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Why You Can't Use the State to Abolish Class

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Emma Goldman knew it. Mikhail Bakunin warned everyone about it half a century before the Russian Revolution. Veterans of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army Ashanti Alston and Kuwasi Balagoon drew the same conclusion. There's no such thing as revolutionary government. You can't use the instruments of government to abolish oppression.

Since the mid-19th century, anarchists have maintained that the key to liberation is not to seize the state but to abolish it. Yet from Paris to St. Petersburg, from Barcelona to Beijing, one generation of revolutionaries after another has had to learn this lesson the hard way. Shuffling politicians in and out of power changes little. What matters are the instruments of *rule*—the police, the military, the courts, the prison system, the bureaucracy. Whether it is a king, a dictator, or a Congress that directs these instruments, the experience on the receiving end remains roughly the same.

This explains why the outcome of the Egyptian revolution of 2011–2013 resembles the outcome of the Russian Revolution of 1917–1921, which resembles the outcome of the French Revolution of 1848–1851. In each case, as soon as the people who made the revolution stopped attempting to carry out social change directly and shifted to investing their hopes in political representatives, power consolidated in the hands of a new autocracy. Whether the new tyrants hailed from the military, the aristocracy, or the working class, whether they promised to *restore order* or to personify the power of the proletariat, the end result was roughly the same.

Government itself is a class relation. You can't abolish class society without abolishing the asymmetry between *ruler* and *ruled*. Economics is only one of many spheres in which codified power differentials are imposed by means of social constructs; politics is another. Private ownership of capital is to economics what state power is to politics.

Marx and Lenin created tremendous confusion by promising that the state could be used to *abolish* class society, after which

As the crises of our era intensify, new revolutionary struggles are bound to break out. Anarchism is the only proposition for revolutionary change that has not sullied itself in a sea of blood. It's up to us to update it for the new millennium, lest we all be condemned to repeat the past.

Either the State for ever, crushing individual and local life, taking over in all fields of human activity, bringing with it its wars and its domestic struggles for power, its palace revolutions which only replace one tyrant by another, and inevitably at the end of this development there is... death!

Or the destruction of States, and new life starting again in thousands of centers on the principle of the lively initiative of the individual and groups and that of free agreement.

The choice lies with you!

—Peter Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role*

bear fruit. Anarchists, Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, and others learned the hard way after 1917 that failing to prepare for victory can be even more disastrous than failing to prepare for defeat.

The good news is that revolutionary movements don't have to end the way the Russian Revolution did. There is another way.

Rather than seeking state power, we can open up spaces of autonomy, stripping legitimacy from the state and developing the capacity to meet our needs directly. Instead of dictatorships and armies, we can build worldwide rhizomatic networks to defend each other against anyone who wants to wield power over us. Rather than looking to new representatives to solve our problems, we can create grassroots associations based in voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. In place of state-managed economies, we can establish new commons on a horizontal basis. This is the anarchist alternative, which could have succeeded in Spain in the 1930s had it not been stomped out by Franco on one side and Stalin on the other. From Chiapas and Kabylia to Athens and Rojava, all of the inspiring movements and uprisings of the past three decades have incorporated elements of the anarchist model.

Proponents of state solutions claim they are more efficient, but the question is—what are they more efficient at? There are no shortcuts to liberation; it cannot be imposed from above. If we aim to create genuine equality, we have to organize in a way that reflects this, decentralizing power and rejecting all forms of hierarchy. Building local projects capable of addressing immediate needs through direct action and solidarity, interconnecting them on a global scale, we can take steps down the road toward a world in which no one can *rule* anyone else. The kind of revolution we want cannot happen overnight; it is the ongoing process of destroying all concentrations of power, from the domestic sphere to the White House.

the state would somehow vanish. In other words, “the workers”—which is to say, a party declaring itself to represent them, the same as any other ruling party does—could retain the police, the military, the courts, the prison system, the bureaucracy, and all the other instruments of the state, but these would magically begin to produce equality rather than inequality. This begs the question: what is the state? Above all, it is the concentration of political legitimacy in specific institutions, in contrast to the people they rule over. This is the very definition of inequality, as it privileges those who hold power via these institutions over everyone else. While Marxists and Leninists have successfully seized power in dozens of revolutions, not one of these has succeeded in abolishing class society—and rather than vanishing, the state has only become more powerful and invasive as a result. As the Sonvilier Circular put it, “How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization?”

When revolutionaries attempt to undo the class inequalities created by private ownership of capital by giving complete control of capital to the state, this simply makes the class that holds political power into the new capitalist class. The word for this is state capitalism. Wherever you see political representation and bureaucratic management, you will find class society. The only *real* solution to economic and political inequality is to abolish the mechanisms that create power differentials in the first place—not by using state structures, but by organizing horizontal networks for self-determination and collective defense that make it impossible to enforce the privileges of any economic or political elite. This is the opposite of seizing power.

Government of every kind stands opposed to this project. The first condition for any government to hold power is that it must achieve a monopoly on coercive force. In struggling to achieve this monopoly, fascist despotisms, communist dictatorships, and liberal democracies come to resemble each other. And in order to achieve it, even the most ostensibly radical party usually ends up

colluding with other power players. This explains why the Bolsheviks employed tsarist officers and counterinsurgency methods; it explains why they repeatedly took the side of the petite bourgeoisie against anarchists, first in Russia and later in Spain and elsewhere. History gives the lie to the old alibi that Bolshevik repression was necessary to abolish capitalism. The problem with Bolshevism was not that it used brutal force to push through a revolutionary agenda, but that it used brutal force to crush it.

It's not particularly popular to acknowledge any of this today, when the flag of the Soviet Union has become a dim, receding screen onto which people can project whatever they wish. A generation that grew up after the fall of the Soviet Union has renewed the pipe dream that the state could solve all our problems if the right people were in charge. Apologists for Lenin and Stalin make exactly the same excuses for them that we hear from the proponents of capitalism, pointing to the ways consumers benefitted under their reign or arguing that the millions they exploited, imprisoned, and killed had it coming.

In any case, a return to 20th-century state socialism is impossible. As the old Eastern Bloc joke goes, socialism is the painful transition between capitalism and capitalism. From this vantage point, we can see that the temporary ascendancy of socialism in the 20th century was not the culmination of world history foretold by Marx, but a stage in the spread and development of capitalism. "Real existing socialism" served to industrialize post-feudal economies for the world market; it stabilized restless workforces through this transition the same way that the Fordist compromise did in the West. State socialism and Fordism were both expressions of a temporary truce between labor and capital that neoliberal globalization has rendered impossible.

Today, unfettered free-market capitalism is about to swallow up the last islands of social-democratic stability, including even Sweden and France. Wherever left parties have come to power on the promise of reforming capitalism, they have ultimately been com-

pelled to implement a neoliberal agenda including austerity measures and repression. Consequently, their ascension to power has drained grassroots movements of momentum while enabling right-wing reactionaries to pose as rebels in order to tap into popular unrest. This story has recurred in Brazil with the Workers Party, in Greece with Syriza, in Nicaragua with the Ortega administration.

The only other model for "revolutionary" government is the barefaced state capitalism represented by China, in which elites are amassing wealth at the expense of laborers just as shamelessly as they do in the United States. Like the USSR before it, China confirms that state administration of the economy is not a step towards egalitarianism.

The future may hold neoliberal immiseration, nationalist enclaves, totalitarian command economies, or the anarchist abolition of property itself—it will probably include all of those—but it will be increasingly difficult to preserve the illusion that any *government* could solve the problems of capitalism for any but a privileged few. Fascists and other nationalists are eager to capitalize on this disillusionment to promote their own brands of exclusionary socialism; we should not smooth the way for them by legitimizing the idea that the state could serve working people if only it were properly *administered*.

Some have argued that we should suspend conflicts with proponents of authoritarian communism in order to focus on more immediate threats, such as fascism. Yet widespread fear of left totalitarianism has given fascist recruiters their chief talking points. In the contest for the hearts and minds of those who have not yet chosen a side, it could only help to distinguish our proposals for social change from the ones advanced by Stalinists and other authoritarians.

Within popular struggles against capitalism, state violence, and fascism, we should grant equal weight to the contest between different visions of the future. Not doing so means assuming in advance that we will be defeated before any of these visions can