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Spring 1978

From libcom  
Published in Volume 2, Number 2 of *The Red Menace*, Spring 1978.

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# The End of Dialectical Materialism

An anarchist reply to the libertarian Marxists

P. Murtaugh

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Words I teach all mixed up in a devilish muddle,  
Thus, anyone may think just what he chooses to think;  
Never, at least, is he hemmed in by strict limitations.  
Bubbling out of the flood, plummeting down from the  
cliff,  
So are his beloved's words and thoughts that the poet  
devises;  
He understands what he thinks, freely invents what he  
feels.  
Thus, each may for himself suck wisdom's nourishing  
nectar;  
Now you know all, since I've said plenty of nothing to  
you!  
from 'On Hegel' by K. Marx

Libertarian Marxism is a rather recent development, as far as political theories and movements go. I suppose that a truly dedicated

historian could dig up the bones of various defunct political groups and individuals who held similar views during the last two hundred years. Even the ever invoked shade of Karl Marx is dredged up, and once again we are treated to the spectacle of 'what Marx really meant'. This time though with a difference; through a libertarian Marxism. A Marxism that essentially reduces down to anarchist politics tied to Marxist philosophy. Is this mixture viable? I would say no, and the following paragraphs are my reasons.

What is libertarian Marxism? From my conversations with those who subscribe to this set of ideas it seems to me that there are basically two sincere reasons why people become libertarian Marxists and one insincere one. The sincere ones first.

People often move from 'pure' Marxism to libertarian marxism because of the obvious sterility and brutality of standard Marxist-Leninist practice. The first reaction is disgust with what their fellow Marxists have made of socialism. It is only later that these people work through the theoretical justification for their particular brand of Marxism. The problem is that in moving from a Marxist position to one of anarchist politics they meet not an organized serious anarchist movement, with its own theoretical apparatus but a fragmented, disorganized collection of small groups and individuals. In this vacuum libertarian Marxism grows as an alternative to the emptiness and vagueness of present day anarchism in this part of the world.

Other people approach libertarian Marxism from another direction, through anarchism. These people become fed up with the state of the present day anarchist movement and opt for libertarian Marxism, in the hope that it will provide some sort of coherent theory and guide to practice. This tendency has always been present in the anarchist movement, and is most particularity evident in those times and places where the emotional 'gut-feeling' idea of anarchism holds strong sway (i.e. the idea that theory, tactics, a plan, organization, etc. are unimportant and only a strong hatred of oppression is needed for the overthrow of the system). In

I do not consider that everything that Marx said was wrong, and I do not consider that all libertarian Marxists are sinister conspirators. Yet I would ask the sincere libertarian Marxists to consider the results of what they advocate. The theoretical discipline that they acquired while they were Marxists is needed in the anarchist movement. Their energies would be better used in the building of a coherent anarchist and modern theory than in trying to drag the rotting corpse of Hegel into the movement. I also do not consider that all intellectuals are somehow 'evil' and ever ready to take over a movement for socialism. I feel that our movement must do its best to attract the sincere seekers after truth among the intellectuals. We must, however, never allow any particular priesthood of 'those who understand to come to dominate the movement. I feel that we must abandon systems of thought that encourage such priesthoods if we are to attract the type of intellectuals who will be of the most benefit to the anarchist movement.

people are convinced that anything they cannot understand must be really brilliant.

“... took a book of logarithms, photographed a page at random, shone it high upon the blackboard, with the overhead projector.

Thirty seven, forty seven, from the Ampex Corporation.

Gleaming in its chromium plating, from the Ampex Corporation.

And they thought that he was very clever,

For they could not understand his logarithms.”

— from Hiawatha’s *Lipid*

The content of ‘dialectical materialism’ consists of unproved and unprovable assertions, along with enough obvious truisms to give it the air of plausibility. An argument about its ‘correctness’ could likely go on forever without any successful conclusion. The point is not whether this or that particular assertion is correct or not. The point is what the result of accepting a theory of byzantine complexity (with equally byzantine disagreements as to what is ‘real’ dialectics as the usual result) is on the socialist movement that accepts this theory as the truth. I would submit that it encourages the penetration of a certain type of individual into the socialist movement — the type who will proceed to establish his control over the movement because of his presumed ‘intellectual brilliance’. I think that the history of all Marxist movements show that I am right. I would be interested to see if any Libertarian Marxists can answer this charge. That Marxism is bifocal, like other class ideologies (Marxism for the masses versus Marxism for the leaders) is a charge that is not simply a personal attack or ‘intellectual baiting’, but an important question that will have repercussions on the type of movement we are going to build.

these cases it is an inevitable reaction of anarchists to borrow their theory from the Marxists, in the hope of providing some sort of coherence. This particular borrowing has always disappeared when individual revolt turns to mass revolt and when anarchism ceases to be the resort of bohemians and becomes a mass movement. In such cases the anarchist movement has inevitably thrown up its own theoreticians — of equal calibre to those of the Marxists.

Now, we come to the clincher — the insincere reason why some people become ‘libertarian Marxists’, or any other flavour of Marxist for that matter. One of the things that Marxists fail to realize when they sit down to spin philosophy is that their insight that, in a class society, systems of thought also have a class character also applies to their own pet theory. For every theory of society is likely to be accepted by a particular class of people and not others, and every theory of society has certain objective effects if its acceptance becomes widespread. The effects of the widespread acceptance of Marxism are so obvious that only a blind man could fail to see them. Over fifty years of the bloodiest tyranny the world has ever seen gives ample proof of the nature of practical as opposed to theoretical Marxism.

Just as the theory of liberalism acted as a front for the rise of the capitalist class (and just as liberalism was not the only ideology suitable for this rise), so the theories of Marxism provide ample cover for the rise of a new ruling class. To serve such a purpose a class ideology must have certain characteristics. One, it must provide the oppressed class with a myth of the justice and rightness of the present set-up. Marxism’s cover of abstractions about the ‘proletarian dictatorship’ obviously serve this function. Second, it must provide the ruling class with an acceptable ‘moral’ justification for their actions. Class societies that are founded on nothing but naked power don’t tend to produce the type of rulers who have a good survival rate. Morale is an important factor in the survival of any society, especially morale amongst its leaders. Once again, the function of Marxist rationalizations in this area are too obvi-

ous to be mentioned. The final important characteristic that a class ideology must have is that it very possession must itself make a substantial difference in the very nature of the person possessing it. While 'libertarian' Marxists may be able to escape the first few charges, it is this aspect that betrays certain of them as what they really are. Perhaps I should try to make what I am saying a little clearer.

Most class ideologies are really not one but two ideologies. There is one ideology for the rulers and one for the ruled. To be brief and simplistic, under feudalism there is honour (and all the other ideological baggage of the lords) and salvation through meekness and obedience (and all the other Christian and patriarchal baggage). Under capitalism there is efficiency and justice. For the capitalist his system is best because it is efficient. The 'freedom' it provides supposedly ensures the optimum allocation of all possible resources. The process of becoming a businessman is also a long process of initiation into the correct knowledge i.e. the rules of a certain gamble. In his most unguarded moments the successful businessman will readily concede that the huge chance factor proves that 'justice' plays little role in allotting rewards in capitalism. The intelligent conservative position (what used to be called liberal) is precisely this — freedom produces efficiency. To the working class, however, the justification for capitalism is that it somehow embodies justice, that 'hard work is rewarded'. The strength of this conviction can be gauged by the fact that immense popular indignation can be whipped up against the unemployed or those on welfare, but anyone who tried to suggest that old age pensions should be cut would find himself on the quickest possible road to political oblivion.

Now, how does the possession of Marxist theory serve to divide people into rulers and ruled? A good idea can be gained by comparing the attitude of rank and file Marxists to 'what are the basic ideas of socialism' to the attitude of the leadership. To the average rank and file socialist socialism is about justice, equality, freedom, love — very simple and human ideas and ones capable of being expressed

in plain language. If the average socialist does know anything at all about 'dialectical materialism' it is usually only the vaguest most mechanical bit of theory learned from popularizing tracts that his leadership thinks is proper fare for the rank and file. The socialism of the rank and file socialist is instinctive and not overlaid by a massive weight of theory. Usually he or she cares little for all the oppressive volume of tracts and theorizing turned out by the leadership. Your average Maoist cares more for the fairy tales of how happy are the workers and peasants in the Peoples' Shitworks and Prefabricated Outhouse Man-ufacturing Plant in Shitsang Province than he does for all the attempts of Maoist professors to prove the intellectual brilliance of Mao's thought.

Now, dialectical materialism is a very subtle and complicated system of abstractions and a method of mental calculus for manipulating the events of the world. Its successful practice usually requires the ability to quote obscure biblical texts at the drop of a polemic. Its use also requires the attainment of the mental habit of refusing to ask simple questions in ordinary English (or whatever language you speak). This sort of knowledge and habit is not picked up in a day. It usually requires a period of years of study — which means the leisure or infinite determination to make leisure to study. Whether the doubtful usefulness of dialectical materialism in solving practical problems is ever shown to be real or not (it certainly does provide all sorts of convenient methods of confusing issues, so it may be 'practical' after all, in a twisted sort of way) the fact is that its addition to the ideological baggage of the socialist movement has certainly made the self definition of various people, usually intellectuals, as 'revolutionary leaders' immensely easier. The immediate response of most non-intellectuals to a barrage of senseless words is "gee whiz are you ever wonderful Mr. Professor". The natural respect that people show for knowledge is easily taken advantage of by various charlatans who know well how to give the appearance of knowledge. Some, perhaps a majority, of