarchists cannot have any special affection for the Soviets. At best, they merely “exploit them” and are ever ready to dismantle them. From this situation arises a further, rather far-reaching practical difference: as far as we are concerned, the chief task is to give the power of the mass proletarian organisations – the Workers’ Councils – the widest possible base by strengthening and organising them; whereas the anarchists have consciously to obstruct that work.

We also differ widely in the courses we take in the province of what shape economic praxis ought to take during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The fundamental condition for economic victory over capitalism consists of ensuring that the “expropriation of the expropriators” does not degenerate into an atomisation, even should it be into equal shares. Any new shareout produces small property holders, but big capitalist property grows out of small property, and in this way a

² Here the author is referring to what happened in Soviet Russia. (Note by the Italian editors.)

shareout of the possessions of the rich leads, of necessity, to a rebirth of that same class of the rich.

It is up to the working class not to carry out a shareout that would favour the petite bourgeoisie and the ragged mob, but to see that the means of production to be expropriated are used socially and collectively in a systematic, organised fashion.

And that, in turn, is only possible where expropriation is effected in an organised way, under the control of the proletarian institutions; otherwise, expropriation takes on a frankly disorganising complexion and easily degenerates into mere “appropriation” by private individuals, of what ought to be the property of society as a whole.

Russian society – and particularly industry and agricultural industry – is passing through a period of crisis and total ruin. These tremendous difficulties result not only in the obvious destruction of productive forces, but also in the massive disorganisation of the whole economic setup. As a result, the workers ought, more than ever today, to take care to take an exact inventory of and to supervise all the means of production, dwellings, consumer products requisitioned and so on. Such supervision is possible only where expropriation is the work not of private individuals or groups but of the organs of proletarian power.

3

We have purposely avoided arguing against anarchists as if they were delinquents, criminals, bandits and so on. The important thing, for workers, is to understand what is pernicious in their teachings and the origin of noxious praxis.

We cannot have a superficial squabble at the focal point of our argument. Everything that has already been said explains, in itself, why it should be that it is precisely the anarchist groups that rapidly spawn bands of “expropriators,” who expropriate for the sake of their own pockets, and why the anarchists attract delinquents. There are always and everywhere disruptive elements that exploit the revolution for their own private gain. But where expropriation is carried out under the control of mass organs it is much more difficult for the private profit situation to arise.

On the other hand, when one shuns participation in organised mass actions on principle and substitutes for them the actions of free groups “that make their own decisions,” “autonomously and independently,” one creates the best possible atmosphere for “expropriations” that are, theoretically and in practical terms, no different from the activities of a common street-thief.

Individual expropriations and confiscations and so on are not only dangerous on account of the fact that they act as a brake on the creation of an apparatus of production, distribution and control, but also because such actions completely demoralise the men who carry them out and deprive them of class consciousness, make them unused to collaboration with their comrades, and abandon these in favour of a single group of even a single “free individual.”

There are two sides of the workers’ revolution: the destructive side and the creative or reconstructive side. The destructive side shows above all in the destruction of the bourgeois state. The social democratic opportunists claim that in no shape or form does the proletariat’s capture of power mean the destruction of the capitalist state; but such a “capture” exists only in the minds of a few individuals. In reality the capture of power by the workers can become a reality only through the destruction of the power of the bourgeoisie.

The anarchists have a positive role to play in this labour of destroying the bourgeois state, but, in organic terms, they are incapable of creating a “new world;” and,

on the other hand, once the proletariat has taken power, when the most urgent task is to build socialism, then anarchists have an almost exclusively negative role, harassing such constructive activity with their wildcat and disorganising actions.

Communism and communist revolution – that is the cause of the proletariat, of the productively active class, through the apparatus of large scale production. As for all the other strata of the poor classes, they can only become agents of communist revolution whenever they protect the rear of the proletariat.

Anarchy is the ideology, not of the proletariat, but of declassed groups, inactive groups, lacking a connection with all productive labour: it is the ideology of a horde of beggars (lumpenproletariat), a category of people drawing its recruits from among proletarians, ruined bourgeois, decadent intellectuals, peasants cast out by their families and impoverished; an amalgam of people incapable of creating anything new, anything of value, only seizing what they have got their hands on through their “confiscations.” Such is the social phenomenon of anarchy.

Anarchy is the product of the disintegration of capitalist society. The complexion of this misery is brought about by the crumbling of social bonds, the transformation of people who were once members of a class into atomised “individuals” who no longer depend on any class, who live “for themselves,” do not work and who, to hold on to their individualism, acknowledge no organisation. That is the misery produced by the barbaric capitalist regime.

A class as healthy as the proletarian one cannot allow itself to catch the contagion of anarchy. Anarchy could emerge from one of its extremes only if that working class were to break up, and then as a sign of sickness. And the working class, struggling against its economic dissolution; must likewise fight against its ideological dissolution, the product of which is anarchy.