

Anarchism and Socialism

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WAYNE PRICE'S *THE ABOLITION OF THE STATE* is a well considered, well researched, and well written book. I shall try to summarize his major points in the first several chapters. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 deal with the failure of revolutions in Russia and Spain and the success of the counter-revolution in Germany, and I shall discuss them as well.

- Both anarchists and Marxists believe in a revolution from below by the working class.
- Both see the state as a “committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (*Communist Manifesto*).
- Marxists would replace the existing state with a new state that would wither away when the class struggle ceases. (Price questions this, given his view of Lenin and Trotsky as incorrigible centralizers.)
- Anarchists, on the contrary, “plan to go immediately into a stateless society” (p.5).
- Homo Sapiens began about 50 thousand years ago, but states did not start until about 5 thousand years ago. Hence, state is not “required by human nature.” • Reformism — whether Fabian or Scandinavian — cannot work because even if social democrats get elected and control the government, “they do not control the economy . . . [and] have to manage a capitalist economy” (p. 25).
- Cooperatives and other alternate institutions are fine, but they are no strategy for overthrowing capitalism.
- Decentralism: Small closely knit communities should be the goal. (According to Ralph Borsodi, 2/3 of the national product could be made more cheaply on homesteads; only 1/3 is more effectively made by mass production.)
- Price acknowledges Marx and Engels’ insistence on worker democracy, but faults them for not rooting it locally in worker institutions and communities.
- Price believes in a federation of cooperative communities and of worker-controlled industries — a federalized pluralistic system (pp. 81,97).
- Anarchists and socialists, generally speaking, agree on the beginning and ending of the struggle for a classless society. Both begin with a *sine qua non* — a bottom-up workers’ revolution (although some anarchists believe this must be a spontaneous movement, and some socialists believe in the leadership of a workers’ party). The ending for both is a withering away of the state and the end of exploitation in a classless society.

With his customary acuity, Engels put his finger on the fundamental difference between anarchists and Marxists:

Bakunin maintains that it is the *state* which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital *only by the grace of the state*. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself. We, on the contrary, say: Do away with capital, the concentration of all means of production in the hands of the few, and the state will fall of itself. The difference is an essential one: Without a previous social revolution the abolition of the state is nonsense; the abolition of capital is precisely the social revolution and involves a change in the whole mode of production. Now then, inasmuch as to Bakunin the state is the main evil, nothing must be done which can maintain the existence of the state, that is, of any state, whether it be a republic, a monarchy, or anything else. Hence, *complete abstention from all politics*. To commit a political act, and especially to take part in an election, would be

a betrayal of principle (Letter to Theodor Cuno, 1-24-1872, italics, Engels').

THE QUESTION, THEN, IS Does the state flow out of class struggle, or does class struggle flow out of the state? As indicated, Price accepts Engels' formulation of the state as a committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, he is unequivocal about the anarchist plan to go immediately into a stateless society. In my view, as long as class contradictions persist, so does the need for state. Socialism does not emerge *in vacuo*; it is birthed from the womb of capitalism. However, Price is not naïve. He realizes that people will not be perfect after a libertarian revolution:

What if [a rogue community] declares itself open only to white people, or it teaches creationism in its schools, or it dumps pollution into the river on which other communities are located? . . . What would a non-statist society do (p.78)?

He imagines a regional conference at which several proposals are brought forward:

1) Leave the rogue community alone, let them stew in their own juice; 2) Organize a regional militia to march on the offending community; 3) Wage a propaganda campaign, organize an economic boycott, demonstrate non-violently.

Clearly #1 is unacceptable. Of course, there is an enormous difference between the functioning of a bourgeois and a putative libertarian society, but let us take a quick glance at some use of state force in past American history, some rare exceptions to the usual use of state force to crush workers. In 1957, despite a unanimous decision by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Brown v. Board of Education*), Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, supported by mobs, could be countered only by federal paratroopers. Again, in 1963, only federal marshals could insure the admission of black students to the U. of Alabama. And, for that matter, none of the three proposals put forward by Price's imagined conference would end the Confederacy in 1861. That was then, now is different, some would say. But the Rush Limbaughs, Sean Hannitys, Ann Coulters, Glen Becks, et. al. will not go away, and their mobs are even now arming themselves in great numbers. Leon Trotsky sums up what he saw as the anarchist fallacy as follows:

Like every sect which founds its teaching not upon the actual development of human society, but upon the reduction to absurdity of one of its features, anarchism explodes like a soap bubble at that moment when the social contradictions arrive at the point of war or revolution.¹

As for the United States, that moment came on April 12, 1861 with the opening shots of the battle of Fort Sumter. IN A SOCIALIST REVOLUTION, would the state wither away if it is not abolished outright? Here is where Price makes an important factual error, despite his otherwise well researched book: he claims that Lenin said, in his most libertarian work *State and Revolution*, "the state might exist indefinitely" (p.50). Nowhere in this work does Lenin say this. Again and again Lenin stresses the withering away of the state. "The more democratic the 'state . . . no longer a state in the proper sense of the word,' the more rapidly does every state begin to wither away"(emphasis his)². Then why did it show no signs of withering away after the Bolshevik Revolution? Was the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into a totalitarian regime due to the Bolsheviks' scorn of decentralization, to their lust for centralized power? First, unlike some (including both Richard Pipes

on the right and Noam Chomsky on the left, who maintain that the October revolution was a Bolshevik coup d'état), Price clearly believes that the Russian Revolution was a genuine workers' revolution from below. Whatever the Bolsheviks did, whatever mistakes they made, was in their view a defense of a bottom-up workers' revolution. This is in sharp contradistinction to, say, the top-down Cuban Revolution. Regis Debray, a close ally of Castro in the early days, wrote in *Revolution in the Revolution*:

The next point is: No political front which is basically a deliberative body can assume leadership of a people's war; only a technically capable executive group, centralized and united on the basis of identical class interests, can do so; in brief, only a revolutionary general staff. (tr., Bobby Ortiz, *Monthly Review*, July-Aug., 1967), 86.

For Castro (and Debray) "the duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution"; for Marx, the revolutionary was the spark (in Russian, *iskra*) — only the workers can make the revolution. It is folly to think that an elite group would cede its power — once won — to the people. And in Cuba, China, and Vietnam, it hasn't. Like Debs, Lenin followed the Marxist dictum of a bottom-up revolution, the opposite of what Debray postulates. After warning that 3 conditions are necessary for a successful revolution (the government must be collapsing; the vanguard — for Lenin, the workers and the soldiers — must be in motion; and the vast majority of people must support the revolutionary party), Lenin concludes:

We could not have retained power July 16-17 politically, for, *before the Kornilov affair*,* the army and the provinces could and would have marched against Petrograd. Now (Oct.) the picture is entirely different. We have back of us the majority of a *class* that is the vanguard We have back of us a *majority* of the people . . . (emphasis his)³.

And perhaps the most remarkable passage in *State and Revolution* is the one in which Lenin envisions a post-revolutionary world of democracy and equality:

The workers, having conquered political power, will break up the old bureaucratic foundations, until not one stone is left upon another; and they will replace it with a new one consisting of these same workers and employees, against whose transformation into bureaucrats measures will at once be undertaken, as pointed out in detail by Marx and Engels: (1) *not only electiveness, but also instant recall*; (2) *payment no higher than that of ordinary workers*; (3) immediate transition to a state of things when *all* fulfill the functions of control and superintendence, so that *all* become "bureaucrats" for a time, and no *one*, therefore, can become a "bureaucrat." (Last 3 words stressed are Lenin's emphases; rest are mine.)⁴

How differently things turned out! PRICE IS AWARE of Lenin and Trotsky's insistence that "the revolution would succeed only if it spread to Western Europe" (127). He concludes:

Under the failure of the revolution to spread, foreign invasions and civil wars, and the extreme poverty of the country, such concepts overwhelmed the libertarian aspects of Lenin's vision and produced a totalitarian nightmare (p. 58).

Given these factors, who can say with any certainty that the degeneration of the Bolshevik Revolution owed primarily — some would say solely — to the Lenin-Trotsky drive toward centralization? In my view, that would be ahistorical, denying the civil war, the backwardness of the people, the lack of industry, the post-WWI exhaustion of both the troops and the people, the famine, the foreign invasion on several fronts, and the failure of the revolution in Western Europe. To quote Lenin on centralization without mentioning that he wrote many of those passages in the midst of a civil war and a struggle against foreign invasion, as many do, seems to me disingenuous. Price faults the Bolsheviks for four major actions: During the Civil War, (1) the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany and (2) suppression of the anarchist Makhno guerrillas; and After the Civil War (3) Bolshevik authoritarianism and (4) the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising. In March, 1918, there was a vigorous debate within the Bolshevik Party. Three positions were argued: Lenin for peace; the anarchists for a revolutionary war (the position supported by Price); and Trotsky for “no war, no peace.” Both the latter two positions staked everything on troops of the Central Powers responding to appeals of the Russian soldiers and revolting. We must keep in mind that World War I left 7 million Russians dead, wounded, or imprisoned and that those troops still active were exhausted, typhus-ridden, and malnourished. Remember, also, that a key slogan of the Bolsheviks in their rise to power was “Peace, Land, and Bread.” Had they not sued for peace, they would have continued a hopeless war, Lenin maintained, and they would have reneged on their pledge. The two positions for waging a revolutionary war seemed risky. A majority sided with Lenin; and Trotsky — perhaps reluctantly — signed the peace accord with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk. As for the struggle with the Makhnoites, here is what the historian W. H. Chamberlain has written:

Typical excerpts from the diary of Makhno’s wife are: “Feb. 23, 1920 — Our men seized Bolshevik agents, who were shot. “Feb. 25, 1920 — Moved over to Maiorovo. Caught three agents for the collection of grain there. Shot them” Further details of Makhno’s harassing guerrilla activity are to be found in the reports of the Soviet Ukrainian Front for the same year, 1920: “June 8 — At the station Vasilekka Makhno blew up the railroad bridge . . . shot 14 captured officials of Soviet and robbed the food warehouse of the railroad workers. . . . Aug. 16 — Having seized Mirgorod for a day-and-a-half, Makhno’s followers robbed all the warehouses of the county food committee, destroyed the buildings of Soviet and workers’ organizations, smashed 15 telegraph machines, killed 21 workers and Red soldiers.” In these dry reports there is a decided hint of a fierce hatred of Makhno’s partisans for everything connected with the city: railroads, telegraph lines, everything connected with the city/town an advantage over the village⁵.

I do not quote this at length to stress the brutality: the Ukraine was a sea of blood and betrayal (e.g. Makhno’s aide Karetnik murdered the renegade Grigoriev and his envoys at a parley). What happened in the Ukraine — on *all* sides (Whites, Reds, Petlurists, Austrians, Makhnoites) — was frightful. (Price mentions only Red transgressions. This is tendentious.) I quote this at length because I think Price sometimes belittles the importance of the social forces involved : the conflict between urban workers and peasants. He calls this “a dogmatic theory of class conflict” (p.123). The workers of Petrograd were hungry, even starving, and the Red Army also desperately needed food. (Price claims that the Bolsheviks could have chosen a more reasonable policy to get grain. Possibly, but starvation is not the optimal condition for reasonableness. Tendentiousness again: the Makhnoites and their peasants also could have been reasonable.) BUT AFTER THE CIVIL WAR . . . *External* political opposition — Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries — had been banned during the later part of the Civil War. Now, in the tenth Party Congress, *internal* opposition (e.g. Workers’ Opposition) within the Party was banned,⁶ even while General Tukhachevsky’s troops were crushing the Kronstadt rising. The insurgents at Kronstadt had demanded an end to the dictatorship of the

Bolshevik Party and the restitution of government by Soviets, which had been promised — and demanded — by Bolsheviks during their rise to power. March, 1921 was a crucial moment in the history of Bolshevism. Lenin referred to the Kronstadt uprising as “the flash which lit up really better than anything else.”) For Trotsky, it was a “tragic necessity.” I agree that it was tragic, but not that it was a necessity. True, power to the Soviets at that time would have removed the Bolsheviks from power, but their holding on to it at all costs proved, as we now know, disastrous. This may seem a contradiction to what I just wrote about actions regarding the Brest-Litovsk treaty and the treatment of the Makhnoites, but we should bear in mind that the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising and the tenth Congress’ ban on internal party dissension both took place not during WWI or the Civil War, but after them (although — it should be mentioned — foreign troops, including those of the United States, were still on Russian soil). A troubling question: Should criteria for holding onto power differ from the criteria for seizing power? (See Lenin’s criteria for latter above.) As Nietzsche wrote, “Whoever battles with monsters had better see to it that [the battle] does not turn him into a monster.” As I have said, Lenin and Trotsky believed that their revolution could be saved only by a workers’ revolution in Europe. (Marx believed that the revolution would begin in Germany, deepen in France, and end in England.) But the Spartacist revolution in Germany in 1919 failed, and the terrible inflation and depression of the 1920s helped Hitler in his rise to power. Here Price sides with Trotsky who faults the German Communists for not forming a common front with the Social Democrats — bad as they were — to fight against the Nazis, who, of course, were much, much worse. IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, Buenaventura Durruti, the great Anarchist leader, whose forces in the Aragon made the only Republican advance during the war, cited the need for a centralized national defense council. This has been denounced by some anarchist historians as a move toward authoritarian socialism; but Price rightly defends Durruti. *Pace* those anarchists, the key question is not whether to have decentralized militias or a centralized council: the real issue is how truly democratic would those bodies be? In Trotsky’s original plan for the Red Army, there would be no insignia or ranks, and each unit would be run by an elected committee, one of whose jobs would be to choose officers. Military discipline would be recognized only in active combat, and even their unit commanders would have had to operate without the sanction of the death penalty. (See Geoffrey Hosking’s *History of the Soviet Union*.) Unfortunately, this plan was scrapped in face of the German advance, but, again, we must remember that the troops at the time were backward — they were mostly poor peasants — and I have already pointed out how exhausted and demoralized they were. I can only say that in my outfit in Italy, the 88th Infantry Division, Trotsky’s democratic, egalitarian plan might have worked. Surely, it would have had a better chance of working. As in a factory, those on the line know more about operations than their higher-ups. (See Bill Mauldin’s cartoons about the combat sagacity of ordinary GIs compared to that of the brass.) As Engels pointed out, anarchists abstain from political power. Yet in the Spanish Civil War, a contradiction arose. In 1936, the anarchists, through their dominance of the trade union (National Confederation of Labor, CNT) and their political association (Federation of Iberian Anarchists, FAI), controlled Barcelona and the surrounding region. Luis Companys, president of the Catalan Generalitat, “offered to resign in [the anarchists’] favor if they wanted but proposed instead that they work together” (141). The anarchist labor leaders joined the bourgeois government as ministers (the anarchist Garcia Oliver becoming Minister of Justice!), the same government that — strengthened by Russian arms deliveries — later repressed the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) and eventually the anarchists themselves. Price is right, in my view, to support Durruti’s group in strongly criticizing the anarchist leaders for their failure to take power and for their subsequent collaborationism. I AGREE WITH PRICE that “[T]here is a libertarian interpretation of Marx which is fairly close to the real views of many anarchists” (42). Despite his false attribution to Lenin in *State and Revolution* that “the state might exist indefinitely,” Price has given us much to chew on. I do have a few cavils:

- He describes Paul Goodman and Noam Chomsky as reformists (174). As a friend of the late

Goodman, I can almost hear him howling from Beyond. And I am sure Chomsky, too, would object to this characterization of him. Reformists believe that society can be fixed by tinkering, while Goodman and, I think, Chomsky believe in the necessity for a social revolution.

- Without offering any proof, he describes Amadeo Bordiga as an authoritarian sectarian — his policy “was a precursor of Third-Period Stalinism” (149).
- Although he is quite familiar with the works of Hal Draper and others in the Workers Party/Independent Socialist League, he concludes that “Trotskyists became variants of social democrats or Stalinists or both” (159). Not all!
- In my opening summary, I mentioned Price’s reliance on Ralph Borsodi’s claim that “[A] third of the national product was more effectively made centrally, by mass production, but two-thirds was cheaper to make on homesteads” (89) This claim needs development, in my view.
- Price has a thoughtful discussion of Errico Malatesta and the question of majority/minority rights in a democracy. It would have been helpful to look at the experiences of the Students for a Democratic Society.
- In his discussion of “emotionally cold antisocial people” (Ch. 5), he could have been helped by Wilhelm Reich’s *Character Analysis* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, where Reich tries to show the connection between economic exploitation and sexual repression.
- Chapter 11, “The Fight Against Naziism in Germany” would have been strengthened by a look at Ruth Fischer’s *Stalin and German Communism*. (Fischer was a co-leader, with Arkadi Maslow, of the ultra-left Maslow-Fischer group within the German Communist Party.)
- He situates the anarchist Karl Hess as neutral between capitalism and a cooperative, production-for-use economy. But Hess was a major speech writer for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential election.

BUT THESE ARE QUIBBLES. I think Marxists and Anarchists can learn from each other and, in fact, need each other.