EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

ANARCHISM, AND THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF CRITIQUE BY WAY OF RECUPERATION

We tend to think of the great achievements — e.g., the systemic grasp of the capitalist mode of production in Capital I; or consciousness of the necessarily political nature of the working-class movement, secured by Marx and Engels in their theoretical and organizational work of the 1850s–60s — as somehow permanent and irreversible. When we do, we are invariably wrong. “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves” — not once for all time, but repeatedly, through a process of continual rediscovery and reconstitution, always in transformed circumstances. In this sense, déjà vu is the mode of existence of progress.

And so the confrontation and dialog between anarchist and Marxist ways of thinking about capitalism and the state, the movement and the goal (using “anarchism” and “Marxism” as very broad, and certainly non-exclusive, categories) continues, re-energized by the worldwide “movement of the squares” and the Occupys. This Special Issue of S&S brings together a wonderful set of essays on various aspects of anarchist and anarchism-influenced theory and practice, in different times and places. All of them embrace, in distinct ways, the task of recuperative critique: doubt everything, but bring it all on board at the same time, as the recurring source material for the revolutionary, scientific and profoundly democratic practice that goes by the name of Marxism, and points the way beyond the capitalist present to a future worthy of our potential, and our planet.

Our collective thanks, as always in the case of Special Issues, to the Guest Editors: John P. Pittman, with Russell Dale and Justin P. Holt. They did the tireless work of envisioning, inviting, corresponding, reminding, vetting, and assembling, without which the Issue would never have taken shape. And also as always, let me extend a non-rhetorical invitation to readers: this is clearly a discussion that must continue, and your participation is crucial. We, and the community of S&S readers, would love to hear from you.

D. L.
INTRODUCTION

Red on Black
Marxist Encounters with Anarchism

JOHN P. PITTMAN

*Science & Society* is an interdisciplinary journal of and for Marxist scholars. In this special issue, we have assembled some studies of anarchist movements, theorists, and practices, primarily in contemporary or late–20th-century struggles. The articles are mostly exploratory rather than polemical, but there is a tonal continuum stretching from the firmly conclusive arms folded to the open, outstretched hand. A number of our contributors were active in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and related movements that crested in the year before our call for papers was released, in October 2012. This introductory essay will offer, in brief, an attempt to show some of the theoretical concerns interweaving through these pieces.

It is a “conversation,” and not merely a confrontation, in the pages of this issue, at least: most of our writers do not simply reject anarchism but challenge and probe with some degree of sympathy. Indeed, one of our contributors claims allegiance to both Marxism and anarchism. Robert Paul Wolff argues in his brief communication that his commitment to a Marxist program of collective action does not in the least require him to affirm the *de jure* legitimacy of any state, even a socialist one — and it is this he rejects. Wolff’s philosophical anarchism starts in an insistence on the moral autonomy of the human individual, and entails, he thinks, the denial of the legitimacy of any political authority. Here, in its pure, abstract form, is theoretical anarchism’s anti-statism, its preoccupation with autonomy (and, one might add, that preoccupation’s abstract — not to say *bourgeois* — individualism).

That preoccupation leaves the lecture hall for the streets in autonomism, the subject of Linda and José Alcoff’s critical conspectus included here. Identified as anarchist by Marxists and as Marxist by anarchists, autonomism, in the Alcoffs’ presentation, grew out of an early 20th-century “anti-authoritarian
tendency within communism.” Autonomism comes to fruition in the 1960s, when crises in the Leninist parties and disillusion with the Soviet model of socialism opened the way for the resurgence of more locally oriented and anti-authoritarian communist politics. At the heart of autonomism, the Alcoffs identify its distinctive conception of autonomy as a social relation between class actors, rather than a moral property of individual persons. Nonetheless, autonomism’s grounding in a localist approach to organizing raises again the question posed also by Wolff’s formulations: how to conceive a revolutionary transition without the necessarily coercive force of state power?

The state as a centralized form of organization and authority has always been a primary concern of anarchist analysis, while for Marxists it is capital that is the core issue, and not the state as such, conceived as an instrumentality of class rule. Marxists are mostly agreed both that any successful struggle for the overthrow of capitalist society involves some centralized political organization coordinating the action of the entire working class and that this struggle necessarily involves the fight for reforms, essential for preparing the workers for the decisive battle, the “conquest of political power by the proletariat,” as the Communist Manifesto has it. Anarchists are suspicious of any organizations beyond those thrown up in the immediate struggles of the workers, of participation in struggles for reform generally, and of electoral struggles especially. These are the issues over which, historically, anarchists and Marxists have clashed.

August Nimtz presents here an account of their first important skirmish — the confrontation between Marxists and Bakuninists within the (“first”) International Workingmen’s Association. Nimtz brings out, from within the organizational issues that clothed these initial confrontations, the crucial role of organized working-class participation in electoral struggle for Marx and Engels, a participation necessitated by the situation of class struggle in the political conditions of “parliamentary democracy.” Nimtz also brings out Marx and Engels’ resistance to the Bakuninists’ somewhat inchoate prefiguratism — the demand that revolutionary organizing must “prefigure” in its essential features the desired post-revolutionary conditions, if only on a limited scale.

These issues — the role of centralized political organization and the consistently revolutionary approach to reform and electoral struggles — have been central to the histories of Marxist movements themselves. The key role of class-conscious revolutionary leadership — particularly in the form of the “democratic centralist” vanguard party — was definitive for the development of Leninism, surely the most powerful form of Marxist movement in the 20th century. Shmuel Lederman, in an article examining the competing conceptions of democracy in radical left practice, considers particularly the workers’ councils or soviets in the European workers’ revolutions and
insurgencies of the first quarter of the 20th century, reflecting critically on the Leninist position and developing that of its leftist detractors. Doing so, he highlights Hannah Arendt’s idea of such “spontaneous” formations as the “lost treasure” of the classical revolutionary tradition, and reflects on the rediscovery of that treasure in 21st-century movements.

Gerald Meyer traces the career of Italian anarchism in the United States in the early 20th century. Anarchists rooted in Italian immigrant culture played key roles in major U.S. workers’ struggles in the period before and after the First World War, until anarchism’s gradual eclipse by the Communist movement of the 1930s. That eclipse dramatized both the growing strength of the intensely class-conscious workers’ culture the two ideologically distinct tendencies shared, and the increasing isolation of the Little Italys anarchist communities in relation to the emerging class-wide movement the Communists were working toward. According to Meyer, that isolation, fueled by deeply felt anti-clerical sentiment, flirtation with a “propaganda of the deed,” and the ethno-linguistic solidarity of common roots, too often relegated the anarchists to the role of “antireligious sectarians assembled around a distinct lifestyle and culture.”

Meyer grounds the anti-statist and anti-clerical animus of the Little Italys anarchists in a “radicalism of nostalgia,” transplanted by Southern Italy’s landless peasants and artisans to the hothouse conditions of ethnic ghettos in an urbanizing United States. Akinyele K. Umoja’s account of the life and political career of Kuwasi Balagoon — born Donald Weems (1946–1986) — presents the case of an “anti-authoritarian” politics emerging in reaction to a heavy-handed top-down leftist centralism. Balagoon, a U.S. army veteran whose political commitments were forged in the urban epicenters of 1960s insurrection and police repression, moved through the Black Panther Party (BPP) to other, revolutionary nationalist paramilitary formations to, ultimately, a “New Afrikan anarchism.” Umoja argues that an authoritarian strain in the BPP’s Maoist-inspired organizing drove Balagoon’s move to more organic yet sectarian nationalist politics, more violently anti-statist tactics and “expropriations.” In tracing Balagoon’s ideological trajectory — and suggesting that the BPP’s “heteronormativity” contributed to the bisexual Balagoon’s alienation from that movement — Umoja illuminates the contradictions of an armed, masculinist “grass roots” political practice with a liberatory intent, fractured and increasingly isolated by state repression.

Again we see the significance of the political culture of left radicalism “on the ground” as the present reality of the revolutionary aspiration embodied in its analyses and ideals. This close connection between a movement’s ideology and its political culture and forms of organization gives life to prefiguratism, associated with anarchism (but not entirely absent from the concerns of many Marxists). An insistence on prefiguratism might appear to
rule out, by definition, engaging in any reform struggles within conditions of class society. And, if radical equality is taken to be a key feature of a post-revolutionary society, prefiguratism would also seem to imply some form of horizontalism — a demand for radically non-hierarchical structures and procedures in all revolutionary formations. That demand reflects a major concern of many anarchists with hierarchy in any and all its forms. Hierarchy as the fundamental problem — and a corresponding reliance on hyper-inclusive, direct democratic, “leaderless” modes of organizing — has come to dominate the anarchist politics of Occupy Wall Street, and an analytic focus on hierarchy is at the core of David Graeber’s Debt, a book — reviewed in these pages by Julio Huato — associated with OWS, which arose just after the book’s publication in 2011.

Jackie DiSalvo, writing — as an activist participant — about the militant street politics of Occupy Wall Street centered in Zuccotti Park, critically reviews the successes and difficulties encountered in the attempt to implement a radical politics based on the problematic appeal of horizontalist prefiguratism. DiSalvo affirms the signal achievements of OWS in forcing the issue of massive inequality onto the front pages and into mainstream political discourse, setting an example of fearless direct action protest to highlight the needs of “the 99%,” and innovating creative forms of popular mobilization. But an obsessive horizontalism weakened the movement’s ability to act decisively, and the related fastidious proceduralism turned the core group increasingly inward, undermining the possibility of reaching and mobilizing mass action and isolating it, increasing its vulnerability to state repression.

DiSalvo is not alone among the contributors in noting the world historic failure of the 20th century’s “actually existing socialisms” as a key to the recent revival of interest in anarchism. To this might be added the weakening of the traditional labor movement, especially in the USA, in part due to the entrenchment and ossification of “service” unionism. The Marxist left, insofar as it has been tied to these movements and formations, might usefully be reminded of its own sympathy with prefiguration, understood as the unceasing demand for the widest democratic engagement of the broadest masses in the struggle for the satisfaction of their needs. Undeniably, the fight for the “emancipation of labor” calls for organizations of the workers, and of the people; just as certainly, only with the continual renewal of the organizational forms of anti-capitalist struggle will the prospects for its victory stay bright.

John L. Hammond, who, like DiSalvo, considers the question of OWS’ anarchist credentials, does so from a somewhat more distanced standpoint as participant–observer. Developing an analysis based on interviews with OWS’ core activists, Hammond identifies what he calls five tenets of OWS belief and practice — prefiguration, horizontalism, autonomy, mutual aid,
and defiance — that are anarchist but also, he suggests, rooted in the history of the U. S. left and progressive movements.

Hammond, cautioning that OWS was an amalgam of ideological and class forces, notes its stress on immediate experience over long-term movement building, its ambiguous attractiveness to some libertarian anarchists, and its uneasy relation to race as a fulcrum of democratic struggle. Let me underscore the point: if Marxist, particularly Leninist, parties have a history troubled by a top-down authoritarian taint, anarchist practice — not only in its U. S. libertarian form — is often impolitic, if not decidedly reactionary. That OWS, initiated in North America, became a global phenomenon of the left, shows its tactical brilliance. Its rapid collapse in the face of police force deployed in the interests of the status quo suggests that anarchism’s renewed appeal in our times, increasingly precarious as they are for both labor and the left, challenges us again with the question: how to challenge decisively the power of a state that serves the rule of capital.

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