

LOUGHBORO:

ANTI-“COMMUNIST” COMMUNISM IN THE GRAVEYARD FOR ORTHODOXIES

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In the radical theory and revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, certain orthodoxies seemed to make sense. In debates of the late 19th century and early 20th, there was a palpable sense that the prevailing worldview would shape the future. Within European radicalism was the idea that following the influence of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Karl Marx could lead to hell or heaven on Earth, depending on one’s point of view. Everything was submitted as evidence for one side or the other, from the Paris Commune and its catastrophic finale to debates between Paul Lafargue and the anarchists, and between Lafargue and the Marxists too. The notion that there should be a cohesive ideology for world affairs did not die easily, and certainly ran up through to the end of the Cold War. Today, in the present context of capitalist crisis, and an impressive wave of global uprisings, all the old ideologies seem to have come back again, like zombies hungry for life. People speak of the return of Marxism, the anarchist character of recent revolts, while statism and its critics are having all kinds of rematches.

I argue that what we need in the 21st century is a graveyard for orthodoxies. This means that we don’t contribute to the revitalization of the dead language of ideological purity. This does not mean that we cannot speak of anarchism or communism, or that there are no longer capitalists in the world. Such conclusions would be absurd. We do not live in a “post-capitalist” world, since most of the whole of human life is organized the logic of capital. What it means to insist on a graveyard for orthodoxies is that we must rethink old traditions and trajectories against their calcified and vilified forms, burying zombie ideologies for good. If we have learned anything from the failures and frustrations of 170 years of revolutionary theory and practice, it should be that ideological narrowness prevents an open approach to available resources, and is a dangerous dead end.

Communists like Anton Pannekoek, Sylvia Pankhurst, Herman Gorter, Raya Dunayevskaya, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Jacques Camatte have long been critical of what has been called “communism.” The very existence of a long history of anti-“communist” communists, along with a real reckoning with Marx’s own complex theory of the state, helps to expose the false pretenses of ideological orthodoxy. Today, there are influential theoretical movements operating under the name of “communization,” which, perhaps inadvertently, make anti-“communist” communism appear as if it were a new thing. But there is a long legacy of Marxism without statism, in which communism is theorized as beneath, against, and beyond the state. When I teach my course on Marxist philosophy, students are often surprised to learn that Marx was not an enthusiastic statist himself, that he wrote so much about the problems of state power, and so little about alternative forms of government. These facts are hard to see when we

only consult ideological narratives about Marx, instead of Marx directly. A few weeks into the semester, and students cannot easily maintain the ideological apparatus they brought with them.

And yet, too many Marxists continue to engage in apologetics for the socialist state as an idea and historical practice. {Michael Parenti, Jodi Dean, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou}. But this wave of apologetics for the socialist state and the communist party has not pooled together with recent waves of insurrection that appear to occur in different waters. Waves of global uprising since 2008 have created real moments of recognition and realization of the social energies of everyday people capable of throwing the existing world into question. A central problem for the theories of Dean, Žižek, and Badiou, is that the communist desire that has been expressed in recent insurrectionary activity is *not* calling for a communist party, has little faith in the state to solve the problems of everyday life, and makes no enduring connections to the communist projects of the previous century. It is one thing for theory to imagine itself in an advisory role for social movements, and another for theory to learn from them. I argue that theory always has more to learn from uprisings than it has to teach them.

And, ideology has also held many streams of anarchist thought hostage. There are still anarchist journals, magazines, and publishers that get squeamish around any serious consideration of Marxism, as if an affirmation of a single Marxist idea is tantamount to ideological betrayal. Since the life and times of Michael Bakunin, Marx's theory of the state has been caricatured as "authoritarian" by a great many anarchists who have not understood it. Yet at the same time, when one reads the anarchist literature contemporaneous with Marx and the Marxism of the early 20th century, certain things are undeniable. So many anarchists have made dependable use of Marx's analyses of capitalism, so much so that one could find them fully agreeable on *at least* three broad premises:

- (i) the impossibility of an acceptable capitalist world;
- (ii) the desirability and possibility of a different world organized on *other* principles or logics;
- (iii) the necessity of revolution, although many different and incompatible conceptions of revolution are at play throughout this history.

When one reads Errico Malatesta's beautiful little book, *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism*, the analysis of capital and class follows Marx right up to the question of revolution, at which point Malatesta distinguishes his position in a discussion of "free communism."¹ And while Bakunin had a famously tumultuous relationship with Marx, we cannot reduce that relationship to its oppositions alone. Bakunin joined the Geneva section of the First International, helped create new branches in Italy and Spain, and translated and circulated many of Marx's works, including the first Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. Anarchists have long been capable of critiquing Marx, while crediting him for the foundation on which so much of anarchism rests.²

Despite this, stubborn old allergies persist. Consider one prominent example: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have retained a strange insistence on distinguishing an ideological

¹ Malatesta, Errico, *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism* (Freedom Press, 2005), p. 65.

² See also "Bakunin's Reminiscence" of Marx in *The Portable Karl Marx* (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 26 and Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* (Dover, 2003).

divide that dissolves in their own work. It is important to highlight the problem here, in the case of Hardt and Negri, because they are now among the most iconic representatives of Marxism without statism—especially Negri, who has written two autonomist Marxist manifestos.³ Hardt and Negri declare that it is their time, as communists, to give voice to the cry “*Big government is over!*” They acknowledge the old socialistic aspiration to use government to redistribute wealth, and they confess: “*Today, however, those times are over.*” Hardt and Negri define the revolutionary aspiration of the multitude in terms of a quest for “*autonomous self-government.*”⁴ No anarchist would disagree with that aspiration. Hardt and Negri know this well, and immediately anticipate the accusation that they are anarchists. They make the following pre-emptive rebuttal:

*That is not true. We would be anarchists if we were not to speak from the standpoint of a materiality constituted in the networks of productive cooperation, in other words, from the perspective of a humanity that is constructed productively... No, we are not anarchists but communists who have seen how much repression and destruction of humanity have been wrought by liberal and socialist big governments.*⁵

What is “the standpoint of a materiality constituted in the networks of productive cooperation?” What is “the perspective of a humanity that is constructed productively?” Hardt and Negri mean that they are not anarchists because they accept the materialist premises of Marx’s political-economy. It is thus reasonable to assume that they have not read the rich history of anarchism in which those very premises are also accepted, often with a self-conscious debt to Marx. The perspective of a humanity constructed productively can be found throughout the history of anarchism, in the diverse writings of Lucy Parsons, Peter Kropotkin, Charlotte Wilson, and Rudolph Rocker, just to name some examples. There is nothing to take seriously in Hardt and Negri’s peculiar insistence that they “are not anarchists but communists who have seen the repression and destruction wrought by liberal and socialist big governments.” Anarchists have long been communists who have seen how much repression and destruction of humanity have been wrought by governments. Indeed, the anarchist prescience about such repression and destruction defined them in the 19th century, when their theory of power only looked like a fearful wager, and vindicated them in the 20th century, when it looked like a prophecy.

Why does this matter? Because ongoing ideological dichotomies continue to haunt and over-determine the development of new heterodox theories, which do not make use of the historical and political resources of other anti-capitalist tendencies. Thus, the purported heterodoxy of open Marxism is belied by the fact that it remains a too-narrow enclosure.

In the political context of anti-“communist” communism, or what I call “precarious communism,” we need a communism as the body without organs of the “communists,” that is, we need a new communist becoming, a becoming-ungovernable, as Félix Guattari might say. What is the empirical side of this? If we look at the major post-Cold War uprisings over the past twenty years, from 1994 to 2014, from the uprising of the Mexican Zapatistas to the recent insurrectionary activity in the MENA countries south of the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in Greece, Spain, Turkey, and Brazil, we see that actually-existing revolt has largely turned away

³ The two “manifestos” I am referring to are *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* (Polity Press, 2005) and, with Félix Guattari, *New Lines of Alliance, New Spaces of Liberty* (Autonomedia, 2010).

⁴ Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 349.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

from the question of administrative modes of problem-solving. The crucial questions are less about how to govern than about how *not* to be governed by capital. If we're honest, there is a lot of anarchist and communist content in all of this, and to keep the zombies down, we need to use everything we've got. Gramsci once wrote: "Everyone is a bit of a Marxist, without being aware of it." Can we not finally say that every good Marxist is more than a bit of an anarchist, and vice versa? And what about the importance of being aware of it? I close on those questions.