# Politics and Ethics: Marx, Lenin, and Anarchism

**by**

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The political left seems oddly impotent in the face of the ongoing economic crisis and of the accompanying austerity measures. Though these measures are aimed at shifting the cost of the crisis onto working people there is little sign that the crisis has informed the emergence of a renewed socialist let alone Marxist left. And even on the anti-capitalist left few would follow Raymond Geuss’ suggestion that if ‘political philosophy wishes to be at all connected with a serious understanding of politics, and thus to become an effective source of orientation or a guide to action, it needs to return from the present reactionary forms of neo-Kantianism to something like the ‘realist’ view, or, to put it slightly differently, to neo-Leninism’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Indeed, amongst even that small minority of political philosophers who have read his works, Lenin is typically dismissed as an opportunistic politician who held at best an instrumentalist view of political rationality. In these circles something like Alasdair MacIntyre’s comparison of Leninism and capitalist managerialism is widely accepted.[[2]](#endnote-2) Both Leninists and capitalist managers repeat, or so MacIntyre argues, a more general failing of modern politics: an inability to transcend the nihilistic limitations that Nietzsche claimed were a universal feature of the human condition.[[3]](#endnote-3)

From a similar perspective, Simon Critchley argues that Lenin’s vanguardism reproduced a form of active nihilism which reflects ‘the silence or hostility to ethics that one finds in Marx and many Marxist and post-Marxist figures’.[[4]](#endnote-4) In contrast to Leninism, Critchley argues that we now need ‘a conception of ethics that begins by accepting the motivational deficit in the institutions of liberal democracy, but without embracing either passive or active nihilism’.[[5]](#endnote-5) He suggests that ‘actually existing anarchism’s’ ethically grounded politics overcomes this lacuna in Marxism through the creation of ‘a new language of civil disobedience’ which, apart from anything else, escapes the ‘pious humourlessness of most forms of vanguardist active nihilism’.[[6]](#endnote-6) More concretely, he suggests that contemporary anarchism involves not merely a ‘continual questioning from below of any attempt to impose order from above’, but also ‘a recovery of the notion of direct democracy.[[7]](#endnote-7)

While the appeal of this and similar conceptions of anti-capitalist politics is easily appreciated, in this paper I argue it involves two fundamental misconceptions. First, that Lenin and before him Marx failed to escape the parameters of modern nihilism, and, second, that contemporary anarchism points beyond these parameters. Conversely, I show that whereas Lenin pointed to the realisation of Marx’s ethics of freedom, anarchism embeds a key constituent part of the standpoint of civil society which traps it within the Nietzschean universe.

Specifically, I argue that social or class-struggle anarchism[[8]](#endnote-8) tends, like more obviously individualistic conceptions of anarchism, to naturalise a model of individual egoism which undermines not only the democratic impulse behind much of contemporary anarchist practice but also their criticisms of Lenin and Marx. Lenin and Marx, I argue, point beyond this impasse and towards an ethics of freedom understood as social self-determination through real democracy.

This essay, which extends arguments I have made elsewhere,[[9]](#endnote-9) is offered as an alternative to the dichotomy often presented within anti-capitalist literature between ethically justified impotence and practical but nihilistic efficiency. Against MacIntyre, Critchley and a number of other commentators, I argue that Marx and Lenin provide indispensable resources for an ethical anti-capitalism that points beyond the limitations not only of modern political philosophy but also of much of contemporary radical leftist theory. As we shall see, this ethical Leninism is obscured by a tendency amongst the minority of contemporary leftist theorists who do engage with Lenin’s ideas to one-sidedly caricature his revolutionary perspectives as a form of insurrectionary or Jacobin politics. After critically surveying some of this literature, I extend George Brenkert’s claim that Marx held to an ethics of freedom (understood as social self-determination) to suggest that Lenin, through his analysis of the consequences of the uneven nature of the struggle for freedom, and freedom’s institutional form, made a fundamental contribution to Marx’s ethics of liberation.

This ethical perspective presupposes the truth of Marx’s model of working class resistance to capitalism. The viability of this assumption is the wager upon which Marxist politics rests, and the traditional caricature of Leninism merely confuses this issue. While I do not, in what follows, address MacIntyre’s criticisms of this assumption, I have touched upon them elsewhere.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Human Nature, Freedom, and Democracy**

Critchley substantiates his claim that contemporary anarchism involves a recovery of the concept of direct democracy through reference to the work of David Graeber.[[11]](#endnote-11) Before I turn to Graeber’s comments on this issue it is apposite to point out that the link between anarchism and democracy is much more problematic than Critchley supposes. Uri Gordon, for instance, insists that despite the existence of ‘major parallels between some of the values animating anarchist practices and those which feature in the more radical end of democratic theory’, because democracies allow for majority control whereas anarchism defends the absolute rights of the individual against the state, anarchism is best understood as ‘not ‘democratic’ at all’.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Gordon’s assessment of the relationship between anarchism and democracy is true to the dominant tendency within classical anarchist theory. More to the point, it is just as true of social as it is of individualistic forms of anarchism. As David Morland argues in his comprehensive overview of social anarchist conceptions of human nature, although social anarchists rejected Max Stirner’s extreme individualism they never fully escaped the naturalised egoistic individual of liberal theory. Indeed, this concept sits at the very core of anarchism’s claimed synthesis between liberalism and socialism, and is embedded within the social anarchist ‘conception of human nature’ which was built ‘on the twin pillars of egoism and sociability’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Often presented as a virtue, for instance through the medium of Rudolf Rocker’s famous claim that anarchism involves a synthesis of a socialist critique of capitalism with a liberal critique of socialism,[[14]](#endnote-14) in reality anarchism’s inheritance from liberalism sits uneasily alongside its socialist pretentions. Morland shows that despite Proudhon’s, Bakunin’s, and even Kropotkin’s attempts to articulate social conceptions of anarchism in which society is ‘perceived as an organic whole within which individual freedom is mediated through some notion of communal individuality’, in practice social anarchist attempts to synthesise socialist and liberal accounts of human nature have been unsuccessful; bringing these two accounts together in an uneasy mix which, by universalising the liberal conception of the egoistic individual alongside more socialistic elements, results in an ‘irresolvable stalemate over the question of human nature’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Thus Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin all embraced models of human nature that include transhistorical conceptions of both egoism and sociality that consequently tend towards a conceptualisation of history as ‘an ‘everlasting battle in human nature between good and evil’.[[16]](#endnote-16) For instance, Kropotkin, who is by far and away the most sophisticated spokesperson of social anarchism, was only able to make sense of the evils of modern society by embedding a transhistorical conception of egoism as the necessary counterweight to the idea of mutual aid within his model of human nature. As Morland argues, Kropotkin suggested that throughout human history two opposed traditions have vied with each other: this timeless struggle is actualised through history as struggles between ‘the Roman and the Popular; the imperial and the federalist; the authoritarian and the libertarian’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

There are two political consequences of this approach to history that are relevant to my argument. First, as Bakunin insisted in his *Revolutionary Catechism*, anarchism involves the ‘absolute rejection of every authority’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Second, and related to this, is Kropotkin’s contention that because ‘men are men’ who cannot be trusted with power, revolutions could not be the work of a minority.[[19]](#endnote-19)

If the democratic flavour of Kropotkin’s argument is clearly perceptible, the undemocratic implications of Bakunin’s argument should be equally apparent. Indeed, despite the social aspects of anarchist theory, the political corollary of the liberal side of anarchism’s supposed synthesis of liberalism and socialism tends towards a conception of the social as an external (alienated) imposition on the individual. This negative conception of the social underpins the problems experienced by anarchist attempts to theorise democracy, even amongst those anarchists who otherwise reject Stirner’s egoism. Thus despite pointing to the limits of extreme individualism, Proudhon insisted that because freedom consists in submitting to no other law than one’s own, ‘the authority of the suffrage must be renounced’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Similarly, though Bakunin proclaimed himself both an individualist and a socialist, his individualism won out in so far as he insisted, in Guérin’s words, that ‘the individual owes duties to society only in so far as he has freely consented to become part of it’.[[21]](#endnote-21) In a more extreme variant of a similar thesis Errico Malatesta claimed that ‘democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class’.[[22]](#endnote-22) While Malatesta’s argument was aimed at bourgeois democratic forms, he did not specify that his critique was limited to these forms. Following this and similar claims, it is unsurprising that George Woodcock is able to comment that ‘no conception of anarchism is farther from the truth than that which regards it as an extreme form of democracy’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Peter Marshall gravitates to a similar position when approvingly quoting both Bakunin’s claim that ‘all political organisation is destined to end in the negation of freedom’ and Proudhon’s suggestion that ‘Universal Suffrage is the Counter-Revolution’.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Interestingly, the essay by Graeber to which Critchley refers, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), does not confront this problem. Indeed, beyond vague references to the new global justice or anti-capitalist movement ‘reinventing the very meaning of democracy’, Graeber says very little of substance about his vision of direct democracy other than that it is consensual and thus distinct from both modern liberal and classical Athenian democracies.[[25]](#endnote-25) This unsubstantiated gesture towards consensus politics fails to address a problem that Ruth Kinna notes is a more general characteristic of anarchist thought. In a discussion of the complementarities and tensions between anarchism and democratic theory, Kinna points out that anarchists have had little of substance to say about democracy beyond a desire for consensus decision-making. But, as she admits, this approach is open to the famous criticism levelled by Jo Freeman at the American anarcha-feminist movement in the 1960s. What she called *The Tyranny of Structurelessness,[[26]](#endnote-26)* or the ability of the most articulate (usually middle class) members of structureless groups to hold *de facto* power within them.

Interestingly, in one the most sustained recent anarchist engagement with the problem of democracy Wayne Price points beyond this impasse to an overlap between anarchism and Marx’s and indeed Lenin’s politics. In *The Abolition of the State*, Price argues both that ‘the historical relation between anarchism and democracy is highly ambiguous’[[27]](#endnote-27) and that ‘anarchism is democracy without the state’.[[28]](#endnote-28) More concretely, he suggests that while ‘it will be necessary for the oppressed to take power’ in a revolutionary situation, it would be ‘a mistake for the oppressed to take state power’.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is to Price’s credit that he recognises that this position was, in essence, shared by Marx and Lenin. They too rejected the idea, often mistakenly associated with their names elsewhere in anarchist and autonomist circles, that socialists should ‘seize the state’. In its place they insisted that socialist revolutions could only be realised by smashing the capitalist state and then defended through workers’ own democratic organisations: a workers’ state. Thus in his analysis of the Paris Commune, Marx pointed out that though the old structures of state power (in Paris at least) had been smashed, workers replaced them not with a negation of authority but with their own rule: the Commune was ‘a working-class government’ that held real (not sham parliamentary) power in Paris. This, he explained, is what he meant by the concept dictatorship of the proletariat,[[30]](#endnote-30) or, more simply, the rule of the working class.[[31]](#endnote-31) And although Marxists have described this situation as a workers’ state, more properly, as Engels commented a couple of years later, the word state is misleading here: ‘all the palaver about the state ought to be dropped, especially after the commune, which has ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Beyond this transformation of the social basis of democracy, Ian Hunt notes that Marx conceived proletarian democracy as differing from bourgeois democracy in three important ways: ‘a much wider us of elections ... a radical deprofessionalisation of public life and ... a different relationship between the legislature and the executive’ – most importantly the removal of the kind of checks and balances used to mediate popular control in bourgeois democracies.[[33]](#endnote-33) Lucien van der Walt has recently extended Wayne’s arguments through an anarcho-syndicalist response to my ‘Marxism and Anarchism’. He suggests that if we concede something like the democratic conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat noted above ‘*then* the conclusion *must* be drawn that Bakunin, Kropotkin – and, indeed, the majority of the broad anarchist tradition *are* for the state – at least, that is, *for* the ‘workers’ state’ and *for* the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’[[34]](#endnote-34)

The fact is, however, that the broad anarchist tradition has not accepted the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Clearly this is related to what Chomsky calls Bakunin’s ‘all too perceptive’ warnings about the inevitable logic of Marxist authoritarianism towards the creation of a ‘red bureaucracy’[[35]](#endnote-35) as they were apparently confirmed by the rise of Stalinism. However, this superficially appealing account of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution is predicated upon a transhistorical conception of human nature. Unfortunately, van der Walt does not explore the weaknesses of this perspective, and this is probably related to the fact he shares this assumption; in his case through his embrace of Robert Michel’s famous ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’.[[36]](#endnote-36) For Michels the tendency towards oligarchy is rooted in what are in effect naturalised capitalist social relations. Indeed, he argues that it is a ‘natural love of power’ which gives rise to ‘immanent oligarchical tendencies in every kind of human organisation’.[[37]](#endnote-37) It is a problem for anarchists like van der Walt and Schmidt that a key implication of Michels’ thesis is the impossibility of not merely of socialism but of any but a shallow elitist form of democracy.[[38]](#endnote-38)

By contrast with Michels’ naturalisation of a historically specific conception of human egoism, Marx’s conception of democracy was predicated upon his historisation of human nature. Indeed, whereas liberalism assumes as its analytical point of departure the atomised egoistic individual, Marx’s socialism recognises the social and historical nature of human individuality.[[39]](#endnote-39) From the liberal assumption of individual egoism it is difficult to conceive of social organisation except as an alien power (state) over them: the state is simultaneously a threat to, and the essential guarantor of, individual liberty: the state is for liberals therefore, in Tom Paine’s felicitous phrase, a ‘necessary evil’!

Because Marx, by contrast, recognised that human individuality is shaped by the kind of society in which we live, he was able to grasp both the social and historical roots of modern individualism and that democratisation need not merely result in a new form of unfreedom, but rather expanded the space and nature of individual liberty.[[40]](#endnote-40) Interestingly, Marx developed this historical conception of human nature through his critique of Stirner’s anarchism. Whereas Stirner took liberal individualism to its logical (proto-Nietzschean) conclusion by denouncing as moralism any limit on the ego, Marx countered that socialism was not an abstract moral doctrine intended to repress the individual ego but rather was the real (ethical) movement of workers to submit society to democratic control.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Marx and Engels agreed with Bakunin that organisation implies authority, but recognised that because society is an organisation it would be silly to imagine it without authority. The struggle for socialism from this perspective is not so much a struggle against authority as it is a struggle to replace one undemocratic form of authority with a democratic alternative. Whereas liberalism and anarchism find it difficult to imagine the social aspect of the humanity except as the alien form of the state, Marx argued that because workers are able to free themselves only through collective organisation their solidarity points towards a concrete democratic alternative to their alienation. Thus Engels comments that while all revolutionary socialists agree ‘that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution’, this would not mean the end of social organisation. Rather, he insisted, under socialism society would lose its (alienated) political character to take instead the form of the democratic control of administrative functions.[[42]](#endnote-42) More concretely, as Peter Gowan has highlighted through the medium of a demolition of neoclassical economic theory’s dogmatic attachment to the idea ‘increasing returns to scale *do NOT operate* in modern industry’, it follows from Marx’s recognition of the empirical fact that there were increasing returns to scale in many modern industries that the key economic issue in the modern world is not between free markets and state planning but rather between democratic (social) and undemocratic (private) control of monopolies.[[43]](#endnote-43) This argument frames the co-ordinates of a Marxist counter to anarchist criticisms of centralised co-ordination of production and is the social basis of Herbert Marcuse’s comment that Marx looked not to the ending of authority but rather to its complete democratisation.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Interestingly, this historically specific democratic conception of socialist politics illuminates the error of reducing Marx’s or Lenin’s politics to a form of Blanquism or Jacobin elitism. The opinion that Marx failed to extricate himself from Jacobinism has been a staple of twentieth century liberalism. For instance Isaiah Berlin famously dismissed Marx as a ‘utopian’ believer in a form of ‘positive freedom’ whereby the idea of freedom is transposed from the individual to the social to become the tyrannical attempt on the part of those who control the state to impose their authority upon those poor wretches below them whose desires do not conform to ‘reason’.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Although Daniel Guérin rejects the idea that revolutions necessarily degenerated into tyranny, he nevertheless agrees that Marx had not fully overcame the tension between ‘communal’ and ‘Jacobin’ aspects of his politics, and that Lenin went further along the Jacobin path.[[46]](#endnote-46) The reference to Lenin is an allusion to his famous comment that ‘a Jacobin who wholly identifies himself with the *organisation* of the proletariat—a proletariat *conscious* of its class interests—is a *revolutionary Social-Democrat’*.[[47]](#endnote-47) This phrase has often been cited as evidence that Lenin, at least, failed to escape the limits of Jacobinism, and that because of this the Russian Revolution, like its French predecessor, was doomed to end in terror. However, even a cursory examination of the context within which Lenin made these comments reveals that reference to Jacobinism was first made by the reformist critics of Marxism who sought to jettison revolutionary politics altogether, and then taken up by Lenin who pointed out that like the Jacobins, but in very different conditions, the Marxists were the most resolute opponents of the ruling order.[[48]](#endnote-48)

As a keen student of Marx, the difference between the conditions that gave rise to Jacobinism and those that underpinned the emergence of modern socialism would have been ABC to Lenin. Michael Löwy points out that while Marx obviously admired Robespierre’s ‘historical greatness and revolutionary energy’, he explicitly rejected Jacobinism ‘as a model or source of inspiration for socialist revolutionary praxis’.[[49]](#endnote-49) Indeed, from his earliest writings, Marx drew on Hegel’s analysis of Jacobinism specifically and the French Revolution more generally to criticise the one-sidedly political character of Robespierre’s practice.[[50]](#endnote-50) According to Hegel, Robespierre’s Terror was the necessary counterpart of his attempt to impose a vision on society from the top down that was not rooted in a prior transformation of the nation’s ‘dispositions and religion’.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Marx recognised the power of Hegel’s argument, but disagreed that Jacobinism exposed the limits of the revolutionary project.[[52]](#endnote-52) He argued that this gap between the revolutionary leadership and the mass of the population was not a general characteristic of revolutions, but rather reflected the bourgeois nature of the French Revolution. He distinguished this type of revolution from modern proletarian revolutions in a way that pointed to the qualitative difference between his politics and Jacobinism.[[53]](#endnote-53) According to Marx, bourgeois revolutions were born of developing contradictions between emergent capitalist relations of production and existing pre-capitalist states, and where they were successful resulted in the removal of fetters to further capitalist development. Although these revolutions were generally marked by a progressive break with pre-capitalist hierarchies, because they were characterised by the transference of power from one ruling class to another they involved at best a contradictory relationship between their leadership and the mass of the population. For instance, bourgeois revolutions ‘from above’ such as Bismarck’s unification of Germany involved no mass action at all, whereas England’s, America’s, and France’s bourgeois revolutions ‘from below’ were won through the involvement of the lower classes but ended similarly with the exclusion of the poor from power. Proletarian revolutions, by contrast, because they are made for and by the working class – ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’[[54]](#endnote-54) – were necessarily qualitatively more democratic in both their execution and outcome. Their triumph required the workers to be organised as a political force (a workers’ state), but because the workers exploit no social group below them once the bourgeois counter-revolution was suppressed the workers’ state would begin to ‘wither away’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Marx’s distinction between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions points to a fundamental problem with the claim that there was an unbroken trajectory to him from Robespierre. For, unlike Robespierre, he clearly recognised that there could be no commonly accepted idea of what is good in a class divided society, but equally that workers’ collective struggles were uniquely able to point towards a systemic alternative to capitalist alienation in a way that could appeal far beyond their own ranks. If modern socialism only became a possibility therefore with the emergence of the modern working class, to realise this potential requires at least a two-sided struggle by socialists for leadership within the movement: Marxists struggle for the hegemony of socialism within the working class itself, while simultaneously struggling to win working-class socialist hegemony across society more generally. At its core, therefore, Marx’s revolutionary strategy was founded upon the emergence of new social forces – the growth of the modern working class. For this reason it is very different from previous (top-down/statist) attempts to realise a better world, and goes some way to explaining why Marx believed it important for revolutionaries to have a sure grasp of history: if a socialist revolution was possible only in specific historical circumstances, it was important to recognise what these were and how they different from the conditions that had given rise to other revolutionary moments.

By contrast with Marx, there were nineteenth-century socialists who continued the Jacobin tradition - and Marx distanced himself from their politics. For instance, Blanqui envisioned revolution as an act won by a small elite of revolutionaries who would act on behalf of the workers.[[56]](#endnote-56) Commenting on the Blanquists in the wake of the Commune, Engels argued that this group were ‘socialists only in sentiment’, because their model of socialism was not underpinned by anything like an adequate account of either the class struggle or of the historical basis for socialism itself. And in stark contrast to the claim that he and Marx were closet Jacobins he dismissed Blanqui’s proposal that the revolution be a ‘*coup de main* by a small revolutionary minority’, and claimed that the Blanquist (Jacobin) approach was an ‘obsolete’ model of revolution as ‘dictatorship’.[[57]](#endnote-57) Indeed, against elitist models of revolutionary politics, as early as 1845 Marx and Engels argued that revolution was necessary not only because ‘the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way’, but also because ‘the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew’.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Socialism, from this perspective, could only emerge out of the real movement for solidarity from below through which workers would change. This conception of change in struggle is the point at which Marx sees the future prefigured in the present. Indeed, far from having an instrumental vision of workers’ struggles, according to Marx socialism is ‘workers’ power’,[[59]](#endnote-59) and this, as Engels insisted, is the modern meaning of democracy.[[60]](#endnote-60) More specifically, democracy, or rather social self-determination won through collective struggle, is the concrete meaning Marx gives to freedom.

In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously argued that ‘the criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that *for man the supreme being is man*, and thus with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions* in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being’.[[61]](#endnote-61) While dismissed as a youthful excess by Althusser, Marx’s early ethical concern with human freedom, understood through Hegel’s synthesis of Kantian and Aristotelian themes,[[62]](#endnote-62) informed all his subsequent work. So, if the young Marx followed Kant and Hegel to insist that ‘freedom is so much the essence of man that even its opponents realise it in that they fight its reality’,[[63]](#endnote-63) this idea was not dropped but was in fact profoundly deepened in *Capital* and in his mature political writings.

At its simplest, Marx argued that freedom must be historically grounded, first and foremost, in the satisfaction of our basic needs. Thus in the third volume of *Capital* he argued that ‘the realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends.… The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite’.[[64]](#endnote-64) However, Marx’s model of human freedom is historical in a second sense; not only do increases in the productivity of labour create the potential for people to devote more time to the development of ‘human powers as an end in itself’, but also, as labour productivity increases so too do human needs expand.[[65]](#endnote-65) And as human needs and powers expand through history so does the potential for the realisation of human freedom.[[66]](#endnote-66)

For instance, Carol Gould points out that the concept of freedom is a major theme of Marx’s *Grundrisse* where it is understood as a process through which ‘social individuals’ come to realise themselves through their labours.[[67]](#endnote-67) This idea is expressed in *Capital* thus: ‘Through this movement he acts upon nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature’.[[68]](#endnote-68) Freedom consequently is understood not merely as a necessary, negative, aspect of our relationship to nature, but also positively as a process of ‘self-realisation’ through work.[[69]](#endnote-69) Gould argues that Marx took Hegel’s conception of freedom as self-realisation and reinterpreted it in materialist language to explain how we not only realise our potential through labour, but also recreate our very nature as our needs and capacities expand through purposeful social activity.[[70]](#endnote-70) This ‘historical form of humanism’[[71]](#endnote-71) is evident in the *Grundrisse* whereMarx praised capitalism for creating the potential for a ‘rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as it is in its consumption’.[[72]](#endnote-72) Thus, for Marx, as our needs and capacities change through history so too does our essence. Commenting on this perspective, Allen Wood has argued that while the sixth of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ does not entail a denial of human essence, it does assert ‘that this essence is inextricably bound up with the social relationships in which those individuals stand, and must be understood in light of them’.[[73]](#endnote-73)

Thus historicised, the human essence as freedom is best understood as an immanent force which evolves over time through a process of collective struggles shaped by the development of humanity’s productive forces.[[74]](#endnote-74) And contra the attempts by analytical Marxists such as Norman Geras and Jerry Cohen to reduce Marx to the status of a minor moral theorist, Marx’s rejection of the one-dimensional abstractions of moral (Kantian) theory is rooted in his view that workers’ struggles opened the door to a conception of human freedom that was significantly deeper than Kant’s vision of the moral suppression of (egoistic) desire.[[75]](#endnote-75) For Marx, the concrete meaning of human freedom changes through history as the material parameters for its realisation expand and as groups form through struggle to fight for the realisation of these expanding demands.[[76]](#endnote-76) Against a unilinear reading of Marx’s comment that history has moved through ‘the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production’, Eric Hobsbawm suggests that those stages be understood as a logical, not a historical, progression – a movement towards the growing ‘individualisation of man’.[[77]](#endnote-77) As Gould argues, the importance of this point for Marx cannot be overstated, for Marx insists that ‘although an individual cannot become free in isolation from others, nonetheless it is only individuals who are free’.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Nevertheless, Marx’s mature conception of freedom does not end with individual self-realisation. Our existence as social individuals presupposes some degree of division of labour as the medium through which society itself is possible.[[79]](#endnote-79) This social basis for politics means that it is impossible to develop *all* of our potential. What we can do, is remove most of the barriers to human self-realisation that are a consequence of the technical or manufacturing division of labour, thus allowing people to flourish to a level that is presently denied the vast majority. Beyond this aim, the necessary (social) aspects of the division of labour are best understood as the historical precondition for our exercise of real democratic control over the product of our social labours. It is for this reason that Marx concretely conceives the struggle for freedom as the struggle to win the battle for democracy. As George Brenkert argues, Marx’s conception of freedom does not involve an impossible all-round conception of self-realisation but rather self-realisation that is best understood as social self-determination through democracy.[[80]](#endnote-80) Thus, in volume three of *Capital* he wrote:

Freedom ... can consist only in this, that socialised man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their common control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.[[81]](#endnote-81)

**The Politics of Freedom**

Elsewhere I have noted Lars Lih’s demolition of what he calls the ‘textbook interpretation’ of Leninism, according to which Lenin’s contempt for the intellectual capacities of workers underpins his insistence on building a party of professional revolutionaries who would bring socialist ideas to the working class from without and subsequently lead this class in a top-down manner.[[82]](#endnote-82) By contrast with this myth, Lih shows that Lenin’s underlying assumption in *What is to be Done?* was an optimism about the possibility of the growth of socialist consciousness within the Russian working class, combined with scathing criticisms of the weaknesses of Russia’s radical intelligentsia generally and the Russian socialist movement specifically, which, or so he claimed, were in grave danger of failing the workers’ movement in the coming revolution.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Lenin strategy of building a revolutionary party assumed this optimistic analysis of the potential of working-class struggle to underpin the emergence of a widespread socialist movement. In this, as Lih points out, Lenin followed the logic of Marx’s politics. Because Marx insisted that socialism can only come from below, he realised that it necessarily would emerge from sectional and fragmented struggles, and it is the sectional and fragmentary nature of the struggle which creates differences between more and less advanced workers, a process which underpins the emergence of a ‘vanguard’ of socialist leaders. Consequently, though collective working-class struggles can begin to prefigure aspects of socialism because such struggles necessarily emerge in a fragmented and sectional way they also give rise to forms leadership that are not at all prefigurative in that sense. More concretely, Lih points out that whereas ‘[s]ometimes the dictum [socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class] is viewed as the opposite of the vanguard outlook … in actuality, it makes vanguardism almost inevitable. If the proletariat is the only agent capable of introducing socialism, then it must go through some process that will prepare it to carry out that great deed’.[[84]](#endnote-84)

The key aim of such a party is to create the conditions for its own dissolution by winning a majority of workers’ to socialism. Michael Löwy points out that for Marx while ‘the proletariat tends towards the totality through its practice of the class struggle’, this process is necessarily mediated through a revolutionary socialist party.[[85]](#endnote-85) The role of such an organisation is not to preach ‘the truth’ but to ‘participat[e] closely in the process of class struggle, helping the proletariat to find, through its own historical practice, the path to communist revolution’.[[86]](#endnote-86) This is the practical corollary of Marx’s famous claim that ‘Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence’.[[87]](#endnote-87) It is from this perspective that Marx envisaged an ethical anti-capitalism which escaped the narrow nihilistic parameters of bourgeois society.[[88]](#endnote-88)

If Lenin’s contribution to Marxism included this focus the practical political consequences of this ethical critique of capitalism,[[89]](#endnote-89) he deepened the Marxist conception of democracy in *The* *State and Revolution*. Through an engagement with Marx and Engels’ writings on freedom and the state and on the basis of his experience of the 1905 Revolution (the arguments of *The State and Revolution* were formulated prior to 1917),[[90]](#endnote-90) Lenin reasserted Marx’s claim that socialism could only come through the ‘smashing’ of the old capitalist state and deepened it by showing that the concrete contemporary form of freedom as democracy involved the immense expansion of democracy characteristic of workers’ councils (soviets).[[91]](#endnote-91)

Workers’ councils offer the possibility of expanding democracy by overcoming the separation characteristic of capitalism between economics and politics.[[92]](#endnote-92) By thus extending the scope of democratic activity into an arena whose operation is falsely naturalised within both classical and neoclassical economic theory, workers councils act as the practical political basis for the socialist critique of capitalism. Beyond this, as Alex Callinicos has argued, something like the original Russian soviets are a necessary political prerequisite for the operation of the kinds of economic democracy modelled by socialists such as Pat Devine.[[93]](#endnote-93) Writing in the 1980s at a time when the idea of market socialism was in the ascendency, Devine pointed out that while the growing literature on market socialism started from a recognition of the limits of the ‘statist’[[94]](#endnote-94) economies of the Eastern Bloc, theorists of market socialism tended to counterpose to these regimes not the real economies of the West but rather their reified image as found in neoliberal textbooks. It was against this tacit tendency to idealise the operation of markets in really existing capitalist societies that Devine reiterated the Marxist critique of the inefficiencies, crisis prone tendencies, and exploitative essence of real market economies.

In opposition to both state and market authoritarianisms, Devine’s model of economic democracy was founded upon the idea of ‘negotiated coordination’ of production through democratic control from below.[[95]](#endnote-95) Concretely, Devine suggests, contra ‘statism’, decision making should be decentralised downwards to the people affected by the decisions, and, contra market economics, the *ex ante* rather than *ex post* coordination of the economy by people whose democratic participation would allow them to ‘transcend their narrow self-interest’.[[96]](#endnote-96)

**Conclusion**

Of course the soviets of 1917 quickly degenerated. Anarchists have an easy answer as to why this happened: Lenin, following Marx, reproduced the worst forms of hierarchical politics associated with the system they nominally aimed to overthrow. As I’ve suggested this critique is underpinned by anarchism’s embrace of a more or less explicit conception of egoistic individualism which negates the possibility not only of socialism but also of anything beyond a weak and elitist model of democracy. Marxists share anarchism’s revulsion at Stalinism, but provide a materialist explanation of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution in terms of the dramatic narrowing of possibilities under the whip of necessity.[[97]](#endnote-97) In essence it was this context that killed the Revolution. This means that they are more forgiving of the errors made by Lenin because they were made whilst trying to defend the Revolution in the hope that similar Revolutions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe would break Russia’s isolation.[[98]](#endnote-98)

As I noted in the introduction, Lenin’s argument presupposes that which Alasdair MacIntyre has denied: the revolutionary *socialist* potential of the modern working class. If MacIntyre’s own work on social practice is an attempt to rethink ethics in this context, Critchley’s comments on contemporary anarchism betray a lack of awareness of implications of rejecting Marx’s conception of the working class. In the *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx argued that his ‘new materialism’ escaped the limitations of modern morality because it took as its standpoint the ‘social humanity’ represented principally by collective working-class struggles against alienation.[[99]](#endnote-99) Conversely, the modern nihilistic simulacrum of morality has socio-historical determinants in the standpoint of civil society, and anarchist difficulties conceptualising democracy stem from the embeddedness of important aspects of this standpoint in its model of human nature.

Whereas modern moral theory, pre-eminently Kantianism, confronts egoism with an abstract call to duty against desire, workers’ struggles can act as a concrete and potentially systemic counter to alienated egoism; suggesting an immanent convergence of duty and desire through the idea of solidarity. If the conflict between desire and duty in Kant reflects the tragic nature of egoistic individualism, Marx’s vision of an alternative to civil society, being rooted in the real movement of workers from below, is concrete and explicitly interested. Marx’s politics is best understood, therefore, not crudely in opposition to morality but as an expression of a social practice that overcomes the opposition between materialism and idealism. Working-class solidarity points to a need and desire for association through which social duty, initially as class solidarity and eventually as human solidarity, can cease to be an abstract moral imperative. Because Marxist *revolutionary* politics is thus rooted in the emergence from below of a new classwith new modes of association it would be a mistake to reduce it to the kind of top-down (active nihilist) *insurrectionary* politics that merely reproduce traditional political hierarchies.

Because anarchist critics of Marx and Lenin have tended to reduce Marxist revolutionary practice to pre-Marxist insurrectionary politics, they fail to extricate themselves from the standpoint of civil society. This is the intellectual core of Bakunin’s otherwise absurd claim that ‘by education and by nature [Marx] is a Jacobin, and his favourite dream is of political dictatorship’.[[100]](#endnote-100) Bakunin’s superficial and silly rhetoric about Marx’s supposed will to power, actually reveals anarchism to be the flipside of elite theory: like Robert Michels and Lord Acton anarchists tend to confuse democracy with authoritarianism because their conception of human nature leads them to a secularised version of the original sin myth: all power, even democratic authority, corrupts.[[101]](#endnote-101)

This assumption informs the inherent elitism of direct action. As Ben Franks points out, direct action is best understood as a form of ‘practical prefiguration’.[[102]](#endnote-102) However, whereas Franks conceives this as the ethical other to Leninist instrumentalism, in effect it tends to inform the kind of political susbstitutionism that has been a recurrent failing of the twentieth-century left. If the rational core of anarchist practice reflects the reality of the unevenness of anti-capitalism across the population, the fetishisation of direct action as *the* form of opposition tends to reify the problems of unevenness. Lenin, by contrast, once his politics are suitably recovered from their caricature at the hands of Stalin, reacted to this problem by fighting to overcome it: if vanguards reflect the unevenness of the spontaneous rebellion against capital, Lenin’s goal was to organise the vanguard to create the conditions for its own dissolution. Against capital’s alienated imperative to accumulate for accumulation’s sake,[[103]](#endnote-103) Marxist politics is rooted in those struggles which, as Terry Eagleton suggests, prefigure the structures through which our emergent need and desire for solidarity might be realised.[[104]](#endnote-104) Amongst the forms of revolutionary *phronesis* (practical wisdom)[[105]](#endnote-105) required of such activists is an ability to lead in a way that escapes the Weberian conflation of leadership with domination. This is the ethics of Leninism, and it is rooted in a wager on the socialist potential of ordinary working-class people.[[106]](#endnote-106)

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