

The Platypus Questions on Marxism & Anarchism

Panel 3/17 in Chi, with responses to prepared questions

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The Platypus Society is having a panel on “Marxism and Anarchism,” 3/17, in Chicago. It prepared a list of questions on the topic. These are my responses to the questions, in preparation for the discussion.

Announcement of Event

The Platypus Society is having a panel discussion in Chicago on “Radical Ideology Today: Marxism and Anarchism.” It will be at 7 pm on the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC), room TBA, March 17, 2014, a Monday. This is part of a number of discussions on this topic which they are sponsoring in several cities (including NYC). At this point in time, I was told, they have invited Peter Hudis, of the Marxist-Humanist Institute, someone from the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party, a local anarchist (TBA), and...me. (I won’t be “representing” anyone, let alone “the anarchists,” just expressing my own views.)

To prepare for the discussion, the Platypusites have prepared a 3 paragraph statement (“Panel Description”) and a list of 6 questions. (<http://platypus1917.org/2013/11/15/upcoming-internationalism/>) Since each panelist gets only 12 minutes to speak (to provide time for dialogue and audience comments), they cannot expect us to cover all of this. Therefore I am now writing out my responses. (This is NOT what I will be saying in my 12 minutes; it is what I might say if I had an hour.)

The Statement about Marxism and Anarchism

The statement begins by declaring, “It seems that there are still only two radical ideologies: Anarchism and Marxism.... They are the revolutionary heritage...” It asks what we make of this today. While radical feminism, Black consciousness/ nationalism, and eco-socialism may also be called “radical ideologies,” it seems fair to say that anarchism and Marxism are the two main, historic, systems-of-ideas for total social change. They propose abolition of the state, capitalism, and all other forms of oppression.

The statement presents an odd conception of anarchism, referring to “...an anarchist practice—understood as an anti-hierarchical principle that insists [!] revolution must begin now...[but] Marxism rejects anti-statist adventurism...” No doubt there are adventurist anarchists (and Marxists!) who believe that a revolution could be sparked at any moment. But while I would be happy to see a revolution begin immediately, like most anarchists I am aware that the US is not in a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary period—yet. Anarchists participate in mass movements which fight for short-range reforms (higher wages, union recognition, keeping abortion legal, an end to current US wars, GLBT rights, etc.). But they should guide their current actions by the long-range goal of a socialist-anarchist revolution. And they should be aware that the ruling class is most likely to grant reforms when it feels threatened by revolutionary opposition.

The Platypus Questions

1. What do Marxism and Anarchism have to say to those politicized today?

Ans.: I do not accept Marxism as a total world view, but think that it has valuable concepts and insights which are useful for revolutionary anarchists. In particular, Marxism (the Marxism

of Marx and Engels) has the best analysis of how capitalism works; there is nothing comparable in anarchist theory. But anarchism has a far better vision of what a post-capitalist society should look like—the goal. Anarchists reject the Marxist program of either taking over the existing state or building a new state, and nationalizing and centralizing the economy. This is the route to state capitalism, not to a stateless, classless, society.

2. In general, what forms of organization are necessitated by the theories we inherit and the tasks of today?

I am a supporter of the “dual-organizationalist” tradition in anarchism. It is sometimes called “neo-platformism” or (in Latin America) “especificismo.” It advocates the formation of a specifically revolutionary anarchist organization in the form of democratic federalism. This would participate in broader popular organizations (unions, community groups, united fronts of radical groups, etc.). This is not a “party” because it does not aim to take power for itself. It does not intend to either get elected to office or to seize state power. The anarchist organization promotes mass self-activity, militancy, participation, and self-organization, to prefigure a self-managed society.

3. Can you briefly assess the most important splits and breaks between and within both traditions? Does the historical divide between Marxism and Anarchism still matter?

Within anarchism there are those (going back to Bakunin) who advocate eventual revolution: the smashing of the state and the capitalist class, and then their replacement with an association of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies and popular militias. This requires building mass movements of popular opposition. This is revolutionary, class-struggle, anarchist-communism. But others, perhaps a majority, of anarchists today advocate building alternate institutions and lifestyles (coops, bike clubs, gardens, etc.). In this view (going back to Proudhon), these would spread until they can, mostly peacefully, take over and replace capitalism and the state. These views are not necessarily sharply differentiated. The first viewpoint does not oppose the formation of coops and community organizations, but sees them as, at best, a part of an overall revolutionary program. But, by itself, the alternate-institution idea is not a workable strategy.

Within Marxism, there has long been a (small, minority) trend which is based on the libertarian, democratic, humanistic, and proletarian side of Marxism. It rejected the authoritarian, statist, and scientific side. From William Morris to today’s “left communists,” these tendencies have raised a revolutionary politics close to anarchism, while using Marx’s critique of political economy. I think that anarchists can find this trend sympathetic. But this does not mean that anarchists can simply become uncritical Marxists. The authoritarian side of Marxism is also real and has resulted in terrible suffering for working people.

Anarchists and Marxists can work together. This is because they share a set of negative politics: they are both against capitalism and the capitalist ruling class, the existing state, patriarchy, white supremacy, ecological catastrophe, etc. Differences are about positive politics, what they are for: whether to be for a new, bureaucratic-military, state or for a non-state federation of councils and associations. Some Marxists are very far from anarchist goals, being openly totalitarian. Others claim to be quite close to libertarian socialism. (But many of the most anti-authoritarian Marxists are often supporters of Lenin’s one-party police state, and presumably would do something comparable if “objective factors” similarly pressured them.)

4. What are the inalienable values and the end goals of radical politics? Are Marxism and Anarchism ideologies of freedom? Of democracy? Of the working class?

Anarchism is the most extreme version of radical, participatory, democracy. While not opposed to all necessary delegation and representation, it wants a society rooted in self-managed

communities and workplaces of day-to-day direct, face-to-face, democracy. Democracy and freedom are its “values and end goals.” As contrasted with Marxism. While Marx was deeply motivated by moral values, his theory did not include them. It relied on the “historical process.” Nowhere did Marx write that socialism was “good,” or that people “should” be for socialism. This lack of clarity about moral goals led to most revolutionary Marxists accepting the monstrosities of Stalinist Russia and Maoist China as “really existing socialism.”

Marxism and class-struggle anarchism overlap in that both look to the working class, allied with other oppressed groupings, as the agent of change. Strategically, the workers have the ability to immediately stop society and to start it up on another basis. The US working class is perhaps the most conservative working class in the world. But the workers are the majority of the US population; without the workers, there will be no revolution. No one is more likely to revolt against the felt evils of the capitalist workplace than workers—certainly not managers, police officers, or shopkeepers. And the working class overlaps with every other oppressed group: women, People of Color, GLBT people, prisoners, and people who suffer from climate change.

5. What should we fight for today — more state or less state?

What we should want is not more or less state, but NO state, as part of a classless, stateless, nonoppressive, society. Put another way, what we should fight for is not so much “less state” but less oppression, domination, and exploitation! Anarchists are not merely against the state, but against all oppression, of which the state is the keystone. (There is no such thing as “anarcho-capitalism.”) Just as workers make demands on a corporation’s management (e.g., for higher wages), I think they can make demands on the overall management of capitalist society, the state (e.g., for living wage laws). But just as workers should not join a corporate board of directors (as some have done, here and in Europe), so they should not seek to join the state through a supposed “workers’ party” or “improved” Democratic Party.

6. Has history vindicated Marxism or Anarchism or neither at all?

In terms of theory, Marxism has been definitely “vindicated” as a critique of political economy. The continuation of the business cycle, including periodic crashes, the long-term stagnation of the epoch of capitalist decline, the growth of semi-monopoly capitalism and imperialism, the continuation of class conflict, and the ecological crises—all were present in Marx’s economic theory.

Anarchism has also been theoretically “vindicated” in the failures of both reformist and revolutionary state socialist strategies. The anarchist opposition to electoralism (the “parliamentary road to socialism”) has been repeatedly justified in practice. Anarchism further predicted that the Marxist program of a “workers’ state” with nationalization would lead to state capitalism, with a new, bureaucratic, ruling class. Unfortunately, this has also been demonstrated for an extended period.

But in a key way, both anarchism and Marxism have been failures. Neither alone nor together have they led to successful socialist working class revolutions in the industrialized countries or elsewhere.

Marxism has especially failed. The first wave of world Marxism led to reformist social democracy, which revealed itself to be pro-imperialist, statist, and counterrevolutionary. The next wave, of Leninism, led to the authoritarian, mass murdering, inefficient, state capitalist regimes—which have now collapsed back into traditional capitalism. As Engels liked to say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Marxists have to explain why and how their theory repeatedly produced such terrible results.

This does not mean that authentic socialist revolutions will not succeed in the future. I advise combining the anarchist vision and values with the Marxist economic analysis to reach that goal. History is not over.

Further Reading

a) Peter Hudis, the Marxist-Humanist, has recently published a book on the post-capitalist vision of Marx. My review can be found at:

The Alternative to Capitalism? A Review of Peter Hudis, "Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism"

<http://anarkismo.net/article/26446>

b) The Chairman of the Maoist RCP, Bob Avakian, has written a criticism of anarchism. My response can be found at:

A Maoist Attack on Anarchism: An Anarchist Response to Bob Avakian, "MLM vs. Anarchism"

http://anarkismo.net/article/5847?search_text=Wayne+Price

c) For further discussion of the relation between anarchism and Marxism, see

The Marxist Paradox: An Anarchist Critique

Review of Ronald D. Tabor, The Tyranny of Theory: A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism.

http://anarkismo.net/article/26583?search_text=Wayne+Price

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