

A few comments on “Bakunin’s Statism and Anarchy: A review by Chris Gray”

Anarcho

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Chris Gray’s review of Bakunin’s *Statism and Anarchy* is, in general, good. It covers the weaknesses of Bakunin’s ideas (namely his personal prejudices against Germans and Jews and for Slavs) and indicates its underlying strengths. As part of his review, Gray raises some serious political points which, I feel, need answering. We should thank Chris for allowing us to bring into clear light some of the key differences between anarchism and Marxism. Chris’s article is a welcome breath of fresh air compared to the standard Marxist accounts of Bakunin’s ideas as it does recount them honestly and presents a critique which does try to address them rather than straw men arguments invented by the reviewer.

That said, Gray does make serious mistakes in his account of Bakunin’s ideas, mistakes which hinder a full understanding of the differences between anarchism and Marxism as well as Bakunin’s critique of Marxism. This means by my comments have to explain where Gray makes his errors and explain what Bakunin actually meant. Equally, my comments also discuss the flaws in Gray’s critique of Bakunin and will indicate exactly why Bakunin was, in my opinion, basically correct in his critique of Marxism. All this will, hopefully, indicate why anarchism, not Marxism, is the future of the revolutionary socialist movement.

Gray argues:

“Here Bakunin successfully argues his case, giving the reader sufficient detail to accept that his judgement is accurate:

< Thus the Prussian radicals saw quite clearly the danger that threatened them. What did they do to forestall it? Monarchical-feudal reaction was not a theory but a force, an awesome force. It had behind it the entire army, burning with impatience to purge the shame of the March defeat in the people’s blood and restore the besmirched and insulted authority of the king; it had the entire bureaucracy, the state organism with its enormous financial resources. Did the radicals really think they could bind this menacing force with new laws and a constitution, with nothing but paper? (p156) >

Curiously, Bakunin does not seem to realise that this conclusion undermines his root-and-branch opposition to any type of state. The state is an essential organ of

class power: whilst under capitalist control it resolutely defends the existing mode of production. The salvation of the socialist revolution requires that it be overthrown, which can only be achieved by the creation of an opposing armed power — a rival state. Like it or not, there is no other way.”

In fact, it does not. Why is this the case? Simply put, because anarchists and Marxists do not have exactly the same definition of what a state is. As such, for anarchists the state is not “an essential organ of class power.” Rather, it is an essential organ to maintain minority class power. In order to do this, the state must be organised in a particular way, namely the delegation and centralisation of power. In the words of Kropotkin:

“To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more...”[Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel*, p. 143]

Thus “the representative system was organised by the bourgeoisie to ensure their domination, and it will disappear with them. For the new economic phase that is about to begin we must seek a new form of political organisation, based on a principle quite different from that of representation. The logic of events imposes it.” [Op. Cit., p. 125] Simply put, the state is centralised to facilitate minority rule by excluding the mass of people from taking part in the decision making processes within society. This is to be expected as social structures do not evolve by chance — rather they develop to meet specific needs and requirements. The specific need of the ruling class is to rule and that means marginalising the bulk of the population. Its requirement is for minority power and this is transformed into the structure of the state

Anarchists, of course, do not deny that the modern state is (to use Malatesta’s excellent expression) “the bourgeoisie’s servant and gendarme.” [Anarchy, p. 20] Every state that has ever existed has defended the power of a minority class and, unsurprisingly, has developed certain features to facilitate this. The key one is centralisation of power. This ensures that the working people are excluded from the decision making process and power remains a tool of the ruling class. As such, the centralisation of power (while it may take many forms) is the key means by which a class system is maintained and, therefore, a key aspect of a state. As such, for anarchists, the state means “the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few.” [Malatesta, Op. Cit., p. 40] This is, of course, the only way by which minority rule can be maintained. Unless power is concentrated in a few hands and the means to enforce its decisions exist independently of society, class society could not exist.

As such, for anarchists, socialism cannot be based on an organ (however modified) whose basic function is to protect class society. This means that socialism has to be based on self-management within popular organisations. Hence Proudhon’s comment that “the true meaning of the word ‘democracy’” was the “dismissal of government.” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 42] Bakunin argued that when the “whole people govern” then “there will be no one to be governed. It means that there will be no government, no State.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 287] Malatesta, decades later, made the same point — “government by everybody is no longer government in the authoritarian, historical and practical sense of the word.” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, p. 38] And, of course, Kropotkin argued that by means of the directly democratic sections of the French

Revolution the masses “practic[ed] what was to be described later as Direct Self-Government” and expressed “the principles of anarchism.” [*The Great French Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 200 and p. 204]

For Bakunin, like all anarchists, it was a political truism that a socialist revolution would have to create a “power” to overthrow the current system and defend itself against attempts at counter-revolution. As he stressed, “the sole means of opposing the reactionary forces of the state” was the “organising of the revolutionary force of the people.” This revolution involve “the free construction of popular life in accordance with popular needs … from below upward, by the people themselves … [in] a voluntary alliance of agricultural and factory worker associations, communes, provinces, and nations.” [*Statism and Anarchy*, p. 156 and p. 33] While strenuously objecting to the idea of a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” he also thought a revolution would need to defend itself. In his words:

“Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines … In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt … and to federate with them for common defence.” [*No Gods, No Masters*, vol. 1, p. 142]

And:

“the Alliance of all labour associations … will constitute the Commune … there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council … [made up of] delegates … invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times … all provinces, communes and associations … [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all … invested with binding mandates and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces … and to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction … it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution … will emerge triumphant.” [Op. Cit., vol. 1, pp. 155–6]

The question is how this necessary working class power be organised. Will it be organised from below upwards (by libertarian means) or from above downwards (by statist means)? As such, Gray is missing the point. To equate popular self-management with the state simply confuses two radically different forms of social organisation. Similarly, with any attempt to equate the defence of a revolution with the state. As can be seen, Bakunin clearly saw the difference between the state (an instrument of minority rule and so centralised and top-down in nature) and the popular self-managed working class organisation required to end class society and the state (and so create a decentralised, classless, society organised from the bottom-up by its members).

Under the sub-heading “Power — An Outmoded Social Analysis,” Gray argues:

“The anarchist anti-state prejudice is closely bound up with an abhorrence of power per se. Bakunin writes that ‘anyone who is invested with power by an invariable social law will inevitably become the oppressor and exploiter of society’ (p134).

This is false – and it had better be false, because if it is correct we can say goodbye to socialism, anarchism or anything resembling them. The proposition amounts to an assertion that the powerful are always exploiters.”

In his comments Gray confuses two distinctly different forms of power. For Bakunin, “power” as such was not the issue. As he argued, anarchists aimed for “the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages.” [*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 300] The issue was not “power,” but hierarchical power. This can be seen when Bakunin noted that “the principle of authority” was the “eminently theological, metaphysical and political idea that the masses, **always** incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed from above.” [*Marxism, Freedom and the State*, p. 33] This can be seen from the quote Gray himself provides. Thus the power which Bakunin abhorred was **hierarchical** power and not “power” as such.

Once we correct Gray’s mistake, we see the validity of Bakunin’s argument. Simply put, any form of delegated power is a potential danger to liberty (and, of course, violates a core idea of socialism, namely equality). The rationale for democracy is Bakunin’s position, namely that power can corrupt and that it should be held accountable. Anarchists take this one step further and argue that any centralised and top-down structure will quickly result in those at the top developing interests separate from those at the bottom and find ways to escape from popular control (and so organisations must be built to eliminate this danger). The development of bureaucracy within explicitly socialist and democratic organisations confirms Bakunin’s insight. If you do not recognise this problem, then you can truly say goodbye to socialism!

Gray argues:

“Bakunin does not seem to be worried by this, because he seems to think that power can simply be destroyed if it is found in the wrong hands (see page 50). But power is never destroyed: the disempowering of an individual or a class entails the empowering of a different individual or a different class; power – the capacity to control – remains.”

Clearly if hierarchical power is destroyed, then the “power” to make decisions former exercised by a minority falls into the hands of the formerly governed. By destroying hierarchical power, we empower the masses and so power, in the usual sense of the word, no longer exists. In other words, by destroying hierarchical power/control we ensure that control/power is exercised over ourselves by ourselves. By stressing the need to destroy power, anarchists simply underline the importance of not equating working class power with party power and working class self-organisation with the state (as Marxists almost always do, bar libertarian ones like Council Communists and so on). As the Russian Revolution proved, to confuse these two issues can have extremely bad results!

Gray continues:

“Bakunin’s thesis is reminiscent of Robert Michels’ ‘iron law of oligarchy’: any representative system necessarily divides the members of an organisation into those who give orders and those who get given them, with the former tending to coalesce into a closed caste; there is – and can be – no alternative, says Michels.”

It should be noted that Michels expressed his law after studying the German Social Democratic Party. While formally democratic, in practice power rested in the hands of a few leaders at the top. As such, Gray's mentioning of Michels undermines his argument. Clearly, representative systems **do** divide members of an organisation into those with power (the leaders) and those without power (the membership, the vast majority). That is the basis and logic of any system of representation, after all, and so we should not be surprised if reality should follow the theory (or, more correctly, that theory adjusts to the reality of this particularly limited and class based form of "democracy")!

By being blind to the necessary side effects of their own support for representative systems, Marxists like Gray have, by an ironical twist of historical events, created structures which prove Michels point rather than refute it. In Marxist parties, the privilege of formulating policy is bestowed on the "higher bodies" of socialist organisations and so create the kind of hierarchical structure that Michels used as empirical evidence for his analysis.

However, anarchists reject the idea that there can be "no alternative" to this. We do have an alternative, which Bakunin described in general terms in *Statism and Anarchy* as "the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upwards" and, more explicitly, in his vision of revolution seeing "an end to all masters and to domination of every kind, and the free construction of popular life in accordance with popular needs, not from above downward, as in the state, but from below upward, by the people themselves, dispensing with all governments and parliaments — a voluntary alliance of agricultural and factory worker associations, communes, provinces, and nations; and, finally, ... universal human brotherhood triumphing on the ruins of all the states." [p. 179 and p. 33]

This alternative can be seen from Bakunin's discussion on union bureaucracy and how anarchists should combat it. Taking the Geneva section of the IWMA, Bakunin notes that the construction workers' section "simply left all decision-making to their committees ... In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership." To combat this bureaucracy, "the construction workers... sections could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies... In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda was amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed..." [*Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 246 and p. 247] To co-ordinate these self-managed assemblies, Bakunin argued that "the Alliance of all labour associations ... will constitute the Commune ... a Revolutionary Communal Council ... [made up of] delegates ... invested will binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times ... all provinces, communes and associations ... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all ... invested will binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ..." [*No Gods, No Masters*, vol. 1, pp. 155–6]

Thus we have a free federation of popular assemblies, co-ordinated by mandated and recallable delegates. In this way, representation is replaced by mandated delegates and power rests in the hands of the membership, not the leaders. This "new form of political organisation has to be worked out the moment that socialistic principles shall enter our life. And it is self-evident that this new form will have to be more popular, more decentralised, and nearer to the folk-mote self-government than representative government can ever be." [Kropotkin, *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, p. 184]

Thus, while acknowledging the empirical validity of Michels analysis, anarchists do not consider every organisation to be marked by the “iron law of oligarchy.” If you base your movement on representation (i.e. delegated power) then Michels law is inevitable. However, if you understand this danger then you can organise in such a way as to reduce this law. Bakunin’s ideas of decentralised, federal organisations based on self-managed assemblies and mandated, recallable delegates were developed precisely to ensure that organisation does not have to degenerate into government.

In the section entitled “Marx Versus Bakunin,” Gray presents the kernel of Bakunin’s criticism of Marx (pages 178–9 of *Statism and Anarchy*) and then notes:

“What is conspicuous here is the denial of the possibility of any class establishing a special institution to discipline itself as well as other classes – for that is what the proletarian semi-state proposed by Marx (and Lenin in *The State and Revolution*) involves. It is a far cry from Xerxes’ Greek adviser’s description of his fellow-countrymen: ‘They are free, but they have a master over them – the law.’”

What this actually means, Gray leaves us uninformed. If a class creates a “special institution” to “discipline” itself then it clearly means that a power exists above the class in question. This means that the “proletarian semi-state” is, in fact, the real power in society, not the working class. As such, this contradicts the idea that the proletariat is the “ruling class” in socialism (as Bakunin argued).

According to Engels the state is a “power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it, and increasingly alienating itself from it.” It developed when society was broken into classes and exists “to hold class antagonisms in check,” in the interests of “the most powerful, economically dominant class.” The state had two features, one based on territory and “the establishment of a **public power** which no longer directly coincided with the population organising itself as armed force. This special public power is necessary, because a self-acting armed organisation of the population has become impossible since the cleavage into classes ... This public power exists in every state.” [*The Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 752–3]

While a minority class by necessity needs a “special institution” to “discipline ... other classes,” the fact is that if the proletariat (the vast majority) does manage its own affairs then why does it need one? Can it not create “a self-acting armed organisation of the population”? This was obviously Bakunin’s idea – the creation of a voluntary militia to defend a revolution. Thus, from Gray’s comments, we can only surmise that the “proletarian semi-state” is just a state, a “special public power” which exists above society and subjects the “sovereign” people to its power. Given that Engels also admits that the state can, under certain circumstances, acquire “a certain degree of independence” from the classes in society, then the idea that a “semi-state” simply represents “proletarian” interests can be faulted. Simply put, if the state can be “independent” then it suggests it has interests of its own and can “discipline” its subjects to further those interests.

Trotsky gives us a taste of what this may involve. Speaking at the height of his power, he clearly sees the party as the real ruling power, “disciplining” the working class into accepting its rule:

“The Workers’ Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They place the workers’ right to elect representatives – above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy.

It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy." [quoted by Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 209]

This confirms Bakunin's fears, as quoted by Gray, that "in the Marxists' theory this dilemma is resolved in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives and rulers of the state elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage — the last word of the Marxists, as well as of the democratic school — is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will."

As such, the "semi-state" is no such thing. It is a state, a "special" institution existing above and alienated from society. Clearly, rather than Bakunin's critique being flawed, it is Gray's idea of a "semi-state" which can somehow not be a state (i.e. a "special" power existing above society). To paraphrase Gray, what is conspicuous in Marxism is the denial of the possibility that a "special institution" which exists "to discipline itself as well as other classes" in fact means those in charge of the "proletarian" state power are, in fact, the new ruling class. The fate of the Russian Revolution simply confirmed Bakunin's fears. Thus the Marxist account of the state is seriously simplistic and flawed although it does, ironically enough, contain the seeds of the correct (anarchist) analysis.

Gray continues:

"The whole structure depends on the smallest self-contained democratic unit, that is, in Marx's version, the Commune. Marx describes in *The Civil War in France* how the Communards of Paris envisaged the democratisation of French political life."

It should be noted that Marx's "rough sketch of national organisation which the Commune had no time to develop" was written by a follower of Proudhon and so encapsulates many **anarchist** ideas (such as decentralisation, federalism, mandated delegates and so on). As Marx stated in 1866, the French workers were "corrupted" by "Proudhonist" ideas, "particularly those of Paris, who as workers in luxury trades are strongly attached, without knowing it [!], to the old rubbish." [Marx, Engels and Lenin, *Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism*, pp. 45–6] Anarchist K.J. Kenafick states the obvious:

"A comparison will show that the programme set out is ... the system of Federalism, which Bakunin had been advocating for years, and which had first been enunciated by Proudhon. The Proudhonists ... exercised considerable influence in the Commune. This 'political form' was therefore not 'at last' discovered; it had been discovered years ago; and now it was proven to be correct by the very fact that in the crisis the Paris workers adopted it almost automatically, under the pressure of circumstance, rather than as the result of theory, as being the form most suitable to express working class aspirations." [Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx, pp. 212–3]

As such, to state that “Marx bases his ideal after this squarely on the experience of the Commune” means that Marx bases his ideal on key aspects of anarchism, aspects which are at the heart of Bakunin’s vision of revolution! Ideals, incidentally, in direct contrast to his earlier (and later) views on the matter. As Daniel Guerin noted, Marx’s comments on the Commune differ “noticeably from Marx’s writings of before and after 1871” while Bakunin’s were “in fact quite consistent with the lines he adopted in his earlier writings.” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 167]

It should also be noted that the Commune, ironically enough, confirmed Bakunin’s fears that even a popular government could develop into an independent power over society. The Commune was, as noted, anarchistic but it was not fully anarchist (Bakunin argued that the Communards organised themselves “in a Jacobin manner”). As Peter Kropotkin later pointed out, it did not “break with the tradition of the State, of representative government, and it did not attempt to achieve within the Commune that organisation from the simple to the complex it inaugurated by proclaiming the independence and free federation of the Communes.” [Fighting the Revolution, vol. 2, p. 16]

So while abolishing the state externally, it kept certain aspects of the state internally (while applying certain aspects of anarchist theory). This was brought home when the majority of the Commune Council created a “Committee of Public Safety” to “defend” (by terror) the “revolution.” The Minority of the Commune (which included the libertarian members of the First International) opposed this, arguing that “the Paris Commune has surrendered its authority to a dictatorship” and that the Majority were “hiding behind a dictatorship that the electorate have not authorised us to accept or recognise.” Thus, the representatives were not under the control of the masses and abused their power. Little wonder, as the state is based on the delegation of power to a minority and so hinders mass participation and control. The Commune showed that the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat” will turn into the “dictatorship **over** the proletariat” simply because the state is not designed for the masses to use.

Thus we have a striking confirmation of Bakunin’s fears that a “revolutionary” government would become isolated from the people it claimed to represent and gather more and more power to itself. The evolution of the Bolshevik government from “representative” government to an explicitly stated and politically justified “dictatorship of the party” is another case in point. Ironically, therefore, Gray’s example in defence of his critique of Bakunin actually supports Bakunin’s argument. This does not mean that socialism or revolution is impossible. It simply means that libertarian and statist concepts cannot be fused into one body. Thus a “semi-state” is a contradiction in terms, with the statist aspects quickly overcoming the libertarian elements. This is to be expected, as minority rule was what the state was created to defend.

For anarchists, the Commune was a striking confirmation of anarchist politics. On the one hand, its federalism, decentralisation, mandating of delegates and so on, all confirmed anarchist theory. On the other, the attempt to apply these ideals within a statist paradigm undermined their positive benefits. As Kropotkin argued, “instead of acting for themselves … the people, confiding in their governors, entrusted them the charge of taking the initiative. This was the first consequence of the inevitable result of elections.” The council soon became “the greatest obstacle to the revolution” thus proving the “political axiom that a government cannot be revolutionary.” [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, p. 240, p. 241 and p. 249]

For anarchists the Commune did not go far enough. It did not abolish the state within the Commune, as it had abolished it beyond it. The Communards did not organise “solely from the bottom upwards, by free association or free federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then

in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.” universal.” In other words, by a federation of workers’ councils. By using statist forms, the Commune would inevitably clash with those who had elected it. Only when it is “organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.” can a revolution “be created by the people, and supreme control ... belong to the people” [Michael Bakunin: *Selected Writings*, p. 206 and p. 172]

As such, for Gray to use the Commune as empirical evidence to refute Bakunin cannot succeed!

Gray continues: “This comes across in his observations on Bakunin’s book, ‘Conspicuous of Bakunin’s Book State and Anarchy’ (the translation is that of Moscow). Commenting on Bakunin’s question ‘Will the entire proletariat head the government?’, Marx observes:

< Does in a trade union, for instance, the whole union constitute the executive committee? Will all division of labour in a factory disappear and also the various functions arising from it? And will everybody be at the top in Bakunin’s construction built from the bottom upwards? There will in fact be no below then. Will all members of the commune also administer the common affairs of the region? In that case there will be no difference between commune and region. ‘The Germans [says Bakunin] number nearly 40 million. Will, for example, all 40 million be members of the government?’ Certainly, for the thing begins with the self-government of the commune. (Marx, Engels and Lenin, Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, Progress Publishers, 1972, pp149-50) >

As Alan Carter argues, “this might have seemed to Marx a century ago to be satisfactory rejoinder, but it can hardly do today. In the infancy of the trade unions, which is all Marx knew, the possibility of the executives of a trade union becoming divorced from the ordinary members may not have seemed to him to be a likely outcome. We, however, have behind us a long history of union leaders ‘selling out’ and being out of touch with their members. Time has ably demonstrated that to reject Bakunin’s fears on the basis of the practice of trade union officials constitutes a woeful complacency with regard to power and privilege – a complacency that was born ample fruit in the form of present Marxist parties and ‘communist’ societies ... [His] dispute with Bakunin shows quite clearly that Marx did not stress the continued control of the revolution by the mass of the people as a prerequisite for the transcendence of all significant social antagonisms.” [Marx: *A Radical Critique*, pp. 217-8]

The question, of course, is power. Does the “executive committee” have the decision making power in society, or does that power lie in the mass assemblies upon which a federal socialist society is built? If the former, we have rule by a few party leaders and the inevitable bureaucratisation of the society. If the latter, we have a basic structure of a free and equal society. Bakunin made this point clearly, when he argued that socialists should “not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.” Only “a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards” will ensure that the revolution is in the hands of the masses. [Michael Bakunin: *Selected Writings*, p. 237 and p. 172]

Gray, after quoting Marx, argues that “this is indeed representative democracy — it has to be, in a society where questions of the day cannot be decided via a popular vote over the internet.” However, history shows that this statement is false. In every major revolution (the French, American, Russian and Spanish) working class people have organised themselves into popular assemblies and united these assemblies into federation based on mandated delegates. Thus, in practice, working class people have shown that “representative” democracy can be overcome by self-management. Anarchist Nestor Makhno was simply stating a generalised fact of working class self-organisation when wrote that “[i]n carrying through the revolution, under the impulsion of the anarchism that is innate in them, the masses of humanity search for free associations. Free assemblies always command their sympathy. The revolutionary anarchist must help them to formulate this approach as best they can.” [*The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays*, p. 85] The current popular assemblies in Argentina provide a timely reminder of this key anarchist idea.

Thus there is strong empirical evidence to refute Gray’s assertion on the need for representative democracy. As such, Bakunin’s warning that representative democracy simply hides the rule by a few party leaders is still extremely relevant, particularly as anarchists have a clear and valid alternative to it.

It should be noted that anarchists are not the only people who are aware that “representative” democracy is not only undemocratic but is also unnecessary. In both the French and American revolutions, the rising bourgeoisie argued against the idea of self-management by popular assemblies. These arguments are being repeated by the capitalist media against the popular assemblies is that direct democracy cannot be used to decide issues. One Argentine newspaper (*La Nación*) denounced the movement of the assemblies in two editorials. On February 14, the newspaper declared that “although the rise of these assemblies appears as a consequence of the public being sick and tired of the untrustworthy conduct of the political class, we must also take into account that such mechanisms of popular deliberation present a danger, since because of their very nature they can develop into something like that sinister model of power, the ‘soviets’”. The article continues: “It is not a bad thing that people want to express themselves... But it is important to point out that it is one thing is to engage in noisy protest and it is something completely different to take government decisions that touch on public interest and the common good.” The editorial of February 17 continues on this wonderfully self-contradictory theme. It accuses the movement of assemblies of organising an “undercover coup d’etat” and insists that “it is necessary for Argentineans to calm down and recognise that a country cannot work in a state of permanent popular deliberation.” Why not, I wonder? It continues: “It is not reasonable that [a neighbourhood assembly] meets to declare the illegitimacy of the president of the Nation, to declare null and void the mandates of all members of parliament without exception and to demand the resignation of all members of the [Supreme] Court.”

It is understandable that a ruling elite would dismiss popular self-management as an illusion (after all, it strikes at the heart of their power). Thus when *La Nación* repeats the same bourgeois arguments used during the French and American revolutions against popular assemblies, we can understand the continuity and the rationale. It is significant that the newspaper, like Gray, simply dismisses the idea that self-management can be used to decide the “questions of the day.” The common rationale is that it cannot work (i.e. is objectively impossible), yet there are more than enough examples that it can. It seems somewhat ironic that a Marxist should be using a similar argument against popular self-management that the capitalist class uses, but there we have it.

The question becomes, then, why? When a socialist repeats the same arguments in opposition to popular power, we have to wonder why.

Perhaps this flows from a similar, if unstated, premise. After all, the bourgeois paper is arguing that the public interest and the common good is undermined when the public create and participate in “mechanisms of popular deliberation.” Obviously the “public interest” escapes the understanding of the public who, by some miracle of social chemistry, are capable of picking their shepherds while being unable to look after their own interests! *La Nación* is generous, of course, allowing the public to “express themselves” — as long they do not threaten the rule of politicians, bureaucrats and capitalists — and vote for their shepherds! Can shades of Lenin’s infamous argument in *What is to be Done?* explain why a socialist should have similar arguments?

Let us not forget that Lenin explicitly argued that the working class could not, by its own efforts, develop revolutionary/socialist politics. In his words, “the working class, exclusively by their own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness ... The theory of socialism [i.e. Marxism], however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals ... the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.” This meant that “Social Democratic [i.e. socialist] consciousness ... could only be brought to them from without.” He stressed that “there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement **the only choice is:** either bourgeois or socialist ideology ... to belittle socialist ideology **in any way, to deviate from it in the slightest degree** means strengthening bourgeois ideology ... the **spontaneous** development of the labour movement leads to it becoming subordinated to bourgeois ideology.” [*Essential Works of Lenin*, pp. 74–5, p. 82]

The similarities between *La Nación* and Lenin are obvious. Chomsky, basing himself on Bakunin’s critique of Marxism, notes that liberal ideas “have an unmistakable resemblance to the Leninist concept of a vanguard party that leads the masses to a better life that they cannot conceive or construct on their own ... the doctrines are similar at their root.” [*Deterring Democracy*, p. 368] The masses cannot come to an understanding of the public interest (“socialism”) and so it would be foolish to let them govern society directly. The best that the masses can achieve is to select those who are able to understand the “public interest. Hence the need for a “special institution to discipline itself as well as other classes.” Who will run this “special institution”? Simple, the party (as Lenin said in 1917, Russia “was accustomed to being ruled by 150 000 land owners. Why can 240 000 Bolsheviks not take over the task?” [*Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 336]). And the relationship between the party and the class? Obviously the party was in power. As Lenin wrote in 1905 “the principle, ‘only from below’ is an **anarchist** principle.” For Lenin, Marxists must be in favour of “From above as well as from below” and “renunciation of pressure also from above is **anarchism**.” According to Lenin, “[p]ressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.” [*Marx, Engels and Lenin, Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, p. 192, p. 196, p. 189, pp. 189–90]

Once in power, the Bolsheviks consolidated their rule, undermining popular organs such as factory committees and even disbanding soviets which were elected with non-Bolshevik majorities. By 1919, Lenin was stating that “we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party ... we say, ‘Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we

shall not shift from that position ... ” [Collected Works, vol. 29, p. 535] And shift they did not. The following year Zinoviev was arguing at the Communist International that “the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.” [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920, vol. 1, pp. 152] Trotsky held this position until his death.

In summary, calls for “representative” government combined with “discipline” by a “special institution” takes on a distinctly anti-democratic and authoritarian overtones, overtones brought to terrible clarity after the Bolsheviks took power. This is not to suggest that Gray desires such a system, but we cannot ignore the historical examples of what has happened when Marxists have taken power and applied their ideas. As such, Bakunin’s warnings became true and his critique of Marx is clearly shown to be more valid than Gray would like to admit. Simply put, Bakunin’s arguments that party power does not and cannot equate working class power and that representative “democracy” is a shame hiding minority rule have been proved to be true, both in the current capitalist state and in the so-called “proletarian semi-state.”

Gray continues:

“Bakunin makes much of Rousseau’s insight (expressed in The Social Contract) that the people’s representatives are no sooner elected than they begin to advance their own interests to the detriment of those of the people. Here Bakunin seizes upon a real problem — one which Marx tends to skate over, as can be seen from his comment about former workers ceasing to be workmen, which he does not recognise as a problem, because in the same way a manufacturer today does not ‘cease to be a capitalist on becoming a town councillor’ (p151). Marx here ignores the fact that the gulf between a capitalist and a town councillor is considerably less than that between a shop-floor worker and a political representative. The only recourse we have here is the right of recall. The only other recourse is periodic work on the shop floor (or the equivalent) for workers’ representatives, which is less effective. An MP who spends a month or so working as an ordinary operative remains, in terms of individual life-style and outlook, an MP: far more effective is the power to deselect and thereby ‘reduce to the ranks’.”

I should point out a contradiction in Gray’s theory. Earlier he had stressed that self-management was objectively impossible (the population could not vote on “the questions of the day”). Yet, for recall to work the population must be in a position to judge “the questions of the day” in order to evaluate the actions of their representatives. Thus we have a contradiction. Gray argues that “a popular vote” on the “questions of the day” is impossible, yet without such a vote recall is impossible. Thus, if we have recall (and that also implies mandates), we implicitly have the structure for self-management and **not** representation. Simply put, whoever is competent enough to pick their masters is competent to govern themselves and whoever is able to recall their representative is able to decide on “the questions of the day” directly and explicitly mandate them. Thus, if recall is possible, so is self-management and Gray’s defence of representation falls.

It should also be noted that Bakunin had seized on the importance of recall long before the Paris Commune applied the idea in practice. He clearly saw that in order to eliminate government, self-management was required and that this automatically meant mandating and recalling delegates. As such, Bakunin’s works show that there is another “recourse” than “recall” of politicians (which

we have already, incidentally, in General Elections) and that is the elimination of government by means of federations of popular associations organised and run from the bottom-up. Adding recall to a state (i.e. top-down, centralised structure) does not eliminate the fact that only a small minority have power in such a system (namely the few leaders who are in power). By using the term “ranks,” Gray implicitly acknowledges that this is the case (the “sovereign” people are, in fact, simply foot soldiers under an officer core which has the real power in society).

The “right of recall” need not work when we have a highly centralised governmental structure. After all if you have a highly centralised body which governs the affairs of 100 million people, the opinion of a community or association will be swamped. As Bakunin argued, the state “is an arbitrary creature in whose breast all the positive, living, individual or local interests of the people clash, destroy and absorb each other into the abstraction known as the common interest, the **public good** or the **public welfare**, and where all real wills are dissolved into the other abstraction that bears the name of **the will of the people**. It follows that this alleged will of the people is never anything but the sacrifice and dissolution of all the real wants of the population, just as this so-called public good is nothing but the sacrifice of their interests.” [Michael Bakunin: *Selected Writings*, pp. 265–6]

To effect a change in the governing body, the vast majority would have to recall their delegates, a process which may take time and so ensure that the government remains in its position long enough to ride out popular discontent (and, perhaps, “discipline” the population). Equally, in a centralised system the level of extra-political institutions would have to be large in order to accumulate and process the information necessary to make decisions. It is this bureaucracy, rather than the politicians, which would, as in the current state, have the real power. Politicians may come and go, but the state infrastructure would have to have continuity. Thus recall combined with government need not mean popular power, quite the reverse as having a government automatically means the people delegate their power to a minority. As Malatesta argued:

“A government, that is a group of people entrusted with making the laws and empowered to use the collective power to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class and cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will instinctively seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to special interests. Having been put in a privileged position, the government is already at odds with the people whose strength it disposes of.” [Anarchy, p. 34]

Ironically, Lenin’s “semi-state” provides empirical evidence to support Malatesta’s argument. In practice “recall” was just be ignored (as governments often do with popular opinion). The Bolsheviks quickly made recall (and elections) pointless in early 1918. On the one hand, they packed the soviets by “delegates” from organisations they controlled, making direct recall from the shop-floor irrelevant. On the other, they simply disbanded any soviet which was not elected with a Bolshevik majority (and repressed working class protest). [Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, pp. 23–4, p. 22 and p. 33]

Equally, they applied Gray’s “special institution to discipline itself” to justify Bolshevik dictatorship. In the words of Zinoviev:

“soviet rule in Russia could not have been maintained for three years — not even three weeks — without the iron dictatorship of the Communist Party. Any class conscious worker must understand that the dictatorship of the working class can be achieved only by the dictatorship of its vanguard, i.e., by the Communist Party ... All

questions of economic reconstruction, military organisation, education, food supply — all these questions, on which the fate if the proletarian revolution depends absolutely, are decided in Russia before all other matters and mostly in the framework of the party organisations ... Control by the party over soviet organs, over the trade unions, is the single durable guarantee that any measures taken will serve not special interests, but the interests of the entire proletariat." [quoted by Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, pp. 239–40]

This message was repeated in March 1923 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in a statement issued to mark the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party. This statement summarised the lessons gained from the Russian revolution. It stated that "the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat." Vacillations, of course, are expressed by workers' democracy. Little wonder the statement rejects it: "The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party." ["To the Workers of the USSR" in G. Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 213, p. 214]

As such, recall is a necessary, but not sufficient, aspect to ensure working class power. Equally, it shows that equating party power with workers power (as the Bolsheviks did) misses the point and is fundamentally a rationale for dictatorship over the working class (as Bakunin feared).

Gray continues:

"Edmund Burke explained to the electors of Bristol why, in his view, he should be allowed to put forward his own point of view: 'Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices his own opinion.' (Selected Prose, Falcon Press, 1948, p30) But the electors of Bristol (the majority of them) saw things differently, and they refused to re-elect him. If an elected workers' representative betrays a mandate then that person runs the risk of forfeiting the workers' confidence and accordingly ceasing to represent them."

The major problem with this is, of course, the whole point of a mandate is that the electors themselves decide upon the issues at hand. As such, the whole concept of mandates eliminates representative government. If the masses are clever enough to pick their masters, then they are clever enough to make their own decisions. As Gray acknowledges the importance of mandates he also (implicitly) undermines his own argument in favour of representative government over self-management. As Proudhon argued in 1848:

"Besides universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the binding mandate. Politicians bulk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, do not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty! That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy." [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 63]

As such, Gray's use of the words "representative" and "mandate" simply express a contradiction in his own politics. He stands for representative government as it is impossible, he argues,

for everyone to vote on every issue (not that anarchists argue for this!). However, he wants his representatives to have a clear “mandate,” which suggests that the electors have decided collectively how they wish their delegate to act. He also wants recall, which suggests the electors have collectively evaluated their delegates actions. Both these facts suggest self-management, not representation. Clearly, he is confused. Either you have a representative or a delegate, you cannot have both. As such, Gray is trying to fuse anarchist rhetoric with typically bourgeois representation and only confusion can result!

Perhaps Gray is not so far from Burke as he tries to make out. After all, Burke was taking part in a bourgeois election and any “mandate” did not, in fact, exist. The representative who replaced Burke also did not have a mandate, beyond the “mandate” to make any decision they wished and then stand for re-election in 4 years time. With “mandates” like that, the ruling elite can rest easy in their beds. Equally, it seems a poor base on which to create socialism and increasing the speed of re-election does not diminish the fact that the working class “adjures” its sovereignty! Sadly, these typically bourgeois forms of “mandate” and “recall” are obviously at the heart of Gray’s alternative to anarchism.

Gray then contradicts himself:

“Only when socialist society develops enough economically for classes to disappear will this problem also disappear, when, in Marx’s words, representative functions cease to be political, whereupon: ‘(1) government functions no longer exist; (2) the distribution of general functions becomes a routine matter and does not entail any domination; (3) elections completely lose their present political character’ (Marx, ‘Conspectus’, op cit, p150).”

Let us not forget that Gray originally presented an objective factor limiting self-management, namely that “representative democracy” has to exist “in a society where questions of the day cannot be decided via a popular vote over the internet.” As such, whether socialism exists will **not** make this objection disappear. Equally, the danger involved in giving power to a few people does **not** somehow disappear after economic classes have disappeared. The problems of abuse of power will continue to exist in any society and we need to be aware of it. Gray’s blindness on this issue reminds me of Trotsky’s inability to understand that Stalinist Russia was a class system (after all, he argued, how could it be as property was nationalised and class could not exist!). Indeed, Trotsky was so blind to the danger of statist oppression he even argued that under Stalinism the working class was still the ruling class! Incredible as this may seem, it flows naturally from a perspective that sees domination as only flowing from the existence of economic classes.

Equally, I should note that Marx’s comments are a tautology and a not very convincing one at that. Obviously, if economic classes no longer exist then a state (if defined as “an instrument of class rule”) cannot exist. Equally, if politics is just an expression of class conflict then a classless society will also lack a “political” character. However, if we define the state as a structure based on the “delegation of power” then domination by a few leaders can still be an issue. Government “functions” would still exist and their potential for “domination” does not disappear. The assumption that eliminating economic classes automatically means eliminating domination is simply wishful thinking. Moreover, it is dangerous as it blinds its supporters to real forms of social domination which exist in modern society and could exist in any non-libertarian socialist one.

Gray continues:

“Meanwhile, we are left with the existing political form of elections. Bakunin speaks in favour of:

< . anarchy, meaning the free and independent organisation of all the units and parts of the community and their voluntary federation from below upward, not by the orders of any authority, even an elected one, and not by the dictates of any scientific theory, but as a result of the natural development of all the varied demands put forth by life itself. (p198) >

But even if elected ‘authorities’ can and do err, the best approach, on balance, is to accept what the majority favours, if at all possible.”

But that is not what Bakunin is arguing against. Under representative government, the majority does not decide. They elect those (a very small minority) who decide for them. As such, Bakunin simply is rejecting the notion that electing a government means that the majority makes the decisions. Rather, the majority is disempowered and the elected authority (a minority) has the real power.

This is a common anarchist analysis. As Malatesta argued, it was easy “to show how, based on reasoning backed up by the evidence of past and present events, it is not even true that where there is government, namely authority, that authority resides in the majority and how every ‘democracy’ has been, is and must be nothing short of an ‘oligarchy’ — a government of the few.” This was because “democracy” does not mean “rule by the majority” but rather “rule by the representatives of the majority.” Malatesta argues that “it is never the case that the representatives of the majority of the people are in the same mind on all questions; it is therefore necessary to have recourse again to the majority system and thus we will get closer still to the truth with ‘government of the majority of the elected by the majority of the electors.’” This, he notes, “is already beginning to bear a strong resemblance to minority government.” [*The Anarchist Revolution*, p. 74 and p. 78] As such, “elected ‘authorities’ have little in common with what the “majority favours.”

This is equally applicable to the so-called “semi-state” of Leninism:

“The Party, which holds annual congresses ... , is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the congress... Not a single important political decision is decided by any State institution in our republic without the guiding instructions of the Central Committee of the Party...” [Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism*]

The father of Carlo Giuliani (the anarchist murdered in Genoa) stated that “Carlo didn’t accept the notion that eight leaders of the world should decide the life and death of hundreds of thousands of people.” As such, the difference between capitalism and “socialism” seems clear. Under Bolshevism, 19 people made life and death decisions for millions. Under capitalism, 8 people make them. A massive improvement in terms of democracy, I am sure all would agree.

Lenin’s comments were made in regard to the discussion going on in the international revolutionary movement. A left-wing had developed which, like anarchists, argued for a self-managed revolution from below and which rejected the idea of party power or dictatorship in favour of mass working class organisation and direct action. Lenin opposed this and stressed that “all talk about ‘from above’ or ‘from below,’ about the dictatorship of leaders’ **or** ‘the dictatorship of the

masses,’ cannot appear but ridiculous nonsense” and “the very presentation of the question – ‘dictatorship of the Party’ **or** dictatorship of the class, dictatorship (Party) of the leaders **or** dictatorship (Party) of the masses?” – is evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind.” Needless to say, the only confusion of mind was with Lenin who could not see that a handful of leaders being in power did not equal the working class running society. Lenin, in fact, rejected the idea of real democracy as being impossible:

“the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot direct exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.” [*Collected Works*, vol. 32, p. 21]

Clearly, the idea that “elected authorities” equalled democracy is one Bakunin quite rightly rejected.

Ignoring the reality of representative “democracy” Gray argues:

“The alternative, basically, is that conflicts should be decided by a simple trial of strength, that is (if necessary) by violent means. This is costly and highly unpleasant: ritualised decision-making on the basis of a vote is a much more civilised way of dealing with the problem of conflicting ‘varied demands’.”

Or, then again, conflicts could be decided by consensus or by free agreement conducted via mandated delegates. As such, conflicts can be resolved in ways which do not involve giving power to a few leaders at the centre. As Kropotkin argued, anarchy would be based on “free agreement, by exchange of letters and proposals, and by congresses at which delegates met to discuss well specified points, and to come to an agreement about them, but not to make laws. After the congress was over, the delegates [would return] ... not with a law, but with the draft of a contract to be accepted or rejected.” [*Conquest of Bread*, p. 131] This would be infinitely more democratic than Gray’s scheme of “representative” government.

I should note that the word “ritualised” suggests a less than critical approach to the question of democracy. It also suggests that the real needs of individuals, groups and whole peoples will be sacrificed under the “ritual” of democracy for the “greater good” of society (i.e. the vested interests of those who are in power).

Gray moves onto “The Split in the First International” and argues:

“Bakunin asserts that Lassalle ‘founded a sizeable and primarily political party of German workers, organised it hierarchically, and subjected it to strict discipline and to his own dictatorship – in short, he did what Marx in the last three years wanted to do in the International. Marx’s endeavour proved a failure, but Lassalle’s was a complete success’ (p175). Where is the evidence for this?”

Well, Marx did write to Engels the following words:

“In the next revolution ... we (i.e. you and I) will have this powerful engine [the First International] **in our hands.**” [quoted by Carter, Op. Cit., p. 181]

Obviously, Bakunin did not have access to this letter but he was a member of the International and saw the results of Marx’s activities. Equally, the attempts by Marx to combat Bakunin’s influence could be seen by Bakunin as attempts to maintain Marx’s power within the International. What is true is that Marx used every means available to him to ensure that the International followed his vision of socialist politics rather than, say, Bakunin’s.

Gray continues:

“Marx was well aware of the disparate political traditions which came together in the International, which included in its initial stages English trade unionists, French Proudhonists, German exile socialists plus delegates from Belgium and Switzerland. What brought them together was the clear need for coordinated international action on the trade union front. Anarchist influence à la Bakunin did not make itself felt until the Geneva Congress of 1866, and the conflict between Marx and Bakunin only began to take centre stage from 1868. According to GDH Cole:

< Marx’s idea of the International was that of a movement working under central and unified direction, even if a good deal of latitude had to be left to the national sections to shape their own policies in accordance with varying national conditions, whereas Bakunin, supported in this matter by most of the International’s adherents in the Latin countries, insisted that each national — and indeed each local — movement should have complete freedom to shape its own policy without any direction from a controlling centre. (GDH Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, Volume 2, Macmillan, 1961, pp116-7) >

“Bakunin exaggerates the degree of centralised control desired by Marx; he also personalises the issue unduly by accusing Marx of wishing to subject the movement to ‘his own dictatorship’. Marx was surely realistic enough to know he could not in fact impose his own will on the International even if he ever entertained a desire to do so — which seems extremely unlikely. (For an assessment of Marx’s influence on the organisation during 1864–69, see Cole, op cit, p133.)”

Yet, Marx **did** impose his own will on the International. In 1872 he made acceptance of “political action” mandatory on all sections in an attempt to destroy anarchist influence in the organisation. That Gray does not acknowledge that this happened suggests a certain political blindness. It should also be noted that while Bakunin opposed a “controlling centre” he did not oppose the need for regular conferences to agree joint policies and to co-ordinate struggle and activities. As he argued, the International should be based on “the establishment and co-ordination of strike funds and the international solidarity of strikes,” the “international (federative) co-ordination of trade and professional unions” and, lastly, “the **spontaneous and direct development of philosophical and sociological ideas in the International**, ideas which inevitably develop side by side with and are produced by the first two movements.” [*Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 304]

Gray sums up:

“Bakunin’s Statism and Anarchy is certainly worth reading as a revelation of his own opinions, but it seems to me that his deficiencies as a political thinker outweigh his achievements. Apart from various distinctive exaggerations and superficialities, Bakunin’s faults are those of anarchism in general. Anarchism is basically a form of utopian socialism. It has its virtues — including above all a readiness to embrace direct action when this is called for — but as a strategy for the working-class movement, it leaves much to be desired.”

However, once we look at Gray’s comments in light of what Bakunin actually meant and the development of specific events like the Paris Commune, German Social Democracy and the Russian revolution, then we cannot help being struck by how Bakunin’s ideas have been confirmed. As such, Gray’s review while substantially better than many Marxist critiques of Bakunin (and of anarchism) has all the faults of mainstream Marxism in general. It has no appreciation of what socialism actually is and how it can be created. Rather than seeing socialism as generalised self-management from below upwards, Gray sees “socialism” as being compatible with a few leaders exercising power on behalf of the masses and, perhaps (if necessary), exercising “discipline” over the “sovereign” people who, it appears, cannot be expected to manage their own affairs themselves (except, perhaps, long after the revolution).

In this, he follows the ideas of Lenin and as the history of the Russian Revolution shows, a “semi-state” and pressure “from above” onto the masses simply means minority rule (and, ultimately, party dictatorship). Right of recall means little when the government can arrest you as being a “counter-revolutionary” for so doing or even going on strike! Thus, as a strategy for the working class movement, Gray’s politics leave a lot to be desired. Ultimately, the practice of both social democracy and Bolshevism confirmed Bakunin’s predictions. In terms of “deficiencies” outweighing “achievements,” it is clear that Bakunin has a long way to go before he reaches the heights of Marxism!

In the end, what really is “utopian socialism” is the idea that socialism can be created using an instrument (a state) which has been specifically constructed to maintain minority rule. Socialism can only be created from below, as Bakunin recognised. As such, Gray inadvertently exposes one of the central fallacies of Marxism: it claims to desire a society based on equality and the participation of everyone yet favours a forms of organisation — representation and centralisation — that precludes that equality and participation.

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A few comments on “Bakunin’s Statism and Anarchy: A review by Chris Gray”
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