

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



The Lady or the Tiger

Anarcha-councilism and Invisible Dictatorship in
Autonomous Societies

John Farthing II

John Farthing II
The Lady or the Tiger
Anarcha-councilism and Invisible Dictatorship in
Autonomous Societies
September 2017

theanarchistlibrary.org

September 2017

Chiapas and Rojava have broken the Jacobin pattern, while Bakunin, Bookchin, Ocalan, and the present humble author, among others, have laid preliminary theoretical foundations to build on. And Arendt, infuriating apologist that she was, laid the cornerstone with her recognition of the council system as the true revolutionary alternative to systems of oppression propped up by authoritarian centralized government. Protecting our self-created and precious councilist societies, free territories, and autonomous zones will be among our most important tasks as the planetary social revolution evolves. As in our beloved prototype of Rojava, we will fight wars and experience the joy and sorrow of true human communion through solidarity, direct democracy, mutual aid, and compassionate social justice.

I offer these preliminary thoughts on invisible dictatorship and anarcha-councilism. I'm fully aware that further development in theory and practice will be required, and that in our experimentation there will be inevitable mistakes, setbacks, and tragedies. We will learn from them and grow stronger. Our endgame is libertarian socialism, councilist confederation, heterarchy, ecological restoration, antinational liberation from all interlocking systems of oppression, and the founding of a new civilization in which the concepts of individual sovereignty, voluntary association, and the symbiosis of mutual aid are understood as essential truths that our species has payed an unspeakable price in blood and unnecessary suffering to learn.

All authoritarians are counterrevolutionaries, and the only legitimate dictatorship is silent, subtle, and unseen. All power to the soviets.

John Farthing II

with my dear friend and hometown comrade Martin Bemberg (the guy with the red bandana on his neck, name used with permission) punching a Nazi after being attacked himself; on my return in our dialogue I found a person with the existential dilemma of being a soul who wants peace and human solidarity while being forced by conscience to confront evil and prevent the next genocide by any means necessary.

I was originally planning to address science fiction in relation to anarchism in this essay, and it's a rich vein: Robert Heinlein, Phillip K. Dick, Aleister Reynolds, Ursula Le Guin and many other authors have given us gifts of imagined future possibilities that are relevant to liberationist efforts. But history intervened in Charlottesville, and I must conclude with a heavier heart and more weighted considerations. Time is passing too quickly. There is a realistic possibility of a second American Civil War commencing within our lifetimes, perhaps more sooner than later. White supremacists and their alt-lite collaborationist allies have already declared war on all people marginalized by race, gender, sexual identity, poverty, or non-conformity and resistance to American imperialism and capitalist hegemony. Trump has welcomed Nazis into his camp, legitimized them, and made subtle promises of future atrocities. Things have gone full accelerationist as nuclear threats are traded by mirror-image narcissist sociopaths and all pretenses of the legitimacy of national governments fall by the wayside, in the US most of all- in our nihilism and white insecurity we elected a leader who manifests all that is worst in us. Anarchism becomes ever more relevant with the rebirth of fascism, while nationalism and capitalism become more transparently bankrupt with each passing day. At some point in the near future historical momentum will swing towards revolution again- we can't force it or engineer it, but we can prepare and educate ourselves on recurring historical patterns, especially the inevitable self-generation of autonomous councils and federations as a challenge and an alternative to nation-state tyranny.

Contents

Arendt and the Council System	5
Machajski and the Iron Law	9
Postmodern Councilism	13
Invisible Dictatorship Reconsidered	18

tactics and are to some degree anti-nationalist. And perhaps most importantly, both affirm that human liberation begins with women's liberation and empowerment. Both also value ecological preservation and mutual aid against capitalist exploitation, so we can summarize the Zapatista and Rojavan revolutionaries as ecofeminist libertarian socialists, and right now they are the beacon of the world. But how do they deal with authoritarian infiltration? Beats the hell out of me, I can't find any sources on the subject, although Bookchin's life-partner and social ecology colleague Janet Biehl seems to be asking the relevant questions. Will someone with accurate knowledge please come forward and educate us? I'm completely sincere in this request. It's a vital issue that we revolutionists need to understand, as opposed to our current state of total ignorance.

So we have here the beginning of anarcha-councilist theory. Much of the original inspiration for this essay came from speculations that occurred to me while reading science fiction, and the subtle filtering of imaginative SF concepts through my later study of theoretical anarchism and my experiences organizing antifa groups confronting fascists wherever we could find them. Specifically Frank Herbert's "Bureau of Sabotage" from *The Dosadi Experiment* was in the back of my mind while reading Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and the other classic theorists, but it became almost a compulsive riddle of how to sabotage counterrevolution as I read Arendt and Machajski. So I began to write in my jail cell while the world moved on and a beautiful anti-fascist woman was murdered by a man beholden to the ideological demons of genocide and dehumanization. Heather Heyer, rest in power dear one, we're paying attention and we are outraged. And we will act.

This essay was written while I was in a Nebraska jail for DWI, August 1st through 23rd 2017, and I watched on CNN my comrades from Central Arkansas Antifa and Boston Mountains Antiracist Action fighting Nazis in the streets of Charlottesville. The clip they showed over and over again begins

living under the guns and police and jackboots of authoritarian government. We play the sacred role of Kali, Demeter in mourning, and Clytemnestra in righteously destroying that which needs to be eliminated. The only priority and motivation here is community self-defense taken on by those who feel an ethical responsibility to do it competently and with as little bloodshed as possible. This is Kropotkin's version of revolutionary tactics applied to internal security operations. If those who, whether from sincere misapprehension, neurotic vigilante fantasies, or cynical opportunism seek to misuse this autonomist invisibility praxis to gain influence over the structure or decisions of the soviets then they have become what we are trying to regulate- essentially an ambitious political party in anarchist clothing, in need themselves of regulation from the invisible dictatorship of the general heterarchy. We are all responsible for protecting our autonomy, and if we ever become indifferent to this fact we and our children will be enslaved, again. In short our invisible dictatorship must be always iconoclastic and never prescriptive, in the fulfillment and transcendence of anarchist tradition.

Before going further with theoretical speculation on the praxis of invisible dictatorship we would do well to examine in more detail the laboratories of the world's most advanced autonomous zones, Chiapas and Rojava. We have spoken of the theoretical work of Bookchin and Ocalan. But what's happening on the ground?

They've developed a form of revolution very different from those of 1776-1994. There are some parallels with the Free Territory of Ukraine 1919 and the anarcho-syndacalyst-controlled areas in the Spanish Revolution of 1936, but Chiapas and Rojava have already lasted longer and developed further than those noble and doomed predecessors. They were founded among marginalized ethnic groups (Mayans and Kurds) that have made inclusiveness in regard to those of differing race and religion a fundamental doctrine. Both utilize dual power

Anarchist theory has traditionally been more iconoclastic than prescriptive- we're more clear and consistent in our indictment of existing social forms than in our proposed alternatives. I've frequently said in debate, "Can't we agree to abolish the State and other oppressive institutions, and figure out the economics later?" This is valid up to a point: the future will be an evolving experimental laboratory, not something engineered and constructed from a theoretical blueprint. But this experimentalist iconoclasm can easily become an excuse for intellectual laziness and a nihilistic disregard of consequences- if we look at the history of revolutions in the capitalist/industrial era, there are some obvious patterns we can identify that would allow us to be more prescriptive in theory and practice. This is especially true regarding the praxis of revolutionary decision-making councils, and the need to sabotage the authoritarian threat to them that inevitably exists in the form of political parties and other aspiring oligarchies. Several non-anarchist thinkers have given us rich conceptual tools to understand these issues, foremost among them Hannah Arendt and Wacław Machajski.

Arendt and the Council System

Inspired by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Arendt followed her better known *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with the infuriating yet brilliant work *On Revolution* published in 1963. Infuriating because she engages in incoherent abstractions, untranslated polyglot scholasticism, naive apologism for a falsely idealized American parliamentary democracy, and a seemingly willful and compulsive obtuseness on subjects like capitalism, imperialism, and the libertarian-socialist critique that is ignored despite its obvious relevance to her central thesis. But brilliant nonetheless, as she traces the historical development of two competing political systems (the Party and

Council models) from 1776-1956 through every revolution in that period, with the inexplicable exceptions of Makhnovist Ukraine and Free Catalonia. It's as if she couldn't bear to apply her prodigious intellect to the possibility of anarchist social organization, where her ideas were most relevant within a comprehensive body of political philosophy. More on these irrational blind spots later; for now let us consider the conceptual gifts she's given to us whose existence she can hardly bear to acknowledge.

After meandering through Greek, Roman, English, American and French history and political philosophy (with keen insight and obscurantist nonsense in equal measure), she presents in the final 30 pages of the book a startling analysis of councilism as a viable and recurring historical tendency (specifically in the capitalist/industrial era) in opposition to governments based on the rule of political parties, be they parliamentary "democracies" or one-party dictatorships. This model is worth quoting at some length:

"...This aspect is the regular emergence, during the course of revolution, of a new form of government that resembled in an amazing fashion Jefferson's ward system and seemed to repeat, under no matter what circumstances, the revolutionary societies and municipal councils which had spread all over France after 1789. Among the reasons that recommend this aspect to our attention must first be mentioned that we deal here with the phenomenon that impressed most the two greatest revolutionists of the whole period, Marx and Lenin, when they were witnessing its spontaneous rise, the former during the Parisian Commune of 1871 and the latter in 1905, during the first Russian Revolution. What struck them was not only the fact that they themselves were entirely unprepared for these events, but also that they knew they were confronted with a repetition unaccounted for by any conscious imitation or even remembrance of the past. To be sure, they had hardly any knowledge of Jefferson's ward system, but they knew well enough

could even lead to a global civil war between neoliberal plutocrats and autonomist federations. My hope here is to offer a specifically anarchist social organization that's capable of adaptive evolution, sustainable development, and community self-defense. Maximum autonomy and liberationist insurrection are the goals of anarcha-councilism; heterarchy, antinationalism and invisible dictatorship are means towards the endgame of liberation and self-determination for every sentient being on this planet. I sincerely believe that free people practicing mutual aid will in time replace capitalism and statism as we mature as a species.

But we're a century or two away from that beautiful vision, and for the present we have some brutal realities to deal with. The first rule of invisible dictatorship: don't talk about invisible dictatorship. The second rule of invisible dictatorship: limit yourself to one stupid pop-culture caricature per theoretical essay. Here's the issue with formal attempts to combat counter-revolution: we all have egos, ambitions, shadow selves, and authoritarian tendencies. While councils and federations *might choose to designate official and visible Bureaus of Sabotage (a phrase I appropriated from Frank Herbert, genius author best known for his Dune series, more on this later) to guard against oligarchic ambitions, these bureaus could themselves devolve into authoritarian forms. This issue will have to be worked out in practice, experimentally. Invisible dictatorship should consist of diffused, volunteer, and quiet associations of autonomous individuals with a shared will to neutralize authoritarianism as it emerges using minimalist tactics for maximalist results- there is a fine and subtle art of sabotage/subversion we'll need to develop, beginning with horizontal decisions made within cells of liberationist conspirators.

Another key concept is that the invisible dictatorship must never seek to guide, influence, or create: our only task is to destroy efforts to re-enslave sovereign individuals in autonomous and councilist free societies, and protect ourselves from again

and ambiguous abstraction inherited from Bakunin. Let us begin with the concept of invisibility. Robespierre presented himself and his party as the concentrated and forcefully visible expression of "the will of the people". Lenin would do the same 125 years later, with the Bolshevik tyranny further rationalized by appeals to Marxist ideology, specifically a vanguardist interpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As we enter this new period of revolutionary history we may expect both old and new justifications from those who wish to replace the current elites with themselves as our new oligarchs, under the cloak of ideological rationalization. They will be visible. As invisibles our goal truly is all power to the soviets (councils), and we must conspire in cabals, cells of subversion that act from individual conscience, voluntary association, and revolutionary self-defense to protect our autonomy as individuals, councils, and federations.

What Bookchin (in his post-anarchist phase) referred to as Communalism I prefer to frame as anarcha-councilism. I have no quarrel with Bookchin nor his many students who are doing excellent work, but I prefer a theory and terminology which affirms that we *are still anarchists, somewhat to the libertarian left of Ocalan and Bookchin, while we broadly agree with their councilism by whatever name it goes by. Anarcha-councilism uses the feminine suffix because we recognize that, as Ocalan has said, human liberation begins with women's liberation. It's an anarchist philosophy because it recognizes the core principles of individual sovereignty, voluntary association, community/federational autonomy, and revolutionary self-defense in the insurrectionist tradition. While building on the work of non-anarchist thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Wacław Machajski, the concepts of heterarchy and invisible dictatorship as diffused protection of the councils are firmly in the anarchist tradition, though underdeveloped.

I hope the Rojavan model will go viral; if so it will develop and adapt to different cultural and political factors. It

the revolutionary role the sections of the first Parisian Commune played in the French Revolution, except that they had never thought of them as possible germs for a new form of government but had regarded them as mere instruments to be dispensed with once the revolution came to an end. Now, however, they were confronted with popular organs- the communes, the councils, the Rate, the soviets- which clearly intended to survive the revolution. This contradicted all their theories and, even more importantly, was in flagrant contradiction with those assumptions about the nature of power and violence which they shared, albeit unconsciously, with the rulers of the doomed or defunct regimes. Firmly anchored in the tradition of the nation-state, they conceived of revolution as a means to seize power, and they identified power with the monopoly of the means of violence. What actually happened, however, was a swift disintegration of the old power, the sudden loss of control over the means of violence, and, at the same time, the amazing formation of a new power structure which owed its existence to nothing but the organizational impulses of the people themselves. In other words, when the moment of revolution had come, it turned out there was no power left to seize, so that the revolutionists found themselves before the rather uncomfortable alternative of either putting their own pre-revolutionary 'power', that is, the organization of the party apparatus, into the vacated power centre of the defunct government, or simply joining the new power centres which had sprung up without their help".

She's right: these councils have self-generated in every revolution of the modern era, including those of 1776, 1789, 1848, 1871, 1905, 1917, 1936, 1949, 1953, 1956, 1968 (Paris and Czechoslovakia both), and on into our own "postmodern" era in Chiapas 1994 and Rojava 2012. These last two have been notably non-Marxist and resistant to party co-optation, and thus deserve special attention. But first let us first consider three pivotal issues that Arendt brings up: the problem of American

exceptionalism, the difference between political and social motivations in revolutionary efforts, and the French prototype of revolutionary dictatorship.

She never uses the term "American exceptionalism", and I do so in a very specific sense outside of its common racist and imperialist historical meaning, which her writings could be also interpreted to implicitly endorse. But there's an explicit and relevant point here, and that is the radically different paths followed by the American and French revolutions, with all subsequent uprisings following the French model. The fact is that the American Revolution ended in a relatively stable two-party parliamentary republic. This is opposed to the one-party dictatorship developed by the Jacobins and emulated by the Bolsheviks, as well as the multi-party systems of continental Europe. The reason for this difference Arendt ascribes to the "social question": While Europe suffered under the grinding poverty that the French (and later the Marxists) felt obligated to relieve, the "abundance" of America allowed its political philosophers and revolutionists to address the political issues of the rights and responsibilities of collective decision-making without reference to the social problems of poverty that Europe inherited from feudalism that were further exacerbated by capitalism. Here again Arendt's blind spots loom large: she devotes one paragraph each to capitalism and to American slavery—the displaced misery that made American "abundance" possible. She acknowledges the horror and injustice of each and then blithely moves on. The imperialist and genocidal history of European aggression against Native Americans she does not mention at all.

Despite this yawning conceptual and moral abyss, Arendt was essentially correct in recognizing that while America followed its own path it was France that would provide the model for 200 years of revolutionary history and praxis. While the unsuccessful revolutions never made it past the councilist phase before falling prey to counterrevolutionary reaction or dissolu-

the responsibility of sabotaging aspiring oligarchies and other authoritarian tendencies as they emerge.

This should be accomplished with minimal necessary force; authoritarians should be hindered and harassed and mocked off the political stage long before it becomes necessary to assassinate them. A well-timed pie in Lenin's face (which was hilarious back then) might have derailed the Bolshevik train, whereas by the time Stalin was established as absolute ruler killing him would have been the only option to stop the statist horror being perpetrated. Killing is sometimes morally and strategically justified, but even when so it always implies a failure of the invisible dictatorship: the problem should have been addressed sooner, more subtly, and with a lesser degree of violence. Stalin was the apotheosis of visible dictatorship, in the form of a cult of personality that sought not only absolute control over the lives of his subjects but also their thoughts and internal realities. Invisible dictatorship must be something very different, indeed diametrically opposite. So what are we talking about here?

Both anarchy-councilism and invisible dictatorship imply a system of heterarchy, what anarchists commonly refer to as horizontal decision-making. Further implied is the need for mechanisms whereby those who want power over others least may regulate those who want it most. And not only (perhaps idealized) libertarian individuals, but entire communities and federations need these DIY checks on authoritarian ambitions, whether from traditional rightist counterrevolutionaries or those on the authoritarian left offering utopias after their justified crimes against humanity. Foremost among the latter historically was Vladimir Lenin. Let us take back, redeem, and fulfill a slogan he used opportunistically and then betrayed: All power to the soviets. For real this time, motherfuckers.

Invisible dictatorship in defense of individual and council autonomy will require some fleshing out both conceptually and experimentally if its to be a working praxis rather than a vague

Bakunin in terms of a traditional Jacobin revolutionary dictatorship in new semantic and conceptual packaging- and by Machajski's analysis he may have been right, at least in terms of how it would have played out in practice even by a well-intentioned leader like Bakunin. Also Bakunin never clearly defined his terms or gave pragmatic examples of how the invisible dictatorship would function. Nevertheless he may have been on to something important, that we would do well to revisit.

Regardless of Bakunin's ambiguity, I would argue that the use of the adjective "invisible" and the massive body of his work as an anarchist opposed to all systems of dominance and hierarchy suggest that when speaking of invisible dictatorship he was advocating something qualitatively different from the Jacobin/Bolshevik model of revolutionary dictatorship, which was certainly "visible" and offered ideological justifications for authoritarian institutions in post-revolutionary society. This conflict between libertarian and authoritarian visions (including as a key element the conflict between council and party models of organization) was the essential and irreconcilable dispute between Bakunin and Marx that split the First International. So to the degree that Bakunin's explanation and advocacy of invisible dictatorship falls short in terms of clarity and integration within a philosophical system I ascribe this (perhaps optimistically and opportunistically) to other factors than his espousing hypocritical and crypto-authoritarian rationalizations. And, regardless of Bakunin's original and poorly expressed intentions, I'm going to appropriate the term to address the vital issue of revolutionary defense of the councils against attempted authoritarian co-optation. To provide an operational definition:

Invisible Dictatorship: A will towards libertarian conspiracy diffused horizontally throughout the population of an autonomous zone, and practiced by those willing to volunteer for

tion, Robespierre and the Jacobins laid down the pattern to be followed almost exactly by Lenin and the Bolsheviks: in both cases a centralized and paranoid authoritarian party would first utilize the popular appeal of the councils/soviets to gain power, only to betray, co-opt, and neutralize those councils when horizontal decision-making became a threat to the statist one-party dictatorship the political parties aspired to. Afterward the (counter) revolution would inevitably devour its own children: of the 7 original comrades of the Bolshevik Central Committee 6 were killed by Stalin, the sole survivor. Likewise Robespierre and his accomplices died by the same guillotine to which they had sent so many opponents in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, paving the way for the autocratic cult of personality of Napoleon, which is again resonant with Stalin, Mao, and other tyrants who used the idea of liberationist revolution to accomplish authoritarian dictatorship.

Machajski and the Iron Law

Moving past the problematic genius of Hannah Arendt we must consider other non-anarchist thinkers crucial to our prescriptive councilist theoretics, primary among them the post-Marxist founder of the small "Workers' Conspiracy" movement active in both the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions, Jan Wacław Machajski. To understand Machajski's insight we must first mention the brilliant if arguably pessimistic insight of Robert Michels, one of the founders of the political science schools of "Elite Theory" and "Moderation Theory", who in his 1911 book *Political Parties* developed the sociological theory known as the Iron Law of Oligarchy. This concept does much to clarify Machajski's insight. It rests on a foundation of understanding human relations in the context of "the oligarchical tendencies of group life". In the words of the superb and almost forgotten scholar who wrote under the pseudonym Max No-

mad, in his work *Aspects of Revolt*: "In other words, according to Michels, every human collective, regardless of its professed humanitarian, democratic, or libertarian principles, is always dominated by a minority comprised of the most intelligent, the most energetic and the most unscrupulous. Sooner or later, the minority sets itself up as a tightly organized conspiracy of intermediaries, as it were, between the rank and file and the Cause-Faith, Ideal, Country, Morality- for the sake of which that collective body had been organized. To these "intermediaries" the maintenance of the organization, that is, their power over it, always becomes more important than the "Cause" which that organization was meant to serve."

Machajski essentially (and independently) envisioned this unforgiving picture of humans as self-serving political animals and extrapolated it to the utopian illusions of socialism. He pointed out that, even under socialism, differing skill sets would result in differing wages based on their perceived worth to society. Those with higher wages (intellectuals, managerial technocrats, and career politicians) could afford better education for their children, with the result being a hereditary ruling class privilege; basically an aristocracy of merit reinforced by class loyalty among the upper tiers of statist "socialist" society, which as it valued science, administration of a centralized economy, and bureaucratic government services would create a new privileged class of these specialists, kept in line through the benefits and threats of mandatory membership in the Communist Party if one had any ambitions of upward social mobility. Meanwhile the masses of peasants and factory workers would toil under conditions worse than those they suffered under the Czars. The remarkable thing is that Machajski predicted all this with almost 100% accuracy (regarding the class system that developed in the USSR and persisted from Stalin to Gorbachev) as early as 1905 from his understanding of human nature in the context of Russian culture and utopian socialist fallacies. Machajski halfheartedly suggested that equality of in-

you will ask, if we are anarchists, by what right do we wish to and by what method can we influence the people? Rejecting any power, by what power or rather by what force shall we direct the people's revolution? An invisible force—recognized by no one, imposed by no one—through which the collective dictatorship of our organization will be all the mightier, the more it remains invisible and unacknowledged, the more it remains without any official legality and significance."

Bakunin's June 2, 1870 letter to Nechayev[5] "

This theme is also to be found in a letter sent by Bakunin to Albert Richard, a fellow member of the Alliance of Social Democracy during the turmoil surrounding the Paris Commune:[6]

" They appeal for order, for trust in, for submission to those who, in the course and in the name of the Revolution, seized and legalized their own dictatorial powers; this is how such political revolutionaries reconstitute the State. We, on the contrary, must awaken and foment all the dynamic passions of the people. We must bring forth anarchy, and in the midst of the popular tempest, we must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution, not by any kind of overt power but by the collective dictatorship of all our allies [members of the anarchist vanguard organization International Alliance of Social Democracy], a dictatorship without tricks, without official titles, without official rights, and therefore all the more powerful, as it does not carry the trappings of power. This is the only dictatorship I will accept, but in order to act, it must first be created, it must be prepared and organized in advance, for it will not come into being by itself, neither by discussions, nor by theoretical disputations, nor by mass propaganda meetings... "

Now, it is troubling that the first quote comes from a letter to Nechayev, who was a sociopathic and nihilistic Russian conspiracist that Bakunin had a relatively short bromance with, until the madness and authoritarian aspirations of the former became overwhelmingly apparent. Nechayev clearly interpreted

commandante Marcos in Chiapas, Ocalan is the figurehead of a strangely non-authoritarian cult of personality, and when he espoused this new philosophy of democratic confederalism the PKK in Turkey and their sister organizations among the Syrian Kurds went full libertarian along with him. The civil war in Syria allowed the Kurds and their allies in Northern Syria (including Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens, Armenians and Circassians) to form in 2012 the Autonomous Territory of Rojava, a non-statist federation of assemblies and councils in confederation comprised of 3 cantons. The birth of a social revolution in the midst of a civil war, specifically one that includes fascists (ISIS), imperialist neighbors on all sides, and a "socialist" state in the form of Assad's repressive government known for its use of chemical weapons, is very resonant with Catalonia 1936. Except this time libertarian councilists are running the show and building the social revolution with joy, dancing and the blood of YPG & YPJ warriors, without the overlordship of Stalinist counterrevolutionaries (although the "alliance" with imperialist America may prove a similar challenge). But aside from external threats to their new libertarian socialist society, what about subversion from inside in the form of aspiring authoritarians, be they leaders or parties? What about the iron law?

Invisible Dictatorship Reconsidered

An answer may perhaps be found in the letters of the forefather of anarchist revolutionaries, Mikhail Bakunin, who advocated an ill-defined concept he called "Invisible Dictatorship". Two quotes shamelessly lifted from wikipedia should provide an example of the nebulous concept he was trying to develop:

"We are bitter foes of all official power, even if it were ultra-revolutionary power. We are enemies of all publicly acknowledged dictatorship; we are social-revolutionary anarchists. But

come might solve the problem, but one senses that he knew that this was his own contribution to utopian fallacy. Further, just once in his earlier work he admitted his belief that revolutionary dictatorship was the only pathway forwards that could lead to social justice, provided of course that it was administered by himself and his followers who would somehow defy the Iron Law. He was totally silent on the subject in his later work, but never disavowed revolutionary dictatorship nor offered an alternative to an oligarchy of his tiny political party. Machajski was a physician who could diagnose but could not cure.

Nonetheless, we anarchists should pay close attention to the iron law of oligarchy and the tendency towards the formation of elite classes based on skills, intelligence, educational access, dynastic family nepotism, etc. These are the concerns of the Elite and Moderation schools of thought developed by Michels and other early sociologists, and imply that perhaps we will find it exceedingly difficult to eliminate parasitic exploitation of the vast majority of humanity by the few elites who enslave them, backed by the violence of State power. This is equally true of two-party or multi-party "democratic" republics. If we really want to abolish classist authoritarian rule then we must look beyond the political parties that support and legitimize elite hegemony to their mortal enemies: councils of self-determination organized by the people, for the people, as soon as they realize they're being being betrayed and asked to be complicit in their own disempowerment.

Machajski also pointed out that most revolutionaries are somehow disinherited or undervalued "outs", declasses who (often subconsciously) have a score to settle with the injustice of ruling classes and systems, the oligarchs of the moment and the procedures they use to maintain power. These are often intelligentsia or impoverished children of the upper or middle classes, and have an historical tendency to become professional revolutionists. When revolutions occur by their own momen-

tum these declassé malcontents are liberated from the jails or coffeeshops or the obscurity of their theorizing, and have a will to step into the void left by the collapse of unsustainable social forms under the weight of their inherent contradictions. They, or I should say we (because I fit the profile), are known to the public as dissidents who might be dangerous lunatics or, alternately, might have insight into alternative possibilities for social organization. Lenin or Trotsky provide a classic model of this type who cut the Gordian Knot by authoritarian solutions. Bakunin and Malatesta also fit the profile and would have tried for more nuanced and diverse libertarian solutions, but I think Machajski would say that they also would reach towards oligarchy, unconsciously and against their core convictions. This is the dilemma of autonomist revolutionaries: our leaders and thinkers offer much, but if they are true to their principles they must abdicate authority from day one, and let the people empower themselves. Subcommandante Marcos is a recent example of a professional revolutionist who has admirably attempted this. As to results the verdict is still out. In Rojava, Abdullah Ocalan is the center of a cult of personality, which is troubling. It may be the fact that he's in a Turkish prison, probably for life, that is the only thing preventing revolutionary dictatorship as he is venerated from afar, like Kropotkin in exile.

So we have here two almost universal historical tendencies vitally relevant to anarchist theory: the spontaneous self-generation of councils devoted to local self-determination and existing as an alternative to nationalist and other authoritarian political forms, and the sociological pattern of declassé and disinherited would-be oligarchs (including intellectuals as a class in the same sense as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) using the language of social justice to manipulate the exploited masses in their attempts to replace the existing unjust power structures with new privileged oligarchies comprised of themselves- a redistribution of both wealth and in-

councils vs parties and Machajski as established oligarchies vs declassé aspiring oligarchs in alliance with the impoverished masses at the bottom of the social pyramid. All of these conceptions can be usefully applied in our consideration of autonomous territories and how to protect them from authoritarian incursions, as for example in the cases of Chiapas and Rojava.

Indeed, Rojava provides the strongest validation of Bookchin's ideas in the form of Ocalan's more concrete and pragmatic philosophy of democratic confederalism, which he describes thusly in his book by the same name:

"This kind of rule or administration can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state. Democratic decision-making processes must not be confused with the processes known from public administration. States only administrate while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus. Office in the state is determined by decree, even though it may be in part legitimized by elections. Democracies use direct elections. The state uses coercion as a legitimate means. Democracies rest on voluntary participation.

Democratic confederalism is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars. In the frame of this kind of self-administration an alternative economy will become necessary, which increases the resources of the society instead of exploiting them and thus does justice to the manifold needs of the society."

Ocalan (like Bookchin) was originally a Marxist-Leninist, and leader of the PKK, a Kurdish liberationist organization in Turkey. Captured by the Turkish state in 1999, Ocalan read and corresponded with Bookchin from prison and converted from authoritarian nationalist communism to something new- libertarian, ecofeminist, antinationalist, and councilist. Like Sub-

ing and other services to refugees that the Greek government has little to no interest in helping, and has in fact collaborated with fascist groups that spread racist hatred against the refugees {<https://www.marketplace.org/2017/07/12/world/anarchists-offer-lifeline-refugees-greece>}. The anarchists of Exarchia have replaced any need for national government by applying the principles of mutual aid and voluntary association. To some degree revolutionary councils have always practiced dual power as an almost instinctual or intuitional drive towards local community empowerment at the expense of centralized government, which must mask its exploitative violence in a veneer of providing necessary services. Originally the term dual power referred to the situation in Russia after the February Revolution, with the uneasy competing powers of the soviets and the Provisional Government. Bookchin's contribution was in reinterpreting the phenomena, exploring its implications, and proposing dual power as a specific strategy for gradualist and non-violent social revolution.

The sociopolitical system that Bookchin (an avowed utopian, which- full disclosure- as a fellow theoretician I vehemently disagree with utopianism in any form) hoped would evolve from dual power tactics and federated communities he called libertarian municipalism. Inspired by an (arguably idealized) conception of classical Athenian democracy presented in the work of Kitto and Zimmern in the 1950's, the basic idea is neighborhood councils and city assemblies with maximum citizen participation in decision-making. This model, in his own words: "seeks to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship while breaking away from the bleak cycle of parliamentarism and its mystification of the 'party' mechanism as a means for public representation"-from *Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview*. Further, these assemblies would federate together to compete with nationalist political entities- indeed, to a large degree Bookchin framed the primary issue as one of city-states vs nation-states, much as Arendt framed it as

fluence. Both of these sociopolitical facts are of central pragmatic importance and must be addressed if we hope to transition to a post-revolutionary anarchist society founded on the non-negotiable premises of individual sovereignty and voluntary association. We must also address how to defend our autonomist societies against counterrevolutionary authoritarians on the left and right, as they try to neutralize and replace the federated councils with rule by political parties, be they parliamentary or dictatorial. This may require a truly Permanent Revolution that knocks down every sand castle it builds, as the masses gradually improve their conditions while they learn to manage and collectively empower themselves without dominating leaders. Trotsky's "permanent" revolution was wishful thinking that would have ended in his party as the new oligarchy on perhaps a global scale. The Permanent Revolution implied by Machajski (and perhaps Bakunin, as we shall see) would sweep aside every oligarchy that reared its elitist head.

Postmodern Councilism

While there are hints of applied councilist theory in anarchist history (Nabat in Free Ukraine and the CNT in Spain come to mind), it was not until the bankruptcy and collapse of Marxist-Leninist idealistic expectations became irrefutable in the early 1990s that a postmodern libertarian councilism first emerged among the disenfranchised indigenous peoples of Chiapas, Mexico in the form of the Zapatista movement. Here I can do no better than to quote Petar Sanchez's superb article "From Chiapas to Rojava: seas divide us, autonomy binds us" from *Roar* magazine (<https://roarmag.org/essays/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/>), which I consider of highest quality and relevance:

"Ever since it first appeared on the scene in the early 1990s, the Zapatista movement has probably been one of the most

symbolic and most influential elements of the revolutionary imagination worldwide. In the morning of January 1, 1994, an unknown guerrilla force composed of indigenous Mayas took over the main towns of Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state. The military operation was carried out with strategic brilliance and combined with an innovative use of the internet it resonated around the globe, inspiring international solidarity and the emergence of the Global Justice Movement.

"The Zapatistas rebelled against neoliberalism and the social and cultural genocide of the indigenous population of Mexico. Ya Basta!, or 'Enough is Enough!', was the battle cry of the rebellion which was the "product of 500 years of oppression," as the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle stated. The Zapatistas rose up in arms right as global capital was celebrating the presumed end of history, and the idea of social revolution seemed to be a romantic anachronism that belonged to the past. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was soon forced out of the cities after intense battles with the federal army that lasted for twelve days. However, it turned out that the deep horizontal organization of the indigenous communities could not be eradicated by any state terror or military campaigns.

"The masked spokesperson of the rebel army, Subcomandante Marcos, challenged the notion of the historical vanguard and opposed to it the idea of "revolution from below," a form of social struggle that does not aim to take over state power but rather seeks to abolish it. This conceptualization of autonomy and direct democracy then became central to many of the mass anti-capitalist movements we have seen since — from the protests at Seattle and Genoa to the occupations of Syntagma, Puerta del Sol and Zuccotti Park...

"The EZLN was founded in 1983 by a group of urban guerrillas who decided to start a revolutionary cell among the indigenous population in Chiapas, organize a military force and eventually take state power through guerrilla warfare. Soon

they realized that their vanguardist ideological dogma was not applicable to the cultural realities of the local communities, and they started learning from the indigenous peoples' traditions of communal governance. Thus {Neo}Zapatismo was born as a fusion between Western Marxism and the experience and knowledge of the native American population that has been resisting the colonial Spanish state and the federal Mexican state for five centuries."

While Neozapatismo is an original synthesis of philosophy and praxis, it builds on the work of previous theorists, both of the Mexican/Indigenous tradition and of the Western from Marx to Bookchin, the latter being of essential importance. While I have "googled Murray Bookchin" as the meme suggests and even read a couple of his books, I don't feel sufficiently educated on the man's huge lifetime body of work to offer much in the way of valid interpretation or criticism. His relevance to this exploration of councilism lies specifically in his political philosophy of libertarian municipalism and its influence on Abdullah Ocalan, the founding father of the autonomous revolutionary polity of Rojava in northern Syria. Ocalan and Rojava are of central importance to anarcho-councilist theory, but before exploring this primary material let us briefly outline Bookchin's theoretical work that laid the foundations for and inspired the most advanced libertarian socialist society the world has seen since the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Bookchin's most essential gifts to the Kurdish experiment may perhaps be found in his essay "The Communalist Project," where he expounds on the ideas of dual power and libertarian municipalism. The former advocates the intentional development of decentralized, grassroots community institutions that provide an alternative to and, hopefully, eventually supplant the service functions of the nation-state. For example, anarchists in the autonomous zone of Exarchia in Athens, Greece, are currently providing hous-