SMASHING THE ORDERLY PARTY

AN ANARCHISTS' CRITIQUE OF LENINISM
NEED SOME CONTEXT?
HERE’S AN INTRODUCTION:

I would like to write down some thoughts regarding Leninism as a historical and theoretical position. I am writing to those who are willing to listen in hopes of refining a critique of authoritarian socialism. I do not have delusions that this short essay will convince anyone of something drastically outside of what they already believe or, at least, that is not my intention.

Recently, there has been much debate on list serve and social media sites about an upcoming “Flash Lenin Pinsat Party” being hosted by some local Atlanta anarchists. In response to this, Leninists and other authoritarian socialists (including Maoists from other parts of the country) have responded with vitriol, homophobic slanders, and multitudinous critiques of anarchy, “sectarianism,” and “trolling.” I am writing this because I believe that anarchists and anti-authoritarians in other parts of the country have had similar encounters with Leninists. The responses I have seen are usually limited to poking fun or reverting to list-attacking familiar historical bloodbaths of the Leninist project. I hope to bring a humble contribution to the discussion with the intention of increasing our capacity to meaningfully engage in ideological debate with the Party of Order – be it Leninists, bosses, police, liberals, misogynists or anyone else who seeks to impose discipline on our bodies.

For a wild, uncontrollable, rebellion without object or measure.
For anarchy!
Furthermore, it is an apparent strategy of authoritarian politics to equivocate the meanings of “the people”, “the state”, or “the party.” These key words are deeply coded, but they all mean the same thing: small groups of people controlling others, often by pretending to be on their side.

To quote from a particularly popular iconoclast—

“A STATE, IS CALLED THE COLDEST OF ALL COLD MONSTERS. COLDLY LIETH IT ALSO; AND THIS LIE CREEPETH FROM ITS MOUTH: ”I, THE STATE, AM THE PEOPLE.”

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A BRIEF GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AUTHORITY: The difference between your mother or your kindergarten teacher and a police officer or party hack is that the first kind of authority undermines the basis for its own existence over time and the second kind creates the material and social relations which discipline your body and mind in a self-duplicating relationship of domination, or attempt to do so. When anarchists talk about 'authority,' we are nearly always disparaging the domination of the latter. Marxists following the Leninist tradition are often intentionally unclear about their definition of authority, bouncing back and forth between the two listed above when it is expedient for them. Some Leninists even go as far as to say that they don't even know what the word 'authority' means. Here, I have laid bare a coherent, nuanced definition that I believe reflects the lived experiences of contemporary human reality. Note: an 'Authoritarian' is simply someone who believes that authority-as-domination is necessary, desirable, or inevitable. This includes the 'authority of the majority' espoused by democrats (lower-case 'd').

AUTONOMY: The freedom to decide for oneself about things involving one's own body (see also: 'individual'). The limits of autonomy under capitalism are clear - it's not enough for us to simply negotiate a peace treaty with Power, we must attack! Regardless, most anarchists see autonomous self-organization as an absolute prerequisite to any emancipatory project.

DISCIPLINE: It is always rewarding to accomplish a goal or to overcome an obstacle in one's life. More often than not, this requires patience and dedication or some would say, discipline. There is obviously nothing wrong with this undertaking. When I talk about discipline in this piece, I am referring to the historical, social, and institutional use of force, guilt, and coercion to conform human behavior to existing social norms or expectations while subsequently pathologizing or imprisoning all behaviors that do not fit the values of the social order. For anarchists, the problem of prisons, armies, and courts is not only a problem of administration but of the entire world order attached to its development and application.

INDIVIDUAL: Throughout the text, I may refer to the social category of the 'individual.' In liberal Enlightenment philosophy, the individual was a free roaming man who entered equally into voluntary contract with other free persons and developed mechanisms of ensuring security, even at the expense of autonomy and freedom. In anarchist philosophy, as in the Marxist tradition, 'individuals' do not truly exist outside of the context they are socialized in. Many anarchists are avid readers of the Postmodern and Poststructuralist Marxists (i.e., Critical Theory, Autonomia, post-68 literature, etc.) who offer accurate and meaningful critiques of the metaphysical 'individual' described in classical liberal thought. However, it is important: to account for the real subjective experience of memory and the body as continuous modes of interaction with other persons, places, and spaces over time (meaning that all people experience themselves as singular organs of sense experience in space-time). The individual is a being in the world who experiences itself in a limited social context and shapes its destiny in an ongoing creative process. One way or another.

THE STATE: For Marxists, the State is a centralized tool of class oppression. For Marx, the State is simply a compulsory apparatus for maintaining class distinctions. It is never really defined too strictly, which benefits anyone who wants to be in power. A useful definition of the State is either 'a body which maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of force' or 'a body which maintains a monopoly on legitimate decision-making.' The economist definition of a State put forward by Marxists doesn't really tell us anything about how states have worked. Instead, it simply describes the State in its role in a market. It is possible, however, to conceive of governing bodies which do not impose themselves as economic actors, but simply exercise disciplinary control over human bodies. Such is the domination of the concentration camp.

SOCIALISM SUCKS: ALL POWER TO THE COMMUNES!

A critique of Lenin can't be made in a vacuum. Lenin is one of the most famous and respected socialists in the world. I'd like to take some time to think about socialism as a political category and as a theoretical system. I'd like to make the case that socialism is not an alternative system to capitalism at all and that its proponents are not even communists. Socialism is a system of distribution inside of a capitalist economy. Socialism preserves the labor-capital relationship and the alienation of human labor. Socialism even preserves the value-form and the general M-C-M formula of capitalism.

Capitalism as a mode of production is composed of different parts. The most obvious parts include the working humans and those who oversee the extraction of value from their behavior (these people almost always profit from that behavior, but I suppose that's not necessary). Capitalism is reproduced because people keep behaving in ways that produce value. This is, of course, a tautology. The community of capital is why there is capitalism. Everyday life under capitalism is capitalism. The only way to destroy capitalism is to destroy the value form and all relations of exchange through the negative projects of collective self-negotiation and communication.

SOCIALIZATION AND THE LEGAL REGIME OF BUREAUCRATIC CAPITALISM

Socialism is a system of government that radically re-defines the legal regime of property. Capitalists are no longer allowed to hold property and therefore are for living. The representatives inside of the Party control the property. But we know that there is a huge difference between 'public property' and 'private property.'

Under socialism, the M-C-M equation is preserved and the capitalists are replaced with bureaucrats inside of the Party. This is a well-known critique of socialism even amongst 'ordinary people.'

If we are still compelled to work by factors outside of our control where we are still producing wealth and value for others to enjoy, and we still must suffer the boredom and misery of industrial metropolitan society, aren't we still living under capitalism? Socialists (including Leninists and other authoritarianists) are quick to point out the standard of living of the masses of citizens in socialist countries but this begs the question: is socialism simply a welfare state on steroids?

SOCIALISM IS EXTREME REFORMISM

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"SEIZING STATE POWER"

The State exists for its own reasons but Leninists and most Marxists make the argument that the State is simply a tool of the bourgeoisie and that its functions should be taken over by the Party to repress their political opponents. Let’s be absolutely clear about what this means, because Leninists always try to avoid the facts: about this situation: In order the repress the bourgeoisie or the ‘enemies of the revolution/state’ - including anarchists and other ‘infinite’ ultra-leftists - the Party wants to become the government.

The "dictatorship of the proletariat" needs very specific things to exercise its control:
1) Police to round up perceived class enemies,
2) Courts to judge them in,
3) Prisons to hold them in,
and 4) a centralized military to defend from outsiders.

It is common for Leninists to critique the "capitalist state", "capitalist police", and the "privatized prison system." These phrases have the appearances of radicalism. The terms "capitalist", "racist" and "privatized" seem to be modifying the nouns "state", "police", and "prison." But that couldn’t be further from the truth. They are using distinct nouns. Leninists are not against the State, like anarchists are. They are against this state. They are not against police. They are against these police. They are against these prisons. The problem of the State for Leninists, is an administrative question. In their eyes, the wrong regime holds power.

In this light, we can see them for what they are: the most extreme social democrats for a drastically reformed state. The mode of this reform is revolution. That is perhaps the most profound difference between Leninists and Scandinavian-style social democrats who believe in the vote.

AGAINST SELF-VICTIMIZATION & ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AMONG SOME ANARCHISTS

It has been my experience that many anarchists have regularly and compulsively presented themselves as victims of a global historical conspiracy. By and large, the anarchist space rejects the logic of submission and victimization often expressed by liberals and activists on the Left. We prefer to see ourselves as active participants in a social clash waged inside of societies or between worlds. It is surprising, then, that anarchists would be so reluctant to critically analyze the historical failures of anarchism. Of course, we have faced off tyrants, capitalists, and political opportunists of the Left; we have fought against entrenched bureaucracies. However, we have made ourselves the enemies of racists and homophobes.

In short: we have declared war on the Existent and find ourselves with few comrades. Because of this, we stand against tremendous odds. However, anarchists have not simply failed because of outside forces. If this is the case, we must analyze the shortcomings of this reality and develop holistic strategies for defense. It is not enough to be the purest ideology in the marketplace of ideas.

In the last two decades, anarchists and others have written countless essays and pamphlets criticizing the Spanish Civil War and the Paris Commune as well as other mis-steps within the anarchist current. Still, many anarchists are unfamiliar with these critiques or have not developed their own theory regarding the events.

This brings me to my next point: anti-intellectualism in the anarchist space. This is a problem that has influenced nearly every human grouping since the dawn of symbolic thought. I don’t care about most of those groups-- I want to talk to anarchists for a moment longer.

It seems that Marxism, as an essentially idealist philosophy from the Hegelian tradition (despite all claims to the contrary), has primarily produced an endless cast of academics, intellectuals, published authors, professors and other paid thinkers. On the other hand, anarchism has developed primarily as an evolving practice of revolt. The existential differences between Marxism and anarchism are not by chance and are not without consequence. In light of these differences, and perhaps in a sense of arrogance or even resentment, anarchists have not often meaningfully engaged with theoretical texts. Worse, many anarchists have avoided useful insights published by those pushing hardest at the barricade: Explicitly anarchist independent distribution networks of all sizes exist internationally, and that is beautiful. There are anarchist study groups and publishers. Still, the role of engaging with strategic or tactical considerations, let alone theoretical engagements, has been somewhat specialized in the anarchist space. This is unacceptable. We must develop a culture of praxis in the anarchist space-- not so that we can abstractly blorate on panels or in the university, but so that we can effectively spread social rebellion and disorder.

In recent years, the problem of anti-intellectualism has become less and less relevant. The crisis has given rise to several waves of anarchist activity all over the country-- particularly on the west coast. In the current climate, even more so after the spontaneous developments of the #Occupy movement, anarchist networks have sprung up where they were previously lacking, including here in Atlanta. This is a perfect opportunity for many to begin with a proper footing.

TLDR quit whining, read a book, think for your self & let’s kick ass.

*The true contrary of the proletariat is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world, imperialist society, of which the proletariat, let this be noted, is a notorious element, as the principal productive force and as the antagonistic political pole. To say proletariat and bourgeoisie to remain within the bounds of the Hegelian abstraction is something and something else. Why? Because the project of the proletariat, its internal being, is not to contradict the bourgeoisie, or to cut its feet from under it. This project is communist, and nothing else. That is, the abolition of any place in which something like a proletariat can be installed. The political project of the proletariat is the disappearance of the space of the placement of classes. It is the loss, for the historical something of every individual class. “Theory of Worlds”, pg. 7

I am going to begin with a few thoughts on anarchists and our collective inability to meaningfully respond to the theoretical maneuvers of Leninists. I believe most of these critiques are obvious to those inside and outside of the anarchist space. Since my intention with this piece is to contribute to anarchist critique of Leninism, with my intended audience being anarchists. I feel like it may be useful to begin with some humble self-criticism.
A FEW THOUGHTS ON "ARMED STRUGGLE"

One particular strategy of Marxism-Leninism is the socialist revolution. This strategy aims to establish a socialist state through armed struggle. It is based on the idea that the working class has the potential to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a socialist society. This strategy is often associated with the concept of the vanguard party, which represents the interests of the working class and leads the revolution.

SELF-ORGANIZATION VS. SUBSTITIONISM

Anarchists argue that the concept of self-organization is more effective in creating a socialist society than substitutionism. Substitutionism is the idea that leaders can take control of society and guide it towards socialism. Anarchists believe that this approach is flawed because it relies on a single individual or group to make decisions for everyone. They argue that instead of a leader, a society should be organized based on the principles of equality and cooperation among all members.

THE CONCENTRATED AND THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

Many people associate the term "cult of personality" with the leadership of Mao Zedong. However, it is important to note that the concept of the cult of personality is not unique to a single individual. It can be found in many different cultures and historical contexts. The cult of personality becomes a problem when it leads to the consolidation of power in the hands of a small group of people, which can result in the suppression of individual rights and freedoms.

ANARCHISTS DO NOT SEEK TO CONSTITUTE OURSELVES AS A COUNTER-SUBJECT. A COUNTER-STATE WHICH WILL WAGE WAR WITH THE EXISTING SOCIETY, BUT SEEK TO CREATE A STATELESS AND ENDLESS STATE OF EXCEPTION WHEREBY SOCIETY HAS MADE ITSELF COMPLETELY UNRELATABLE

Anarchists do not seek to constitute a counter-subject or counter-state against the existing society. Instead, they aim to create a stateless and endless state of exception where society has made itself completely unrelatable. This approach involves the rejection of traditional forms of domination and the promotion of autonomy and self-organization. Anarchists believe that true freedom can only be achieved through the elimination of hierarchical structures and the empowerment of all members of society.

*Recommended readings available at: /books/revolution, /books/anarchism*, and "Self-Organization" by Peter Elster.
CADRES VS. AFFINITY GROUPS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

CADRES:

A cadre is a distinct group of professional revolutionaries who intervene in social movements and working-class organizations according to the needs and recommendations of the larger coordinating body (i.e., the central committee). While cadres have relative autonomy because they are federated, they are not expressions of legitimate self-organization. Their membership guidelines preclude free association, while the party structure that governs them enforces ideological hegemony and conformity. Although in ‘Democratic centralism,’ debate is encouraged, individuals are expected to go along with the majority decision. How this is distinct from contemporary bourgeois democracy is unclear to me.

The affinity group is the basic unit of most anarchist organizing, especially from current-direct action directors. Affinity groups are essentially small, closed, informal groups of people who share a common goal, common knowledge, and who have come together to directly achieve their goals. ‘Common goals’ can be anything from ‘smash the windows out of the Niketown’ to ‘make some leaflets before the march’ to ‘hold the banner together.’ Affinity groups coordinate and organize themselves autonomously. They intervene however they see fit, but usually with some level of consideration for the place of larger formations. “Common knowledge” means that each person in the affinity group has a general idea of everyone else’s expectations, temperament, and how they will feel about the action they take following its execution, especially in the event of repression or failure. Affinity groups are normally between 3 and 10 people and come together only for a particular set of actions (i.e., informally).

LENIN AND HIS WILLING EXECUTIONERS

I am not going to address the famines caused by forced industrialization or forced collectivization. It must be mentioned, however, that the centralization of power destroyed the Russian economy and caused millions of deaths over several decades from famine and drought. Many Leninists today still view industrialization as good and view the reluctance of the peasants/failures to sell all of their food to Moscow for War Communism and redistribution to have been “individual.” This comes, I believe, from a profound disregard in the Leninist tendency to consider environmental devastation as well as rampant authoritarianism in their tendency. I am not going to discuss Stalin’s forced labor and extermination camps because most Leninists understand that Stalin was a terrible bastard.

I’d like to spend the least time here because I think many people are aware of the deaths dealt at the hands of Lenin and other Leninist dictators. Of note is the suppression of the Kronstadt Commune and the Ukrainian Black Army. Both of these groups helped to overthrow the Tsar and collaborated with the Bolsheviks for years leading up to their deaths. Also noteworthy is the Stalinist repression of the Spanish anarchists and the Maoist beatings of anarchists during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Leninists are often frustrated when anarchists bring these things up, and for good reason. Leninists (whether as strict Marxist-Leninists or as Maoists or Trotskyists) identify with a very particular historical moment. They see themselves as reflections of these leaders. They locate themselves in the theory, behaviors, and lives of these Great Men. To question the legitimacy of this his-story calls into question how they see themselves. Although they would argue that they are not dogmatic followers of their leaders. It is yet to be illustrated that they would follow similar orders to maintain and kill political opponents if they were made today. After all, there were many smart, independent comrades who gladly persecuted political opponents under socialist governments.

When Leninists are confronted with the betrayals of the Kronstadt, don’t they always justify it? “It was a historical necessity.” If it’s not a divine objective necessity, like the colonization of the New World was thought to be, then it’s the fault of the anarchists. Why weren’t they sending grain to Moscow? Why weren’t they submitting to the orders of the Bolshevki leadership? Why did they oppose class collaboration with the national bourgeoisie? These excuses mimic the justification for virtually every imperialist or totalitarian venture in history.

The most insidious justification is that it was a bad thing that had to happen. This way, modern Leninists are able to distance themselves from behaviors that they see as wise and, besides being unfortunate, completely legitimate. They can maintain airs of radicalism while preserving their loyalty and commitment to the Party-line.

The final justification they offer is some form of disassembling. They insist that “Lenin wasn’t a superchef” who could do whatever he wanted. This is dishonest in full. Aside from the fact that the Bolshevik party was totally hierarchical and Lenin could have literally retracted the order to murder if he wanted, it is also an inconsistent distribution of agency.

GFTK!
They laud Lenin for the good thing he does and divert blame for the bad things. Furthermore, anarchists know the problem wasn’t just Lenin. We are very much aware that the problem was totally structural. That is why we are against the State. People shouldn’t have the authority to make decisions like that. When people are able to dominate others, they usually do. Lenin could have been anyone and that’s what scares us about his followers.

OH YEAH, ONE MORE THING!

Anarchists are not innocent activists and in none of these circumstances were they quietly trying to build up State power. Anarchists are rebels and in most of these circumstances they were actively moving forward with revolutionary maneuvers against domination. Because the Leninist Strategy of “seizing State power” involves establishing a new revolutionary government, an equivocation is made whereby the “State” is substituted for “Revolution” and the phrase “enemy of the revolution” is subtly transformed into the Hobbesian/monarchist “enemy of the state.” It is no surprise that enemies “on the right as well as the left” are opposed with tyrannical force. The State is to blame for anarchist deaths that much is clear. This was not the oppression of legitimate citizens in an otherwise quaint society. The anarchists killed by Leninists and Macists were casualties in a social war.

AGAINST ALL AUTHORITY; CRITIQUE OF THE VANGUARD STRATEGY + MORE!

Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert working-class movements... and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy. “What Is To Be Done!” “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats.”

Perhaps the defining characteristic of Leninism as a distinct political philosophy is his revolutionary strategy developed in his text, What Is To Be Done?, published in 1901. In the text, Lenin describes the repressive conditions of the political situation in Tsarist Russia at the turn of the century and the potential vectors of revolt at that point from his perspective. It turns out, it’s “objective” and “scientific.” How lucky!

The text describes a backward feudal society completely controlled by the Tsar and his police. Surveillance is near total and any attempts at economic blackades or even passive demonstration are met by brutal repression by the royal police force. Furthermore, there was little to no revolutionary momentum or theory coming from Russia at the time, outside of the Nihilist movement.

Lenin proposes that the spontaneous self-organization of the working class has as its limit “trade union consciousness” which can only negotiate conditions inside of market society and cannot develop the force necessary to overcome it. The only solution to this problem, Lenin believes, is to form secret, conspiratorial bonds which will intervene in the struggle of the working class to beat back liberalism and to help develop an insurrectionary fervor. These groups, called “cadres,” would be federated with nuclei in the factories. Cadres would report back to the central committee of the Bolshevik Party, which would consolidate the information brought back and decide the strategic course of action at that point. When an insurrection begins, the Party will team with the advanced layers of the working class and their most revolutionary organizations and groups to “seize state power” with which to launch a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”