

The struggle for liberation, perils of individualism, and radical praxis

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Dear friends,

I have been pondering the theoretical landscape of anarchism, particularly anarcho-syndicalism, and its tensions and harmony with Marxist thought. And, for kicks, let's touch on Social Reproduction Theory and how it might intersect with these radical traditions. Buckle in, comrades -we' re in for a theoretical ride (you' re welcome).

Anarchism, at its core, is a political philosophy (sorry to all the triggered materialists) that advocates for the abolition of *all forms* of hierarchical authority, including the state, capitalism, and organised religion. Anarchists envision a society based on voluntary cooperation, mutual aid, and direct democracy. Yass, we' re in love. That said, there are many 'strands' of anarchist thought, some of them dicier and historically more "ehhh" than others, just like Marxists, in general, though they share a commitment to (individual, though sometimes individualist -yuck) liberty, collective responsibility, and a deep skepticism of centralised power. Remembering that capitalism is dually a conspiracy and reality, yeah, being skeptical of centralised power is good.

Emerging from these strands is a theory of anarcho-syndicalism, which emphasises the role of labor unions and worker-controlled industries as a primary conduit for revolutionary transformation of aforementioned political (economy) landscape. It came into being during the late in the 19th and early 20th century and sees the organised working class as the key agent in overthrowing capitalism and the state. We diverge from Marxism, where? The goal, here, is to replace these structures with a society managed by workers through democratic unions and federations. *For the union makes us strong.*

Okay, the divergence?

Both Anarcho-syndicalists and Marxists share a fundamental critique of capitalism and a vision of a classless, stateless society. Wait, wait, you said divergence! Well here it gets interesting, particularly when we factor in the failings of manifest "communist" nations (noting that no such thing has ever really existed).

Marxists (hello), with our emphasis on historical materialism as method, i.e., understanding history to understand how to change the now, and the primacy of class struggle, see the seizure of state power by the working class as a necessary transitional phase towards communism. Or, as Marx and Engels put it, the "dictatorship of the proletariat". This allegedly creates time and space to defend the revolution and will gradually fade away as class distinctions disappear. Except that, again, this hasn' t happened. Countering this, Anarchists reject *any* form of state power, even if ostensibly wielded by the working class. In (almost, but not actually) a response to the Soviet Union and China as failed communist states. They argue that power corrupts and that any state apparatus will inevitably become oppressive, regardless of its initial intentions. Hmm, who is learning from historical materialism now?

This fundamental disagreement has led to significant *historical* tensions between anarchists and Marxists. The split in the First International between Marx and Bakunin, and later conflicts like the suppression of anarchists during the Russian Revolution, highlight these deep-seated ideological differences. At least historically. But, as we' re already seeing, there are also important "synergies" (did that word really come out of my fingers?) between anarchist and Marxist thought.

Both traditions offer incisive critiques of capitalism, emphasise working-class self-organisation, and share a commitment to radical social transformation –even towards a communist system. Indeed, for activist and radical practitioners today, there are those who draw inspiration from both traditions, synthesising elements of each in their theory and practice. Cool, so its sort of pragmatic? Maybe.

For instance, autonomist Marxism (for another day, sometimes shares similar individualist come libertarian impulses), with its emphasis on workers’ self-activity and rejection of vanguardism, shares much common ground with anarcho-syndicalism. Both see the importance of building counter-power within capitalism through worker-controlled institutions and direct action. Almost a reformist-first lens –but here’ s another diverging point –the outcome, to anarchists, needs to be reached through the “final form” means. For many Marxists, there’ s almost a softening of this which has actually allowed capitalist creep.

When we bring Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) to the dance floor things get even more interesting. SRT examines how the reproduction of labor power –the daily and generational renewal of workers’ capacity to work –is essential to the functioning of capitalism. This includes activities like childcare, housework, education, and healthcare, which are often unpaid or underpaid and disproportionately performed by women. Here, once again we’ re advancing an “intersectional” approach to the revolution –this should be table stakes at this point (yet it sadly isn’ t). SRT and anarchism integrate well already: Anarcha-feminists have long emphasised the importance of challenging patriarchy alongside other forms of hierarchy. SRT, then, provides a theoretical framework for understanding how gender oppression is intertwined with capitalist exploitation, enriching anarchist analyses of power and domination. SRT’ s focus on the commons and collective forms of social reproduction resonates with anarchist principles of mutual aid and community self-organisation.

The intersection of anarchism, Marxism, and SRT offers interesting ground for developing more holistic revolutionary theories and practices. Particularly given there are likely more activist *practitioners* who employ anarchist modes today than Marxists –particularly with the strength of anti-marxist propaganda. While not specifically compatible, I have just recently begun arguing that synthesising some of the best insights from these traditions – still leveraging a historical materialist approach –we can better understand the multifaceted nature of oppression and exploitation under capitalism and develop more effective strategies for resistance and transformation. Or, at least, that’ s the plan – this is a very new area, but one that shows real promise theoretically (as the more experienced anarchists and Marxists look on laughing).

Of course tensions remain. How do we balance the anarchist emphasis on individual liberty with the need for collective organisation? How can we build powerful movements capable of challenging capital and the state without reproducing hierarchical structures? And many more questions (than answers) which seem to be pushed into back-room conversations rather than truly animating debates among radicals. But there’ s a few more things to unpack, here, before I leave you for today. Specifically individualism –raised above –and the potential dangers for society therein.

In anarchist thought, there is a strong current of individualism, particularly in the tradition of Stirner and some strands of American anarchism. This emphasis on individual autonomy and self-realisation is, in many ways, a natural response to the suffocating authoritarianism of state and capital, but, like libertarianism it will lead to deeply problematic outcomes.

The danger lies in how easily this individualist impulse aligns fundamentally with, and is consequently corrupted by, neoliberal ideology. When we focus solely on individual freedom without adequately addressing systemic inequalities and collective responsibilities, we risk reproducing the very atomisation that capitalism thrives on. In essence it is a short tumble from “I should be free to do as I please” to “I m not responsible for anyone else’ s wellbeing” .

This individualist bent manifests, particularly historically, in various ways within anarchist spaces. We might see it in the rejection of all forms of organisation or accountability, in the fertilisation of “lifestyle anarchism” which prioritises personal rebellion –flatly just “bad behaviour” –over collective struggle, or in the dismissal of all forms of identity-based organising and struggle as “divisive” .

The consequences of this can be severe, particularly for the most marginalised. When we fail to recognise how systems of oppression operate collectively and intersectionally, we leave those most affected by these systems to fend for themselves. A Black trans woman, for instance, faces interlocking systems of racism, transphobia, and misogyny that cannot be adequately addressed through individual action alone.

Lest we think this is solely an anarchist problem we must turn our critical gaze to similar issues within Marxism. While Marxism is fundamentally a collectivist philosophy, it is not immune to individualist distortions, particularly in its encounters with Western liberal thought. One such manifestation of this is the figure of the “exceptional” revolutionary. The idea that through sheer force of will and correct theory, an individual can transcend their social conditions. This can lead to a cult of personality around revolutionary leaders, ironically reproducing the hierarchies that socialism aims to abolish.

Further, the tendency in some Marxist circles to reduce all oppression to class dismisses other forms of marginalisation as “identity politics” . This class reductionism is, in its way, a form of individualism –it assumes that if we just get our individual relationship to the means of production sorted out, all other issues will magically resolve themselves –lol. This approach fails to account for the complex ways in which capitalism, colonialism, and hegemonic ideology intertwines with and reinforces other systems of oppression. It leads to “colour-blind” socialism that, in practice, centres the experiences of white, male, cisgender workers while marginalising others.

It is here that SRT offers valuable insights for radical thinkers. By highlighting how the reproduction of labor power occurs through a complex web of social relations –in households, communities, and institutions –SRT reminds us that our very existence as “individuals” is dependent on collective labour, much of it unpaid and gendered. Such an SRT-informed approach helps us see how struggles for individual liberation bound with collective liberation. It pushes us to think about how we can create forms of organisation and community that support individual flourishing without sacrificing collective responsibility.

It does not discount the value of collectivism, collective action, mutual aid, and tenets from both Marxism and anarchism – but rather invites us to continually reflect on the mesh of social relations that humans exist within to critique all of them for the presence of anti-human thought. For anarchism, this might mean developing more robust theories of collective decision-making and accountability that don’ t rely on hierarchical authority. For Marxism, it could involve a more intersectional approach which recognises how class exploitation intersects with other forms of oppression in ways that can’ t be reduced to a single (class) axis.

In both cases, it is fundamental that we recognise that true “individuality” –the full development of each person’ s potential –can only be realised through relations of solidarity and mutual aid.

Our freedom is bound with the freedom of others. We are not free until we are all free.

Who knows if this one makes any sense, but in essence there are important lessons from all activist praxis. If we stick to only the theoretical and praxis camps with which we are familiar, we inevitably miss things. In this way, drawing from, in particular anarcho-syndicalism, we can reimagine institutional organisation in a way that benefits workers, not capitalists – and if we get there through advancing the tools of the revolution as the tools

of praxis, we' re really doing both anarchism and Marxism together. And god knows we need left unity.

In solidarity,

Aidan