

# **KARL MARX AND THE ANARCHISTS**

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Paul Thomas

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# KARL MARX AND THE ANARCHISTS

*By*

PAUL THOMAS

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# **Karl Marx and the Anarchists**

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This book is for my Father and my Mother

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# Preface

This book deals with Marx's disputes with and arguments against the anarchists, in the belief that knowledge of the issues involved in them can help us understand Marx's stature and importance as a theorist and as a revolutionist. Inevitably, and quite rightly, questions arise in books of this kind about the standing of Engels, who is not dealt with here. There are several reasons for his omission. It is important to distinguish between the two members of so celebrated an intellectual partnership, not in order to dismiss or diminish the contribution of Engels to the theory and practice of Marxism – he was an important theorist in his own right – but in order to acknowledge the specificity of the thought of Marx and Engels alike. The two were not interchangeable theorists, agreed about everything under the sun; the words of either one should not be used uncritically or incautiously to 'support' the opinions of the other. We should also admit at the outset – as Engels himself quite freely and indeed graciously admitted – Marx's pre-eminence in what was not, and what was not regarded as being, a partnership between equals. What Engels had to say about the anarchists (much of which may readily be encountered in the text I have used in what follows, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, Selected Writings by Marx, Engels, and Lenin*) does not add anything substantive to – nor does it significantly detract from – Marx's much more protracted and extensive attacks on anarchist doctrine and anarchism as a movement. Since it is these attacks that have not received the attention of scholars they deserve, and because Engels's comparatively brief forays into this particular field can be regarded at best as supplements rather than substantive additions, I feel justified in avoiding, in what follows, the needless repetition that would have resulted from the superimposition of Engels's views on to those of Marx.

# Acknowledgments

This book has been some time in the making, and the number of friends, mentors, colleagues and students to whom my thanks are due is legion. To list all their names would be impossible; I am grateful to many whose names do not rise to the surface here. Some of those I do mention may be surprised at their inclusion, since not all of them have agreed with opinions I have expressed in the past; I nevertheless owe them a great deal.

Some of the thoughts that go into what follows first emerged in a doctoral dissertation for Harvard University in 1973, which benefited enormously from the advice, admonitions, cautions and criticisms of Judith N. Shklar and Michael Walzer. I am most grateful also to Miles Morgan for his extensive and sensitive comments on an earlier draft of this book, which helped me considerably in its revision. I should like to thank Terrell Carver, Hanna Pitkin and Norman Jacobson for their kind encouragement; Sir Isaiah Berlin, Reinhard Bendix, Michael Rogin, Martin Jay and Alan Ritter for their helpful comments on individual sections of the manuscript; and Bertell Ollman, Steven Lukes, David McLellan and Shlomo Avineri for planting ideas in my mind in the course of conversations – conversations which may have seemed inconsequential to them but which were to prove invaluable to me. My hope is that all those I mention, and those many more I fail to mention, will encounter traces of past conversation in what follows; responsibility for mistakes, omissions and drawbacks I insist upon claiming for myself alone.

This book was completed with the timely aid of a University of California Regents' Summer Faculty Fellowship; my thanks go also to the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, and to its chairmen since I joined it (Norman Jacobson, Victor Jones and Chalmers Johnson) for their encouragement and aid. Connie Squires was a great help to me in revising Part 2, and Nancy Ruttenburg typed the bulk of the manuscript good-naturedly and cheerfully. My most heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Carolyn Porter, who I am sure thought it would never end and who deserves more thanks than she can know or I can possibly express.



# A note on sources

There is still no reliable, comprehensive edition of the writings of Marx – or for that matter of Proudhon, Stirner or Bakunin. In Marx's case two editions of the required type are promised, in the new *Gesamtausgabe: Editionsgrundsätze und Probestücke*, Berlin, Dietz, 1972 et seq., a monumental publishing project which by virtue of its scope is but barely under way; and in the English language Marx-Engels *Collected Works* (MECW), New York and London, International Publishers, 1975 et seq. Since ten volumes of this latter edition have appeared to date, I have used it alongside other easily available English language sources throughout, except for Chapter 4; the International Publishers' edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, New York, 1963, has the considerable merit of including within its covers Marx's important letters to Annenkov and von Schweitzer about Proudhon, so I have used it in preference to MECW, vol. vi, in which *The Poverty of Philosophy* is included (without the letters). Translations from the German and French are either my own or have been checked against the original. It would have been redundant for me to have repeated the Marx bibliographies that are readily enough available in English; the reader is referred, in particular, to David McLellan's 'Select Critical Bibliography' in his *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, London, Macmillan, 1973, and to Terrell Carver's more recent 'Guide to Further Reading' published as an appendix to the fourth edition of Sir Isaiah Berlin's *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 209–22. In my own List of works cited below, pp. 389–99, material included under Part 1 is not repeated under Part 2; I have included bibliographical notes on Stirner, Proudhon and Bakunin in the notes to Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Extracts from Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, vols 3, 4, and 5 are reprinted by permission of International Publishers, New York, 1975.

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# Introduction

We have not heard the last of the issues this book discusses. They are fundamentals of political thinking and organization alike. Ever since the French Revolution, the rise of the revolutionary Left, and the spread of its doctrines, has helped shape the contours of political life. The politics of our own times are simply incomprehensible if we fail to take this uneven rise into account, and there is no reason to suppose that its progress will be any smoother in the future than it was in the past. Marxism has by now assumed a variety of institutional as well as theoretical forms, but such predominance as it enjoys has never passed unchallenged. Marxism itself has never lacked critics, inside as well as outside the revolutionary Left, and it is not likely to lack them in any foreseeable future. Its critics within the revolutionary tradition may have interpreted the human brotherhood for which the Left is supposed to stand in the spirit of Cain and Abel (as Alexander Herzen once tersely put it), and the Marxists, for their part, have certainly responded in kind. This, however, should not blind us to the salutary reminder that Marxism's critics on the Left have provided: that it is a serious mistake to confuse Marxism with 'revolutionary doctrine', or 'socialism', or 'the Left'. To do so would be to confuse Marxism with its context, to take an overlap for a correspondence – or even an effect for a cause. These critical voices have never been stilled by the variety of Marxism's institutional accomplishments. On the contrary, attempts at institutionalizing Marxism – however successful they may seem to the uncritical – have stimulated and provoked, rather than dampened, criticisms from anarchists and others of Marxism's bearing and directionality.<sup>1</sup>

We are speaking, then, of an unfinished story. No matter how relevant Marxism may be to the world we live in and to the politics that animate it, this one particular sub-species of revolutionary socialism has never enjoyed an intellectual or institutional monopoly on the Left, and it is not likely to assume one. This point, indeed, can be made even more strongly, for it is precisely Marxism's successive pretensions to completeness that have drawn much of the fire from its revolutionary rivals; and their challenges have helped ensure that Marxism's purported

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monopoly of revolutionary thinking, action and 'truth' has remained an empty, fugitive ideal and not at all the *fait accompli* that some of its adherents – with no small degree of desperation – insist has been attained.

This book deals with some of the confrontations that belie Marxism's claims to completeness and finality, in the belief that such finality is (fortunately) unattainable. The particular challenges and responses that form the subject of this book raise issues which, like most political issues, defy final resolution. Marx may have got the better of his anarchist rivals, but he paid a heavy price for his success; even so, the bill was not presented in its entirety to Marx himself, and the final reckoning may still await settlement. It is certainly safe to predict that we have not heard everything from the anarchists; they, too, and the radical questioning they represent, have outlived the historical context in which their doctrine first came to light. This context overlaps significantly with that of the growth of Marxist doctrine; but such an overlap does not suggest the possibility of any future convergence, unless we assume, against all the evidence, a homogeneity of outlook within the Left, or an equally unlikely willingness to compromise of the type that neither Marxists nor anarchists have yet been eager to reveal.

Anarchists insist that the basic source of social injustice is the state. While they are not alone in wishing to overthrow the state – a fact that has led to some confusion of anarchism and Marxism – they distinguish themselves from Marxists by further insisting that all revolutions (in particular Marxist ones) which seek to replace one form of state by another will merely perpetuate or even extend tyranny. Freedom, they insist, is found by following the instincts of the masses, which lead them to organize themselves in communal institutions unsullied by power relations but galvanized by common interests. When the state, the main obstacle to communal life, is destroyed, the people, able to organize themselves without the need for any debilitating hierarchy, will form such communal associations and transform social existence. The removal of the state will suffice to restore man to his true nature, which has been whittled away and eroded by successive state-forms over the span of history.

Anarchism often shares with Marxism an indignation about the enervating effects of the division of labour in capitalist society. To both movements, the perfecting of industrialized economics and the reach of their economic tentacles into marginal, outlying areas has resulted in an increasing mechanization and quantification not only of productive activity *per se*, but also of human life itself so that mental and spiritual horizons are narrowed, injustice spreads like a cancerous growth, and the leisure produced by material progress becomes (for those fortunate enough to receive any of it) a vacuum, to be filled by mindless distraction and violence. Anarchism parts company with Marxism, however, in its insistence that Marxism itself has not provided,

and by virtue of its theoretical limitations cannot provide, a solution to these very problems, for it worships the same gods as its enemies, without even recognizing that it does so. In this view, Marxism, just as much as capitalism, is a product of a soulless, rationalist faith in the supreme importance of material progress; it shares with capitalism a disconcerting overestimation of the significance of productivity, rationalization, quantification and mechanization.

The anarchists, in advancing this argument within Marx's lifetime, were undoubtedly prescient in their predictions (which sometimes even have a kind of 'Weberian' tinge) that pursuit of instrumental values would push capitalism and communism closer together, in certain respects, than either of these two supposedly bitter enemies would be comfortable believing. The distance between the 'alienation in the labour process' outlined so trenchantly and bitterly in Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*, and Soviet Stakhanovism, they still remind us, may not be vast. And both capitalism and communism, the anarchists prophetically indicated even in the nineteenth century, would come to depend upon the progressive (if 'progressive' is the right word) incursion of bureaucracy into hitherto uncharted areas of human experience. Marx himself, of course, was no lover of bureaucracy - as we shall see - particularly when it proceeded from the autocratic state; but nineteenth-century anarchists, and their successors, have indicated that even deep insights into the nature of social evils like bureaucracy do not of themselves produce effective solutions to them. Faced with what they took to be the ambitious social blueprints of Marx, nineteenth-century anarchists were quite capable of being almost Burkean in their belief that such theorizing has an intrinsic tendency to mislead practice; and they could be almost Manichaeian in their insistence that Marxists in power would repeat - or magnify - the mistakes of their capitalist and autocratic progenitors.

Anarchists - as their Marxist and non-Marxist antagonists have been made aware - have a way of asking awkward questions at inopportune moments, as part of an almost temperamental reluctance to accept doctrinal 'finality' on faith or on the authority of anybody (Marxists included). The unaccommodating and truculent manner in which these questions are advanced has engendered much criticism, proceeding from Marxist and non-Marxist alike, of anarchist doctrine in general. It may be true - and it happens to be my belief - that in the last analysis Marxism expresses more intellectual and human content, and has greater political sense, than its anarchist rivals have generally displayed. But the 'last analysis' has yet to be reached. It is not the intention of this study to say the last word about the issues separating Marx from the anarchists. These issues were manifestly not settled during the lifetimes of the protagonists I deal with; and, in any case, it is in the nature of the issues themselves that they could not be put to rest in a study

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like this one, even with the best will in the world. The issues are political ones, and political issues – fortunately enough – are not readily deadened either by academic discussion (with its inevitable aura of comfort and distance) or by polemical in-fighting (with its tendency to conceal issues even from the protagonists themselves). To wish to ‘settle’ finally the issues that separated Karl Marx and his anarchist interlocutors would be to wish to stifle politics itself.

The dangers of adopting too foreshortened a perspective on the disputes that are the subject of this book can be indicated, in a preliminary and somewhat oblique sense, in two ways. In the first place, we can now see with the benefit of hindsight that books treating anarchism as an intellectual oddity having some curiosity value for the historian of ideas have themselves turned into intellectual curiosities; to some extent James Joll’s valuable introductory study, *The Anarchists*,<sup>2</sup> was overtaken by events the likelihood of whose onset it did not suspect. Joll (all of whose books are concerned in one way or another with political failure) could hardly have predicted that the recrudescence of anarchist doctrine and the revival of even scholarly interest in it (which he played no small part in stimulating) would come as precipitately as it did. (George Woodcock, the author of another valuable introductory study, *Anarchism*,<sup>3</sup> confessed in a 1950 biography of Kropotkin<sup>4</sup> that his subject, who died in 1921, was ‘half-forgotten’; today many of Kropotkin’s books have been reprinted by the MIT Press.)

The second danger is in some ways the obverse of the first. Interest – not all of it scholarly – in anarchism as the ‘left-wing alternative’ to ‘obsolete communism’ (to paraphrase the English language title of the Cohn-Bendits’ *pièce de circonstance*)<sup>5</sup> was revived as part of the radical upsurge of the late 1960s. Much of the thinking behind this particular study of Marx’s disputes with the anarchists was prompted and stimulated, if not caused, by this very upsurge; and to this extent it bears the imprint of what is still referred to in some quarters (and in hushed tones) as *les événements* surrounding May 1968. The events in question would not, I imagine, provoke anyone seriously to predict the onset of yet another anarchist revival, but the likelihood of similar upsurges can no longer simply be discounted or dismissed out of hand. It would be peremptory to dismiss May 1968 as an isolated example that is unlikely to repeat itself. Even isolated examples are examples of *something*; to write off the issues – issues which themselves have a history – as the preserve of ‘extremists’ would be short-sighted. Myopia in politics is itself a form of extremism. It remains true that anarchists can be impatient people who tend to provoke impatient responses; Marx’s own responses, to which I was led as a result of May 1968, were often impatient, and sometimes understandably so. Nevertheless, impatient responses are in real sense less than appropriate, or deserved. It may be



that anarchists' perspectives on political questions are themselves unduly foreshortened and 'absolute'. This is the way they were criticized by Marx, among others. Yet foreshortened perspectives cannot be blocked by perspectives that are foreshortened in a different way, without leading into a chain of questions that is, in principle, endless.

As I write, we are at some distance from the late 1960s; and distance, far from lending enchantment to the view – the view, after all, is one of missed opportunities – perhaps enables us to begin to understand what happened, and why. However theoretically unsophisticated they may have been, anarchist alternatives to 'rigid', 'doctrinaire' Marxism held an attraction to many participants – many of them thoughtful participants – in the radical upsurge of that time. Whatever dust was then raised has by now settled, but many of the questions raised at the same time remain unresolved. What lay beneath the partisanship was often a real desire to probe to the fundamentals of politics. (It is presumably no accident that during the heyday of the student movement in the USA there was a marked revival at Berkeley and elsewhere of interest in orthodox political theory.) The claims of Marxism to represent radical thinking in general were in the late 1960s given a much deserved jolt. To many, Marxism seemed to resolve itself into an uneasy and unproductive amalgam – an admixture of elitism and deference to 'the masses' conceived altogether abstractly. It seemed to provide a home – a home that all too easily turned into a retreat – for esoteric theorists about mass revolution, isolated in their scholasticism not only from 'the masses' and from political action, but even from each other. It seemed either divorced from political practice, in a refuge built on the basis of increasingly esoteric and ethereal theorizing, or subsumed beneath an ideologically dogmatic institutional communism of the type that is singularly unlikely to tolerate independent theorizing of any persuasion. The stultifying paradox – in Paris as well as Prague – was that independent theorists could not be heard, or even survive, without a mass party; yet the mass party had no more use for them than had anyone else. The paradoxical eminence of intellectuals in what was ostensibly a 'workers' party was simply one of the many unresolved problems brought out into the light of day, however fleetingly, by other, younger, intellectuals; but for these non-party militants, Marxism's much heralded 'unity of theory and practice' might have continued to serve as a smokescreen, behind which loomed the institutional monolith of 'the Party' at its most hidebound and inflexible. Outflanked on its own left, institutional communism responded by retreating into itself and proving its rivals' every point against it; the self-appointed representatives of the working class looked more self-appointed and less representative than ever; its bureaucratic and ideological inflexibility looked more inflexible than ever; its already stale phraseology looked more warmed over and inappropriate to the world outside the Party's confines than ever; and its



residual Stalinism was more apparent than ever. No amount of invocation of worn, hackneyed incantations about the 'class position' of its intellectual critics of the left, or about law-bound social regularities – all of them discredited phrases pulled from what looked like an increasingly remote, Victorian Eurocentrism – could redress the damage. It seemed, remarkably quickly, that, if spontaneity had anything to do with revolution, there was nothing even remotely revolutionary about orthodox Marxism.

Yet, spontaneity was not lacking – elsewhere – and those who lent exhilaration to the search for *la plage dessous les pavés* could not but be disdainful of 'authoritarian' Marxism. Radical disdain was bolstered in France among a variety of *groupuscules* by the conservative role that was played, just as they predicted, by the Parti communiste français and the trade union bureaucracy in their indifference to, or outright suppression of, any emergent radical currents within the French working class, or outside it. The remoteness of institutional communism from everything but the prevailing system – at a time when it looked as though it might not prevail – took on the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy as *les événements* proceeded with its encouragement or saction. They proceeded, too, in a spirit that was as antithetical to the joylessness of party orthodoxy as to that of everyday life. 'La grande fête de mai' seemed to one of its leaders, the irrepressible *bon enfant*, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, to be 'an irruption of the future into the present'; 'ayant vécu ces heures', he later said, 'je ne peux plus dire: c'est impossible'.

Yet even to Cohn-Bendit the exhilaration lasted a matter of 'hours', and his example testifies that the transformation of everyday life by spontaneous improvisation, transitory and necessarily incomplete as it was, arrayed itself alongside the narcissistic, performing temperament of the movement's leaders. Cohn-Bendit's chutzpah made it easy for him openly to celebrate his notoriety, on the grounds that it was not to be taken seriously; he later said that 'j'ai eu le privilège de me jouer moi-même à grande échelle: la télé, la radio, les journaux'<sup>6</sup> (my emphases). Yet, particularly in France, where the long tradition of *épater le bourgeois* has always found its readiest customer in the hated bourgeois (witness the career of Sartre), revolutionary euphoria becomes as marketable a commodity as anything else. Today, all aspects of the so-called 'counter-culture' (including nostalgia for May 1968) can be bought and sold on the market.

Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*,<sup>7</sup> a book whose pessimism seems intended to justify yet another kind of self-serving retreat, indicates that society has again and again proved its ability to numb, absorb and (to use a word that was fashionable in 1968) 'co-opt' protest. Protest, for its part, knows this; cultural forms commonly become more and more extreme in their ultimately futile desire to