Marxism and Anarchism

Mr. Giles-Peters' reply to my article "Marxism and Anarchism" raises a plethora of issues, which hinge one upon the other. At this point in time I intend only to reply to his main objections as it was my original plan to write a series of articles on Marx and Proudhon, Marx and Bakunin and Marx and Sorel which will cover the other points at issue between us.

Mr. Giles-Peters states that Stirner is not representative of anarchism; that he was "St. Max" only to Marx; and that only a handful of anarchists follow him today. Marx's differences with Stirner, which my article dwelt on, do not therefore show what distinguishes marxism from anarchism. According to Mr. Peters what I should have studied was the thought of Bakunin, Malatesta and Kropotkin, who belonged to the "historical anarchist movement", as then I would have noticed that these anarchists were not anti-social egoists but dedicated to collectivist socialism, and very little different from marxists.

His main objection is thus broken down into two related propositions: 1) Stirner was not a typical anarchist and Bakunin was; 2) Bakunin, who was a typical anarchist, was a historical materialist like Marx. The political conclusion is that anarchism and marxism are basically the same and that my assertion that marxism is partly an anti-anarchism is wrong.

To support these two propositions, which, for the moment, we will assume he believes, he indicates generally correctly that Stirner was forgotten by both marxists and anarchists after Marx left his German Ideology to the "gnawing criticism of the mice"; (Stirner was only rediscovered by Kropotkin years after Marx' death); that even then he had only a handful of so-called anarchist followers; and that his "Hobbesian" union of egoists was quite different from the society which the archetypical anarchist Bakunin advanced and he adduces various quotations from Bakunin to show that the Russian believed that man was a "social animal" and a revolt against society would be "just as impossible as a revolt against nature ..." which contradict those of Stirner, to show both that Stirner's views should not be imputed to other philosophical anarchists and that Bakunin was neither an idealist, nor an egoist, but a historical materialist like Marx.

All these statements are true, though Mr. Giles-Peters has missed the implications of some of his own quotations, but they do not show what he suggests they show because they do not constitute an adequate mode of proof for a marxist, that commitment to these ideas, and for Marx ideas could always become practical forces, would result in nothing but the attainment of their opposite. Stirner's position is not merely an "ideology", that is a system whose components were mutually contradictory, given the context, and which were inadequate to their object, that of liberation from social inequity.

As marxists the only question we need ask ourselves is whether Marx, making a similar reading of Bakunin's theory and practice as he had of Stirner, would reach the conclusion that Bakunin too was advancing an "ideology" with similar deleterious effects. If we can answer in the affirmative then we have established that there is no difference practically between Bakunin and Stirner, and that Bakunin was no historical materialist. Then it does not matter practically what we call them, anarchists or not. The nomenclature depends on the angle of vision: Stirner was called an irrationalist and the precursor of Nietzsche by the Nazis. For Marx and for all other marxists, and I will show, in practice even for Mr. Giles-Peters himself, though he may not be conscious of it, it is not what Stirner and Bakunin say which establishes their difference, nor is it what Bakunin says which establishes his beliefs, but what is implicit in what they say and do both philosophically and practically as well as what is explicit which matters. Starting from this position it is clear that Bakunin and Stirner have similar views, and Marx and Bakunin do have opposing views.

To avoid recapitulation of my article I will merely state that while Stirner claimed that the way to happiness was through an absolute egoism, Marx indicated by his reading that commitment to these ideas, and for Marx ideas could always become practical forces, would result in nothing but the attainment of their opposite. Stirner's proposal is not merely an "ideology", that is a system whose components were mutually contradictory, given the context, and which were inadequate to their object, that of liberation from social inequity.

The force of this point I am making and others I make later about the difference between marxism and Bakunin's materialism can be gathered from a reading of Rodolfo Mondolfo's "Il concetto di necessità nel materialismo storico", Rivista di filosofia, IV, 1912, pp.55-74 where he writes inter alia "Words have often turned men away from the correct understanding of historical materialism" [two things developed the 'fascist' interpretation]; "One came from the conviction that the doctrine had its foundation and presupposition in materialism". "The name historical materialism is not the least responsible for similar misunderstandings. Croe rightly lamented once that this term materialism, which need not be used in this case, gives rise to many misunderstandings and could be uselessly replaced by the 'realist conception of history.' "The philosophy from which the doctrine originates, is the voluntarism of praxis which Marx and Engels derived from Feuerbach." It is a pity that the work of Labriola and Mondolfo is not more widely known in Anglo-Saxon countries as they (especially Mondolfo) anticipated much of Lukacs' arguments more than fifteen years before he wrote.

1 I do not wish to become involved in an argument about the distinction Marx makes between analysis and exposition in Capital. I assert that the distinction can be reconciled with his pronouncement.
marxists the ideas of the facts (nomenclature) are never significant theoretically, though they may be useful on a practical-political level.

To come to Bakunin, and to foreshadow the content of a future article. Mr. Giles-Peters cannot deny that Marx loathed Bakunin and that the feeling was mutual, though in Bakunin's case it had overtones of anti-semitism. Mr. Giles-Peters may certainly see this as an explanation of why Bakunin was having more success than Marx in the First International and was aggrieved and that the main form this took was a quarrel over the mode of philosophical differences. Unluckily we do not have works explicitly when he tried to work out my purpose and the main inference which I can simply refer him to show that he is wrong. But Marx's letters and the Bakunin Archiv show clearly that he is wrong. Marx cursed frequently about the anarchist "children's primer", with its contradictions and his delegate to the anarchist conference at Geneva, after pleading to that gathering not to fall for nationalism and finding them adamant, published his address as "My Pearl before the Congress of Geneva". Marx and his followers found Bakunin theoretically crude.

This is not surprising. Unless we assume that Marx no longer read people as he had in 1845, an assumption which Capital contradicts, then he could not have helped noticing that despite Bakunin's intellectual deference and attempt to ape Marx' opinions he was a crude materialist. In Bakunin's writing against Marx crude materialism comes out clearly. One of Mr. Giles-Peters' quotations shows most clearly the contradictions of their position. Bakunin's reference to man as a "social animal" is an indicative lapse of the pen for 'social being'. Marx most certainly did not believe that men were social animals. It was this sort of error which led to crude materialism and thus to determinism, from whose position Marx sought to escape in his critique of Feuerbachian materialism and Stirner. And since crude materialism is merely the reversal of idealism, logically he is in the same position as Stirner.

No marxist reading of Bakunin can make him a historical materialist. Mr. Giles-Peters has not made his point for Marx by counterposing to Stirner and to Marx what Bakunin said. Moreover, since the "marxist" reading is how people in fact read, Giles-Peters shows that in practice he does not believe that he has made his point by such a juxtaposition, though he pretends to theoretically. He himself observed Marx' common-sense rules of reading implicitly as well as explicitly when he tried to work out my purpose and the logic of my positions from my article. In his practice, which reveals his real standpoint (what he acts upon) he does not believe in taking people at their face value. I am sure that he will agree in comradely fashion that neither can be easily inferred from a single article, and that he would not like me to discover in him a crudely political purpose from his one reply.

Like all articles mine is political, though this admission should be understood in the Crocian sense. Two political points I am making are these, first, marxists must always beware of surface affinities between doctrines. For example, when Mr. Giles-Peters writes that there is an obvious affinity as there were between the anarchist's conclusion and Marx's starting point, he must keep in mind not only the category of opposites but the category of the distinct. The second inference which I make from my conclusions that marxism is an anti-anarchism is that anarchists should be converted to marxism. Since I believe, as is patent from my article, that the truth or falsity of any proposition can only be proven in praes, man's real life activity (retrospectively in history, and prospectively in political action) I believe socialists must unite and work with anarchists so that the latter can discover in a real fashion that they will not make social happiness by tempting society to start any abstract Ideal of destruction. We can only transcend what is, not do away with it.

ALASTAIR DAVIDSON

Private Property and Utopia

Doug Kirsner is to be congratulated on his analysis of "cultural" versus "structural" factors in the strategy of dissent and ultimate revolution ("Spirit of Utopia", ALR No.34). Many of us are sick and tired of being told by so-called "revolutionaries" that what Marx "really meant" when he advocated the abolition of private property was the "abolition of the private ownership of the means of production". Doug's statement brings a breath of clean air into the subject.

Where, however, one may take issue with Doug is in the evaluation of the immediate applicability of "cultural" objectives. "People", he says, "are generally wedded to (the values of the system)". Indeed, those of us who have advocated a direct attack on the values of consumerism as an immediate strategy have often been accused of pushing a "middle class" or "intellectual" approach.

I will try to show that the very reverse is true. The starting point of those who favour the conservative approach to the consensus on consumerism is that the acquisition of private property is largely a response to the generated wants of the system, rather than a fulfillment of actual needs. On the surface, there is much to support this view. The proliferation of advertising, the campaigns of indoctrination by the mass media, and countless tracts by worthy economists all stress the importance of the "generated" market.

What is ignored by this analysis is the nature of consumption and of the consumer. There is now an almost total split of the market into two sectors. One is the sector of generated consumption, served by the means outlined above, and aimed, in the main, at the small section of the population which is really affluent. There can be no doubt that this sector exists. It is made up not only of the upper stratum of the industrial, commercial and political bureaucracy, but, more importantly, contains many wage and salary earners who have no family responsibility. There is also the group of people who live in families with multiple incomes. Thus, for instance, almost the entire entertainment industry is now geared to this sector, as a study of prices for entertainment will show.

This affluent sector, certainly, is wedded to the bourgeois ethos. However, the offspring of the older members of this section, many of whom are tertiary students, are often totally disenchanted with the shallowness generated by consumerism, and turn against it in varying degrees. The consciousness generated in this group is based on moral or ethical grounds. One may safely assume that it is the conscious of consciousness at this level which leads to the assumption that the rejection of private property at this moment is limited to a "middle class" or "intellectual" basis.

3 See EFM passion; compare Bakunin's writings in Arthur Lehning, Bakunin Archiv (Brill, Leiden, 1968-70, 3 Vols.).
Now let us look at the other, numerically far larger section of consumers. There is no doubt that this section is also largely manipulated by commercial pressures. However, it will readily be seen that, where the level of income is low, choice is limited to the make of item (such as which car) rather than the type of item (swimming pool versus boat). An analysis of where spending of this sector goes will show that a small number of items, in fact only two (car and house) are predominant in the family budget after food and essential clothing has been paid for. Spending on cars accounts, if memory serves me right, for four fifths of total hire purchase commitments. Spending on housing (most of which is in the form of paying off a privately owned house) runs, in most cases, at about one third of the family income.

The question now arises, how far are these expenditures—plus other items like refrigerators—generated wants rather than real needs? One does not need a statistical analysis to arrive at the conclusion that the only house most families can afford to live in is one which is owned by them (or the bank). The fact that they “own” the house generally forces them to travel vast distances to work. Absence of public transport often forces them to go to work by car. Present styles of shopping force them to stock food in a refrigerator. And so the list goes on. Thus, ownership of property is forced by circumstances, and is the result of real needs rather than generated wants. The point is—and it is not a novel point—that the generated wants of yesterday become the needs of today. What is not so widely appreciated is that, as soon as a want becomes a need, a totally different relationship arises. Thus, although property which is desired does represent a burden, it is a burden much more gladly borne than property which is forced on you.

An additional, very important aspect often ignored is the cost of servicing such property. There is insurance, rates and maintenance for the house. In the case of the so-called consumer durables (such as cars) one of their main features to the user is that they are not durable, and require continuous costly service. The fact that all car repairs and spares are now available on hire purchase shows the problems involved, and the trauma now involved when you need a car battery and can’t afford it is real only to the person who has to depend on his private transport to go to work.

It is only those with an abundant income who can afford to “enjoy” their property. It therefore seems to me that it is the idea that private property is a pleasant thing which is a “middle class” or “intellectual” preoccupation. “Revolutionaries” who feel that an aversion to property is “utopia” which it will take years to generate are therefore out of touch with reality. Those of us who talk to workers of all political lines will know if they have tried, that when the question of the domination of people by their property is brought up in discussion, you frequently strike an instant response. Far from being “utopia” therefore, opposition to private property should form a major feature of opposition to the system as a whole. What is more, as Doug implies, to limit the “raising of consciousness” around issues like wage increases is to a certain extent counterproductive, as it confines criticism to the level of bourgeois values. How such “consciousness” will ultimately lead to a position of opposition to the values of the system is difficult to see. It is even harder to see how we are to attract those elements already basically in dissent with some of the values of the system by offering them a pure diet of reformist “transitional demands”. We thus lag far behind politically unorganised young people who are already living an alternative life style.

Therefore, while agreeing with Doug Kirsner, it seems that instead of considering Utopia as a reality only for revolutionaries, it should and can be made an immediate starting point for political action.

GERRY HANT

Information sought

Mr. H. Roth, Auckland University Librarian and a Labour Historian, is seeking information about L. Marks, a delegate to the Communist International who claimed to represent the CPNZ at the Second Congress.

Would any reader who knows anything about Marks please write to Mr. Roth at the University Library, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.