

An Anarchist FAQ

How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?

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How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?

It is a truism of Trotskyism that Stalinism has nothing to do with the ideas of Bolshevism. Moreover, most Trotskyists are at pains to stress that these ideas have no relation to the actual practice of the Bolshevik Party after the October Revolution. To quote one Leninist:

"it was overwhelmingly the force of circumstance which obliged the Bolsheviks to retreat so far from their own goals. They travelled this route in opposition to their own theory, not because of it -- no matter what rhetorical justifications were given at the time." [John Rees, "In Defence of October," pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 70]

His fellow party member Duncan Hallas argued that it was "*these desperate conditions*" (namely a terrible economic situation combined with civil war) which resulted in "*the Bolshevik Party [coming] to substitute its own rule for that of a decimated, exhausted working class*". [**Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party**, p. 43] Anarchists disagree.

Before starting, we need to note that the anarchist critique is not based on the notion that the Bolsheviks failed because they did not create socialism overnight. No, as anarchists recognise that a free socialist society will take time to be created (see [section I.2.2](#)). Anarchists see a social revolution as a **process** and its initial steps will be to halting and reflective of the circumstances in which it takes place. As Emma Goldman put it, "*my belief that a revolution à la Bakunin would have brought more constructive results, if not immediate anarchism . . . the Russian Revolution had been à la Bakunin, but it had since been transformed à la Karl Marx. That seemed to be the real trouble. I had not been naïve enough to expect anarchism to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the old. But I did hope that the masses, who had made the Revolution, would also have the chance to direct its course.*" [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 826]. The anarchist critique is that Bolshevik ideology -- and the political and economic structures and social relationships it created -- excluded the masses from managing the revolution, so smothering the emerging (genuine) socialist tendencies created during 1917.

We have discussed in the appendix on "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)" why the various "objective factors" favoured by Leninists to explain the defeat of the Russian Revolution are unconvincing. Ultimately, they rest on the spurious argument that if only what most revolutionaries (including, ironically, Leninists!) consider as inevitable side effects of a revolution did not occur, then Bolshevism would have been fine. It is hard to take seriously the argument that if only the ruling class disappeared without a fight, if the imperialists had not intervened and if the economy was not disrupted then Bolshevism would have resulted in socialism. This is particularly the case as Leninists argue that only **their** version of socialism recognises that the ruling class will **not** disappear after a revolution, that we **will** face counter-revolution and so we need a state to defend the revolution. As we argued in [section H.2.1](#), this is not the case: Anarchists have long recognised that a revolution will require defending. Likewise, we have long argued that a revolution will provoke a serious disruption in the economic life of a country (see [section H.6.1](#)).

Given the somewhat unrealistic tone of these kinds of Leninist assertions, it is necessary to look at the ideological underpinnings of Bolshevism and how they played their part in the

defeat of the Russian Revolution. Simply put, Bolshevik ideology **did** play a role and this is obvious once we look at it as well as the means advocated. Rather than being in opposition to the declared aims of the Bolsheviks, most of the policies implemented by them during the revolution and civil war had clear relations with their pre-revolution ideas. To quote Maurice Brinton's conclusions after looking at this period:

"there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practices of Stalinism. We know that many on the revolutionary left will find this statement hard to swallow. We are convinced however that any honest reading of the facts cannot but lead to this conclusion. The more one unearths about this period the more difficult it becomes to define - or even to see - the 'gulf' allegedly separating what happened in Lenin's time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept . . . that the whole course of events was 'historically inevitable' and 'objectively determined'. Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period. Now that more facts are available self-mystification on these issues should no longer be possible. Should any who have read these pages remain 'confused' it will be because they want to remain in that state -- or because (as the future beneficiaries of a society similar to the Russian one) it is their interest to remain so." [The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, p. 84]

This is unsurprising. The facts of the matter are that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions that they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold -- they will **not** occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot -- and their ideas are shaped by the social relationships they experience. Thus, someone who favours centralisation and sees nationalisation as the defining characteristic of socialism will make different decisions than someone who favours decentralising power and sees self-management as the key. The former will also create **different** forms of social organisation based on their perceptions of what "socialism" is and what is "efficient." Similarly, the different forms of social organisation favoured will also impact on how a revolution develops and the political decisions they make. For example, if you have a vision which favours centralised, hierarchical organisation then those placed into a position of power over others within such structures will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations.

These factors interact. A flawed ideology leads to bad political decisions and inappropriate social structures and social relationships, which in turn make the impact of the decisions worse than the objective factors alone would suggest. As Kropotkin argued in 1920, *"every armed intervention of a foreign Power necessarily results in a reinforcement of the dictatorial tendencies of the rulers . . . The evils naturally inherent in party dictatorship have thus been increased by the war conditions under which this party maintained itself. The state of war has been an excuse for strengthening the dictatorial methods of the party, as well as its tendency to centralise every detail of life in the hands of the Government, with the result that immense branches of the usual activities of the nation have been brought to a standstill. The natural evils of State Communism are thus increased tenfold under the excuse that all misfortunes of our life are due to the intervention of foreigners."* In other words, Bolshevik ideology made a bad situation worse as its *"all-powerful centralised Government which undertakes to supply every inhabitant with every lamp-glass and every match to light the lamp proves absolutely incapable of doing that through its functionaries, no matter how countless they may be -- it becomes a nuisance. It develops such a formidable bureaucracy*

that the French bureaucratic system, which requires the intervention of forty functionaries to sell a tree felled by a storm on a public road, becomes a trifle in comparison. This is what we now learn in Russia. And this is what you, the working men of the West, can and must avoid by all means". [Direct Struggle Against Capital, p. 488 and p.490]

This means that many of the "objective factors" facing Lenin's regime were themselves the products of earlier political decisions: unwelcome and unforeseen (at least to the Bolshevik leadership, if not to anarchists) consequences of specific Bolshevik practices and actions, but still flowing from Bolshevik ideology all the same. So, for example, when leading Bolsheviks had preconceived biases against decentralisation, federalism, "petty-bourgeois" peasants, "declassed" workers or "anarcho-syndicalist" tendencies, this would automatically become an ideological determinant to the policies decided upon by the ruling party. While social circumstances may have limited Bolshevik options, these social circumstances were also shaped by the results of Bolshevik ideology and practice which, moreover, limited possible solutions to social problems. Likewise, when Bolshevik policies hastened the alienation of workers and peasants from the regime, which resulted in resistance to them and, in turn, saw a strengthening of State power over the masses, with its corresponding increase in the size and power of the State machinery and bureaucracy, this cannot be dismissed as "objective factors" outwith Bolshevik control -- rather, they strengthened structures which the Bolshevik's ideology had driven them to build in the first place. Complaining that, eventually, this structure became the power-base of a new ruling class should not make us forget who created them in the first place.

In short, **political ideas do matter**. *"Ideas become a power when they grip the people,"* noted Lenin. [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 130] Yet they also grip the people in power and they are in a position to impose them. And, ironically, the very Leninists who argue that Bolshevik politics played no role in the degeneration of the revolution accept this. For while denying Bolshevik ideology had a negative impact on the development of the revolution, they also subscribe to the contradictory idea that Bolshevik politics were essential for its "success". Indeed, the fact that they **are** Leninists shows this is the case. They obviously think that Leninist ideas on centralisation, the role of the party, the so-called "workers' state" and a host of other issues are correct and, moreover, essential for the success of a revolution. They just dislike the results when these ideas were applied in practice within the institutional context these ideas promote, subject to the pressures of the objective circumstances they argue **every** revolution will face!

Little wonder anarchists are not convinced by Trotskyist arguments that their ideology played no role in the rise of Stalinism in Russia. Simply put, if you use certain methods then these will be rooted in the specific vision you are aiming for. If you think socialism is state ownership and centralised planning then you will favour institutions and organisations which facilitate that end. If you want a highly centralised state and consider a state as simply being an *"instrument of class rule"* then you will see little to worry about in the concentration of power into the hands of a few party leaders. However, if you see socialism in terms of working class people managing their own affairs then you will view such developments as being fundamentally in opposition to your goals and definitely **not** a means to that end. George Barrett states the obvious:

"The modern Socialist, or at least the Social Democrats, have steadily worked for centralisation, and complete and perfect organisation and control by those in authority above the people. The Anarchist, on the other hand, believes in the abolition

of that central power, and expects the free society to grow into existence from below, starting with those organisations and free agreements among the people themselves. It is difficult to see how, by making a central power control everything, we can be making a step towards the abolition of that power." [**Objections to Anarchism**, p. 348]

So part of the reason why Marxist revolutions yield such anti-working class outcomes is to do with its ideology, methods and goals. It has little to do with the will to power of a few individuals (important a role as that can play, sometimes, in events). In a nutshell, the ideology and vision guiding Leninist parties incorporate hierarchical values and pursue hierarchical aims. Furthermore, the methods and organisations favoured to achieve (their vision of) "socialism" are fundamentally hierarchical, aiming to ensure that power is centralised at the top of pyramidal structures in the hands of the party leaders. Indeed, as noted in [section H.3.3](#), Lenin repeated stressed that Marxism was top-downward rather than below-upwards.

It would be wrong, as Leninists will do, to dismiss this as simply a case of "idealism." After all, we are talking about the ideology of a ruling party. As such, these ideas are more than just ideas: after the seizure of power, they became a part of the real social situation within Russia. Individually, party members assumed leadership posts in all spheres of social life and started to apply their ideology. Then, overtime, the results of this application ensured that the party could not do otherwise as the framework of exercising power had been shaped by its successful application. Soon, the only real power is the Party, and very soon, only the summits of the Party. This cannot help but shape its policies and actions. As Cornelius Castoriadis argued:

"If it is true that people's real social existence determines their consciousness, it is from that moment illusory to expect the Bolshevik party to act in any other fashion than according to its real social position. The real social situation of the Party is that of a directorial organ, and its point of view toward this society henceforth is not necessarily the same as the one this society has toward itself." [**The role of Bolshevik Ideology in the birth of the Bureaucracy**, p. 97]

As such, means and ends are related and cannot be separated. There is, Emma Goldman argued, *"no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another. This conception is a potent menace to social regeneration. All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical . . . The great and inspiring aims of the Revolution became so clouded with and obscured by the methods used by the ruling political power that it was hard to distinguish what was temporary means and what final purpose. Psychologically and socially the means necessarily influence and alter the aims. The whole history of man is continuous proof of the maxim that to divest one's methods of ethical concepts means to sink into the depths of utter demoralisation. In that lies the real tragedy of the Bolshevik philosophy as applied to the Russian Revolution. May this lesson not be in vain."* In summary, *"[n]o revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSES to be achieved."* [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, pp. 260-1]

If this analysis of the anarchists against Bolshevism is true then it follows that the Bolsheviks were not just wrong on one or two issues but their political outlook right down to the core was wrong. Its vision of socialism was flawed, which produced a flawed perspective on the potentially valid means available to achieve it -- that is, it dismissed certain possibilities as not being socialist or implemented policies which systematically undermined genuine socialist tendencies. Leninism, we must never forget, does not aim for the same kind of society anarchism does. As discussed in [section H.3.1](#), the short, medium and long term goals of both movements are radically different. While both claim to aim for "communism," what is meant by that word is radically different in details if somewhat similar in outline. The anarchist ideal of a classless, stateless and free society is based on a decentralised, participatory and bottom-up premise. The Leninist ideal is the product of a centralised, party ruled and top-down paradigm.

This explains why Leninists advocate a democratic-centralist "Revolutionary Party" (see [section H.5](#)). It arises from the fact that their programme is the capture of state power in order to abolish the "*anarchy of the market*." Not the abolition of wage labour, but its universalisation under the state as one big boss. Not the destruction of alienated forces (political, social and economic) but rather their capture by the party on behalf of the masses. In other words, to state the obvious, Leninists are not (libertarian) communists; they have not broken sufficiently with Second International orthodoxy, with the assumption that socialism is basically state capitalism ("*The idea of the State as Capitalist, to which the Social-Democratic fraction of the great Socialist Party is now trying to reduce Socialism.*" [Peter Kropotkin, **The Great French Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 31]). Just as one cannot abolish alienation with alienated means, so we cannot attack Leninist "means" also without distinguishing our libertarian "ends" from theirs.

This means that both Leninist means and ends are flawed. Both will fail to produce a socialist society. As Kropotkin said at the time, the Bolsheviks "*have shown how the Revolution is **not** to be made.*" [quoted by Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 75] If applied today, Leninist ideas will undoubtedly fail from an anarchist point of view while, as under Lenin, "succeeding" from the limited perspective of Bolshevism. Yes, the party may be in power and, yes, capitalist property may be abolished by nationalisation but, no, a socialist society would be no nearer. Rather we would have a new hierarchical and class system rather than the classless and free society which non-anarchist socialists claim to be aiming for. As such, the Bolshevik regime confirmed our predictions and warnings over State-socialism: "*We have always pointed out the effects of Marxism in action. Why be surprised now?*" [Kropotkin, quoted by Goldman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 36]

Let us be perfectly clear. Anarchists are **not** saying that Stalinism will be the inevitable result of any Bolshevik revolution. What we are saying is that some form of class society will result from any such revolution. The exact form this class system will take will vary depending on the objective circumstances it faces, but no matter the specific form such a society may take it will not be a socialist one. This is because of the ideology of the party in power will shape the revolution in specific ways which, by necessity, form new forms of hierarchical and class exploitation and oppression. The preferred means of Bolshevism (vanguardism, statism, centralisation, nationalisation, and so on) will determine the ends, the ends being not a free, classless communist society but some kind of bureaucratic state capitalist system labelled "socialism" by those in charge. Stalinism, in this perspective, was the result of an interaction of certain ideological goals and positions as well as organisational principles and preferences with structural and circumstantial pressures resulting from the specific conditions prevalent at

the time. For example, a Leninist revolution in an advanced western country would not require the barbaric means used by Stalinism to industrialise Russia but it would still seek to impose a centralised planning regime in which workers' control would be effectively eliminated in practice if not, as with Lenin, explicitly replaced by one-man management.

Here we indicate the key areas of Bolshevik ideology which, when applied, will undermine any revolution as they did the Russian. As such, it is all fine and well for Trotskyist Max Shachtman (like so many others) to argue that the Bolsheviks had "*convert[ed] the expediencies and necessities of the civil war period into virtues and principles which had never been part of their original program.*" Looking at this "*original program*" we can see elements of what was latter to be applied. Rather than express a complete divergence it could, and should, be argued that it was this that undermined the more democratic aspects of their original program. In other words, the use of state power and economic nationalisation came into conflict with, and finally destroyed, the original proclaimed socialist principles. That the "socialist" vision of Bolshevism was so deeply flawed that even attempting to apply it destroyed the aspirations for liberty, equality and solidarity that inspired it Can we be surprised, then, if Marxist means cannot achieve anarchist (i.e. authentic socialist) ends? To his credit, Shachtman acknowledges that post-civil war salvation "*required full democratic rights*" for all workers, and that this was "*precisely what the Bolsheviks . . . were determined not to permit.*" Sadly he failed to consider whether Bakunin was right and that statism and socialism cannot go together explained **why** the democratic principles of the "*original program*" were only "*honoured in the breach*" and why "*Lenin and Trotsky did not observe them.*"["Introduction", Trotsky's **Terrorism and Communism**, p. xv]

Equally, there is a tendency of pro-Leninists to concentrate on the period between the two revolutions of 1917 when specifying what Bolshevism "really" stood for, particularly Lenin's book **State and Revolution**. To use an analogy, when Leninists do this they are like politicians who, when faced with people questioning the results of their policies, ask them to look at their election manifesto rather than what they have done when in power. As discussed in [section H.1.7](#), Lenin's book was never applied in practice. From the very first day, the Bolsheviks ignored it. After 6 months **none** of its keys ideas were being practiced -- some had not even been applied -- and, in fact, the exact opposite had been imposed. As such, to blame (say) the civil war for the reality of "Bolshevik in power" (as Leninists do) is without substance as this had not started yet. Simply put, **State and Revolution** is no guide to what Bolshevism "really" stood for -- their position **before** seizing power is irrelevant if the realities of their chosen methods (i.e. seizing state power) quickly changed their perspective, practice **and** ideology (i.e. shaped the desired ends). Assuming of course that most of their post-October policies were radically different from their pre-October ones, which (as we indicate here) they were not.

We have discussed what anarchists consider the key issues in [section H.6.2](#) but here we go into the matter in more detail. The factors we highlight all had a negative impact on the development of the revolution individually, combined they were devastating. Nor can it be a case of keeping Bolshevism while getting rid of some of these positions. Most go to its heart and could only be eliminated by eliminating what makes Leninism Leninist. So some Leninists now pay lip service to workers' control of production and recognise that the Bolsheviks saw the form of property (i.e., whether private or state owned) as being far more important than workers' management of production. Yet revising Bolshevism to take into account this flaw means little unless the others are also revised. Simply put, workers' management of production would have little impact in a highly centralised state ruled over by

a equally centralised vanguard party. Self-management in production or society could not co-exist with a state and party power nor with centralised economic decision making based on nationalised property.

In a nutshell, the only way Bolshevism could result in a genuine socialist society is if it stopped being Bolshevik!

1 How did the Marxist historical materialism affect Bolshevism?

As is well known, Marx argued that history progressed through distinct stages. After his death, this "*materialist conception of history*" became known as "*historical materialism*."

Its basic idea is that the "*totality of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness . . . At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or -- this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms -- with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.*" [A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, pp. 20-1]

Thus slavery was replaced by feudalism, feudalism with capitalism. For Marx, the "*bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production*" and "*the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism.*" [Op. Cit., p. 21] In short, after capitalism there would be socialism:

"The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. The integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated." [Karl Marx, **Capital**, vol. 1, p. 929]

Socialism replaces capitalism once the "*proletariat seized political power and turns the means of production into state property.*" By so doing, "*it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as state.*" [Engels, **The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 713] Most Marxists subscribe to this schema of historical progress: for example, "*[f]or Lenin, whose Marxism was never mechanical or fatalistic, the definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a **transition period** meant that there could be **two** outcomes of this phase: going forward to socialism, or backsliding to capitalism. The policy of the party would tip the balance.*" [Tony Cliff, **Revolution Besieged**, p. 364] The possibility of a third outcome, another form of class system (based on the State bureaucracy, for example) was not usually considered a possibility until after the rise of Stalinism.

It should be noted here that many orthodox Marxists -- such as the Mensheviks in 1917 and the likes of Karl Kautsky -- used historical materialism to argue that the Bolsheviks could not

create socialism in Russia because capitalism was not fully developed in Russia (indeed, the Bolsheviks themselves held this position before 1917). As it was a predominantly peasant economy, with a small industrial working-class, socialism was impossible and this was argued at the time by Kautsky and others (for example, the Socialist Party of Great Britain). Later, in the 1930s, some libertarian Marxists concluded that the Bolsheviks simply replaced the bourgeoisie in its role of industrialiser of the country. While such a position allow its adherents to excuse Marxism from the failures of Bolshevism, this does not address the all-too-often made assumption that the only alternatives were socialism or a return to capitalism (or barbarism, to use Rosa Luxemburg's well known saying).

Marxists, then, argued that socialism was the society which would come after capitalism. Thus the Bolsheviks had the mindset that whatever they did there was only two possibilities: (their version of) socialism or the restoration of capitalism. However, this is based on a false premise. Is it valid to assume that there is only one possible post-capitalist future, one that, by definition, is classless? If so, then any action or structure could be utilised to fight reaction as after victory there can be only one outcome. However, if there is more than one post-capitalist future then the question of means becomes decisive. If we assume just two possible post-capitalist futures, one based on self-management and without classes and another with economic, social and political power centralised in a few hands, then the means used in a revolution become decisive in determining which possibility will become reality.

If we accept the Marxist theory and assume only one possible post-capitalist system, then all that is required of revolutionary anti-capitalist movements is that they only need to overthrow capitalism and they will wind up where they wish to arrive as there is no other possible outcome. But if the answer no, then in order to wind up where we wish to arrive, we have to not only overthrow capitalism, we have use means that will push us toward the desired future society. As such, **means** become the key and they cannot be ignored or downplayed in favour of the ends -- particularly as these ends will never be reached if the appropriate means are not used.

This is no abstract metaphysical or theoretical point. The impact of this issue can be seen from the practice of Bolshevism in power. For Lenin and Trotsky, **any** and **all** means could and were used in pursuit of their ends. They simply could not see how the means used shaped the ends reached. Ultimately, there was only two possibilities -- socialism (by definition classless) or a return to capitalism. This explains why Trotsky, for example, could argue for the militarisation of labour:

"the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State... Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction... No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour." [Communism and Terrorism, p. 169-70]

For Trotsky, there was no need to worry for *"the worker does not merely bargain with the Soviet State: no, he is subordinated to the Soviet State, under its orders in every direction – for it is his State."* Even if we can really ignore his admission that the regime was a party dictatorship (*"the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the*

dictatorship of the party"), we must wonder whether the vast and powerful state machine this would require could be controlled by those subject to it. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 168 and p. 109] Events showed the anarchist prediction that such a bureaucracy would develop its own class interests was correct (see [section B.2.6](#)).

Once we see that because of their flawed perspective on what comes after capitalism we understand why, for the Bolsheviks, the means used and institutions created were meaningless. We can see one of the roots for Bolshevik indifference to working class self-management. As Samuel Farber notes that *"there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921."* [**Before Stalinism**, p. 44] There was no need, for such means had no impact on achieving the ends Bolshevik power had set itself. As Trotsky put it:

"It would consequently be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers [i.e., the party], and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered... I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully." [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 162-3]

As we discuss further in [section 6](#), questions of meaningful working class participation in the workplace or the soviets were considered by the likes of Trotsky as fundamentally irrelevant to whether Bolshevik Russia was socialist or whether the working class was the ruling class or not, incredible as it may seem. Indeed, he even went so far as to suggest that under Stalinism *"[s]o long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class."* [**Writings 1933-34**, p. 125] Perhaps this was understandable, given that the position of the proletariat was the same as when he was at the top of the pyramid -- subject to political and economic dictatorship by the bureaucracy.

So if we accept Marx's basic schema, then we simply have to conclude that what means we use are, ultimately, irrelevant as there is only one outcome. As long as property is nationalised and a non-capitalist party holds state power, then the basic socialist nature of the regime automatically flows. This was, of course, Trotsky's argument with regard to Stalinist Russia and why he defended it against those who recognised that it was a new form of class society. Yet it is precisely the rise of Stalinism out of the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks which exposes the limitations in the Marxist schema of historical development -- for here was a regime which was not private capitalism nor was it socialist. In short, the application of Marxism yet again refuted itself: worse, the difficulties most Marxists had in recognising its class nature suggests that Marxism itself produced a regime which it could not explain for *"it is perfectly clear that Soviet society can hardly be explained in orthodox-Marxian terms at all. If it is accepted that the USSR was not communist in a Marxian sense, the analysis becomes almost impossible"*. [Marcel van der Linden, **Western Marxism and the Soviet Union**, p. 317]

Simply put, there is no guarantee that getting rid of capitalism will result in a decent society. As anarchists like Bakunin argued against Marx, it is possible to get rid of capitalism while not creating socialism, if we understand by that term a free, classless society of equals. Rather, a Marxist revolution would *"concentrate all the powers of government in strong hands, because the very fact that the people are ignorant necessitates strong, solicitous care by the government. [It] will create a single State bank, concentrating in its hands all the commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production; and they will divide the mass of people into two armies -- industrial and agricultural armies under the direct command of the State engineers who will constitute the new privileged scientific-political class."* [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 289] As Bolshevism proved, there **was** always an alternative to socialism or a reversion to capitalism, in this case **state** capitalism (see [section H.3.13](#)) for *"as long as the statist socialists do not abandon their dream of socialising the instruments of labour in the hands of a centralised State, the inevitable result of their attempts at State Capitalism and the socialist State will be the failure of their dreams and military dictatorship."* [Peter Kropotkin, **Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 191]

So libertarians have long been aware that actually existing capitalism could be replaced by another form of class society. As the experience of Bolshevik tyranny proves beyond doubt, this perspective is the correct one -- the means revolutionaries use matter for the end is not pre-determined. This perspective ensured that during the Russian Revolution the Makhnovists **had** to encourage free soviets and workers' self-management, freedom of speech and organisation in order for the revolution to remain socialist (see the appendix on ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#)). In contrast, the Bolsheviks implemented party dictatorship, nationalisation and one-man management while proclaiming this had something to do with socialism. Little wonder Trotsky had such difficulties understanding the obvious truth that Stalinism has **nothing** to do with socialism.

2 Why did the Marxist theory of the state undermine working class power?

Anarchists and Marxists have a fundamentally different understanding of what constitutes a state. While there is some overlap (both agree that the role of the State so far has been to secure minority class rule), anarchists argue that it has evolved certain structures to achieve this role and that these cannot be utilised by the masses to achieve liberty. Rather, they will create a new class regime as the State and its machinery has interests of its own. A social organisation based on liberty for the working class necessitates new organisational principles to reflect the new functions needed:

"the State, with its hierarchy of functionaries and the weight of its historical traditions, could only delay the dawning of a new society freed from monopolies and exploitation.

"Developed in the course of history to establish and maintain the monopoly of land ownership in favour of one class . . . what means can the State provide to abolish this monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? Then perfected during the course of the nineteenth century to ensure the monopoly of industrial property, trade, and banking to new enriched classes, to which the State was supplying 'arms' cheaply by stripping the land from the village communes and

*crushing the cultivators by tax -- what advantages could the State provide for abolishing these same privileges? Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in **their** unions, **their** federations, completely outside the State?"* [Kropotkin, **Modern Science and Anarchy**, 164]

These differences are not academic, for the Marxist analysis resulted in the Bolsheviks undermining **real** working class power during the Russian Revolution in favour of an abstract "power" which served as little more than a fig-leaf for **Bolshevik** power, around which a new ruling class of bureaucrats emerged as they held real power (both economic and political).

For anarchists, the state is marked by centralised power in the hands of a few. The state, we argue, has evolved to ensure minority rule and, consequently, cannot be used by the majority to manage their own affairs. Thus the state *"cannot take this or that form at will. Those who think they can do so give the word 'State' an arbitrary meaning, contrary to the origin, to the entire history, of the institution. The State is the perfect example of a hierarchical institution, developed over centuries to subject all individuals and all of their possible groupings to the central will."* It is *"necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian -- or it ceases to be the State."* So *"how can we talk about abolishing classes without touching the institution which was the instrument for establishing them and which remains the instrument which perpetuates them?"* [Kropotkin, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 226-7, p. 350] This applied to the democratic state, with every bourgeois revolution being marked by a conflict between centralised power and popular power and, unsurprisingly, the bourgeois favoured the former over the latter:

"To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralize, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more, to invest it with powers of which the king himself would never have dreamt, to concentrate everything in its hands, to subordinate to it the whole of France from one end to another" [Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 143]

Which raises an obvious question: *"how it is possible that the socialists of the second half of the nineteenth century adopted the ideal of the Jacobin State when this ideal had been designed from the viewpoint of the bourgeois, in direct opposition to the egalitarian and communist tendencies of the people which had arisen during the Revolution?"* [**Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 366] For, given the history of the state and its role in history, we would expect centralised power (i.e. a state) to be the means by which a minority class seized power **over** the masses and never the means by which the majority managed society themselves. Whether it is based on seizing the existing State and transforming its machinery or creating a "new" state based ostensibly on workers organisations (the so-called "soviet state"), Marxism aimed to use the same structural principles which have so well served minority classes to secure their rule. It was for this reason that anarchists refuse to confuse a federation of self-managed organisations with a state:

"The reader knows by now that the anarchists refused to use the term 'State' even for a transitional situation. The gap between authoritarians and libertarians has not always been very wide on this score. In the First International the collectivists, whose spokesman was Bakunin, allowed the terms 'regenerate State,' 'new and revolutionary State,' or even 'socialist State' to be accepted as synonyms for 'social collective.' The

anarchists soon saw, however, that it was rather dangerous for them to use the same word as the authoritarians while giving it a quite different meaning. They felt that a new concept called for a new word and that the use of the old term could be dangerously ambiguous; so they ceased to give the name 'State' to the social collective of the future." [Daniel Guerin, **Anarchism**, pp. 60-1]

This is no mere semantics. The essence of statism is the removal of powers that should belong to the community as whole (though they may for reasons of efficiency delegate their actual implementation to elected, mandated and recallable committees) into the hands of a tiny minority who claim to act on our behalf and in our interests but who are not under our direct control. In other words it continues the division into rulers and ruled. Any confusion between two such radically different forms of organisation can only have a seriously negative effect on the development of any revolution. At its most basic, it allows those in power to develop structures and practices which disempower the many while, at the same time, taking about extending working class "power."

The roots of this confusion can be found in Marxism. As discussed in [section H.3.7](#), Marx and Engels had left a somewhat contradictory inheritance on the nature and role of the state. Unlike anarchists, who clearly argued that only confusion would arise by calling the organs of popular self-management required by a revolution a "state," the founders of Marxism confused two radically different ideas. On the one hand, there is the idea of a radical and participatory democracy (as per the model of the Paris Commune). On the other, there is a centralised body with a government in charge (as per the model of the bourgeois democratic state). By using the term "state" to cover these two radically different concepts, it allowed the Bolsheviks to confuse party power with popular power and, moreover, replace the latter by the former without affecting the so-called "proletarian" nature of the state (see [section H.3.11](#)). The confusion of popular organs of self-management with a state ensured that these organs **were** submerged by state structures and top-down rule which the Bolsheviks created.

By confusing the state (delegated power, necessarily concentrated in the hands of a few) with the organs of popular self-management, Marxism opened up the possibility of a "workers' state" which is simply the rule of a few party leaders over the masses. The "truth of the matter," wrote Emma Goldman, "is that the Russian people have been **locked out** and that the Bolshevik State -- even as the bourgeois industrial master -- uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan . . . Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party." [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlix] In this, she simply saw in practice that which Bakunin had predicted would happen for "every state power, every government, by its nature and by its position stands outside the people and above them, and must invariably try to subject them to rules and objectives which are alien to them." It was for this reason "we declare ourselves the enemies of every government and state every state power . . . the people can only be happy and free when they create their own life, organising themselves from below upwards." This could only be achieved by "federal organisation, from below upward, of workers' associations, groups, communes, districts, and ultimately, regions and nations", which could not be considered as the same as "centralised states" for this was "contrary to their essence." The end of "sham popular sovereignty" would create "real as opposed to fictitious freedom." [**Statism and Anarchy**, p. 136 and p. 13]

The "workers' state" created by the Bolsheviks in 1917 proved no exception to that generalisation. The roots of the problem, which expressed itself from the start during the Russian revolution, was the fatal confusion of the state with organs of popular self-management. Lenin argued in **State and Revolution** that, on the one hand, *"the armed proletariat itself shall become the government"* while, on the other, that *"[w]e cannot imagine democracy, not even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions."* If, as Lenin asserts, democracy *"means equality"* he has reintroduced inequality into the "proletarian" state as the representatives have, by definition, more power than those who elected them. [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 363, p. 306 and p. 346] As noted in [section H.1.2](#), representative bodies necessarily place policy-making in the hands of deputies and do not (and cannot) mean that the working class **as a class** can manage society and so actually end classes once and for all. Moreover, such bodies ensure that popular power can be usurped without difficulty by a minority: for a minority already **does** hold power. As noted in [section H.3.8](#), once they had tasted power they soon acknowledged the necessity a state to act against the "backward" masses.

True equality implies the abolition of the state and its replacement by a federation of self-managed communes and workplaces. The state, as anarchists have long stressed, signifies a power **above** society, a concentration of power into a few hands (see [section B.2](#)). Lenin, ironically, quotes Engels on the state being marked by *"the establishment of a public power, which is no longer directly identical with the population organising itself as an armed power."* [quoted by Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 275] As Lenin supported **representative** structures rather than one based on elected, mandated and recallable **delegates**, he created a *"public power"* no longer identical with the population. Unsurprisingly, this power soon sought to recreate its own bodies of armed men to enforce its decisions -- a political police force (the Cheka) and an undemocratic armed forces.

Combine this with an awareness that bureaucracy must continue to exist in the "proletarian" state then we have the ideological preconditions for dictatorship **over** the proletariat. *"There can be no thought,"* asserted Lenin, *"of destroying officialdom immediately everywhere, completely. That is utopia. But to smash the old bureaucratic machine at once and to begin immediately to construct a new one that will enable all officialdom to be gradually abolished is not utopia."* In other words, Lenin expected *"the gradual 'withering away' of all bureaucracy."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 306 and p. 307]

Yet why expect a "new" bureaucracy to be as easy to control as the old one? Regular election to posts does not undermine the institutional links, pressures and powers a centralised *"officialdom"* will generate around itself, even a so-called proletarian one. Significantly, Lenin justified this defence of temporary state bureaucracy by the kind of straw man argument against anarchism **State and Revolution** is riddled with. *"We are not utopians,"* asserted Lenin, *"we do not indulge in 'dreams' of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination: these anarchist dreams . . . are totally alien to Marxism, and, as a matter of fact, serve only to postpone the socialist revolution until human nature has changed. No, we want the socialist revolution with human nature as it is now, with human nature that cannot dispense with subordination, control and 'managers.'" [Op. Cit., p. 307]* Of course anarchists do not wish to *"dispense"* with *"all administration,"* rather we wish to replace government **by** administration, hierarchical positions (*"subordination"*) with co-operative organisation. Equally, we see the revolution as a process in which *"human nature"* is changed by the struggle itself so that working class people become capable of organising themselves and society without bosses, bureaucrats and politicians -- but recognising that

even the best organisation could produce bureaucratic tendencies and so build in various safeguards to reduce this danger (federalism, bottom-up, elections, mandates, recall, etc.). If Lenin says that socialism "*cannot dispense*" with the hierarchical structures required by class society why should we expect the same kinds of structures and social relationships to have different ends just because "red" managers are in power?

Anarchists argue that states, by their very nature, are based on concentrated, centralised, alienated power in the hands of a few. The "workers' state" is just the same as any other state, namely rule by a few over the many. This is confirmed when Lenin argues that "*[u]nder socialism, **all** will take part in the work of government in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing.*" Once the "*overwhelming majority*" have "*learned to administer the state **themselves**, have taken this business into their own hands . . . the need for government begins to disappear. The more complete democracy becomes, the nearer the moment approaches when it becomes unnecessary. The more democratic the 'state' of the armed workers -- which is 'no longer a state in the proper sense of the word' -- becomes, the more rapidly does **the state** begin to wither away.*" Yet "*[u]ntil the 'higher' phase of communism arrives, the Socialists demand the **strictest** control, by society **and by the state**, of the amount of labour and of consumption.*" [Op. Cit., p. 361, p. 349 and p. 345]

Clearly, even in theory the "proletarian" state is **not** based on direct, mass, participation by the population but, in fact, on giving power to a few representatives. It is **not** identical with "society," i.e. the armed, self-organised people. Rather than look to the popular assemblies of the French revolution, Lenin, like the bourgeoisie of that time (and after), looked to representative structures -- structures designed to combat working class power and influence (at one point Lenin states that "*for a certain time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state remains under communism, without the bourgeoisie!*" This was because "*bourgeois right in regard to the distribution of articles of **consumption** inevitably presupposes the existence of the **bourgeois state**, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of **enforcing** the observance of the standards of right.*" [Op. Cit., p. 346]).

As the Marxist theory of the state confused party power with working class power, we should not be surprised that Lenin's **State and Revolution** failed to discuss the practicalities of the role of the party in the new regime in anything but a passing and ambiguous manner. For example, Lenin notes that "*[b]y educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of **leading the whole people** to socialism, of directing and organising the new order.*" It is not clear whether it is the vanguard or the proletariat as a whole which assumes power. He also states that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*" was "*the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of crushing the oppressors.*" [Op. Cit., p. 288 and p. 337] Given that this fits in with subsequent Bolshevik practice, it seems clear that it is the vanguard which assumes power rather than the whole class. As Lenin summarised in 1920:

*"The Party . . . is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the Congress, while the current work in Moscow has to be carried on by still smaller bodies, known as the Organising Bureau and the Political Bureau, which are elected at plenary meetings of the Central Committee, five members of the Central Committee to each bureau. This, it would appear, is a full-fledged 'oligarchy'. . . Such is the general mechanism of the proletarian state power viewed 'from above', from the standpoint of the practical implementation of the dictatorship . . . all this talk about 'from above' **or** 'from below', about the dictatorship of leaders **or** the dictatorship of*

*the masses, etc., [is] ridiculous and childish nonsense". ["Left-wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder", **Collected Works**, vol. 31, pp. 47-49]*

However, the assumption of power by the party highlights the key problem with the Leninist theory of the state and how it could be used to justify the destruction of popular power. It does not matter in the Leninist schema whether the class or the party is in power, it does not impact on whether the working class is the "*ruling class*" or not. As Lenin put it in 1917, "*democracy is **not** identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a **state** which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e. an organisation for the systematic use of **violence** by one class against the other, by one section of the population against another.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 332] Thus the majority need not actually "rule" (i.e. make the fundamental decisions) for a regime to be considered a "democracy" or an instrument of class rule. That power can be delegated to a party leadership (even dictatorship) without harming the "class nature" of the state. This results of such a theory can be seen from Bolshevik arguments for party dictatorship made during the civil war period but generalised to all revolutions and the post-revolutionary period.

The problem with the centralised, representative structures Lenin favours for the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" is that they are rooted in the inequality of power. They constitute in fact, if not initially in theory, a power **above** society. The "*essence of bureaucracy*", in Lenin's words, is "*privileged persons divorced from the masses and **superior to the masses.***" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 360] Yet, in the words of Malatesta, a "*government, that is a group of people entrusted with making laws and empowered to use the collective power to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class and cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will instinctively seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to its special interests. Having been put in a privileged position, the government is already at odds with the people whose strength it disposes of.*" [**Anarchy**, p. 36]

Can we expect the same types of organs and social relationships to produce different results simply because Lenin is at the head of the state? Of course not -- and the reality of the new regime confirmed that the "new" centralised structures soon produced the same alienation as previous states along with a bureaucracy which, rather than start to decline, immediately "*grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between 'people' and 'officials,' which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about 'bureaucratic excesses,' lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder.*" [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 242] Thus the early months of "soviet rule" saw the "*the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees, and soviets . . . were no longer representative, democratically run working-class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies. There was ample reason for this concern.*" [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, p. 224] As we show in [section H.6](#), Lenin's own regime provides more than enough evidence to support the anarchist analysis.

This is the fatal flaw in the Marxist theory of the state which, as Bakunin put it, is "*based on this fiction of pseudo-popular representation -- which in actual fact means the government of the masses by an insignificant handful of privileged individuals, elected (or even not elected) by mobs of people rounded up for voting and never knowing what or whom they are voting*

for -- on this imaginary and abstract expression of the imaginary thought and will of the all the people, of which the real, living people do not have the faintest idea." Thus the state represents "government of the majority by a minority in the name of the presumed stupidity of the one and the presumed intelligence of the other." [Op. Cit., pp. 136-7]

By confusing popular self-organisation with a state, by ignoring the real inequalities of power in any state structure, Marxism allowed Lenin and the Bolsheviks to usurp state power, implement first party power and then party dictatorship while continuing to talk about the working class being in power. Because of Marxism's metaphysical definition of the state (see [section H.3.7](#)), actual working class people's power over their lives is downplayed, if not ignored, in favour of party power. As one socialist historian puts it, "*while it is true that Lenin recognised the different functions and democratic raison d'etre for both the soviets and his party, in the last analysis it was the party that was more important than the soviets. In other words, the party was the final repository of working-class sovereignty. Thus, Lenin did not seem to have been reflected on or have been particularly perturbed by the decline of the soviets after 1918.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 212] This can be seen from how the Marxist theory of the state was changed **after** the Bolsheviks seized power to bring into line with its new role as the means by which the vanguard ruled society (see [section H.3.8](#)).

More, as parties represent classes in the Marxist schema, if the party is in power then, by definition, so is the class. This raises the possibility of Lenin asserting the "working class" held power even when his party was exercising a dictatorship **over** the working class and violently repressing any protests by it (which, as indicated in [section H.6.3](#), began before the civil war started at the end of May 1918). Yet if, when "*the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists*" and "*suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery*", "*it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence*" then how can there be freedom and democracy for the proletariat when this dictatorship likewise suppresses with violence the protests of the proletariat itself? [Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 337-8]

This confusion between two radically different concepts and their submersion into the term "state" had its negative impact from the start due to the practices it allowed and the structures it favoured. Firstly, the Bolsheviks constantly equated rule by the Bolshevik party (in practice, its central committee) with the working class as a whole. Rather than rule by all the masses, the Bolsheviks substituted rule by a handful of leaders. Thus we find Lenin talking about "*proletarian revolutionary power*" and "*Bolshevik power*" being "*now one and the same thing*". Yet it was a case of "*Bolsheviks taking full state power alone*" rather than the masses: "*Russia had been governed by 130,000 landowners*" and "*[y]et we are told that the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party will not be able to govern Russia, govern her in the interests of the poor and against the rich.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 26, p. 179, p. 94 and p. 111]

However, governing in the "*interests*" of the poor is **not** the same as the poor governing themselves. Thus we have the first key substitution that leads to authoritarian rule, namely the substitution of the power of the masses by the power of a few members who make up the government. Such a small body will require a centralised state system and, consequently, we have the creation of a hierarchical body around the new government which, as we discuss in [section 7](#), will become the real master in society.

The preconditions for a new form of class society have been created and, moreover, they are rooted in the basic ideas of Marxism. Society has been split into two bodies, the masses and those who claim to rule in their name. Given this basic inequality in power we would, according to anarchist theory, expect the interests of the masses and the rulers to separate and come into conflict. While the Bolsheviks had the support of the working class (as they did in the first few months of their rule), this does not equal mass participation in running society. So while Lenin raised the vision of mass participation in the "higher" stage of communism, he unfortunately blocked the means to get there. Sadly, Marxist theory confuses popular self-government with a state so ensuring the substitution of rule by a few party leaders for the popular participation required to ensure a successful revolution.

Simply put, a self-managed society can only be created by self-managed means. To think we can have a "*public power*" separate from the masses which will, slowly, dissolve itself into it is the height of naivety. Unsurprisingly, once in power the Bolsheviks held onto power by all means available, including gerrymandering, packing and disbanding soviets, suppressing peaceful opposition parties and violently repressing the very workers it claimed ruled in "soviet" Russia (see [section H.6](#)). So when popular support was lost, the basic contradictions in the Bolshevik's social position in society and its theory became clear: the Bolshevik regime was simply rule over the workers in their name, nothing more. And equally unsurprising, the Leninists revised their theory of the state to take into account the realities of state power and the need to justify minority power **over** the masses (see [section H.3.8](#)).

Needless to say, even electoral support for the Bolsheviks should not, and cannot, be equated to working class management of society. Echoing Marx and Engels at their most reductionist (see [section H.3.9](#)), Lenin stressed that the "*state is an organ or instrument of violence exercised by one class against another . . . when the state will be a proletarian state, when it will be an instrument of violence exercised by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, we shall be fully and unreservedly in favour of a strong state power and of centralism.*" [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 116] The notions that the state could have interests of its own, that it is not simply an instrument of class rule but rather **minority** class rule are nowhere to be found. The implications of this simplistic analysis had severe ramifications for the Russian Revolution and Trotskyist explanations of both the nature of Stalinism and its rise.

By considering the state simply as an instrument of class rule Lenin could downplay, even ignore, such important questions of **how** the working class can "rule" society, how it can be a "ruling" class. Blinded by the notion that a state could not be anything **but** an instrument of class rule, the Bolsheviks simply were able to justify any limitation of working class democracy and freedom and argue that it had no impact on whether the Bolshevik regime was really a "dictatorship of the proletariat" or not. This can be seen from Lenin's polemic with German Social-Democrat Karl Kautsky, where he glibly stated that "*[t]he form of government, has absolutely nothing to do with it.*" [Collected Works, vol. 28, p. 238] From this it follows that it does not matter if there is a dictatorship of the party rather than that of the proletariat. Likewise with Trotsky's confused analyses of Stalinism which was based on the simplistic analytical tools he inherited from mainstream Marxism:

"The dictatorship of a class does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state. This we have seen, first of all, in the case of the propertied classes. The nobility ruled through the monarchy before which the noble stood on his knees. The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie took on comparatively developed democratic forms only under the conditions of capitalist upswing when the

ruling class had nothing to fear. Before our own eyes, democracy has been supplanted in Germany by Hitler's autocracy, with all the traditional bourgeois parties smashed to smithereens. Today, the German bourgeoisie does not rule directly; politically it is placed under complete subjection to Hitler and his bands. Nevertheless, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie remains inviolate in Germany, because all the conditions of its social hegemony have been preserved and strengthened. By expropriating the bourgeoisie politically, Hitler saved it, even if temporarily, from economic expropriation. The fact that the bourgeoisie was compelled to resort to the fascist regime testifies to the fact that its hegemony was endangered but not at all that it had fallen." [*"The Class Nature Of The Soviet State," Writings 1933-34, pp. 103-4*]

Yet while it is possible for a minority class to rule in different ways, particularly if they control the means of production, the same cannot be said of a majority class (particularly if, as under the Bolsheviks, they are subject to one-man management by state appointed officials within production). Then the issue of form becomes key as authoritarian, hierarchical, centralised structures by their nature disempower those at the bottom -- the majority class -- and inevitably empower those at the top. Given this, the idea that there is a difference between **who** rules in a revolutionary situation and **how** they rule is a key one, and one raised by the anarchists against Marxism: if the working class is politically expropriated by centralised, top-down structures how can you maintain that such a regime is remotely "proletarian"? Ultimately, the working class can only "rule" society through its collective participation in decision making (social, economic and "political"). If working class people are not managing their own affairs, if they have delegated that power to a few party leaders then they are **not** a ruling class and could never be. While the bourgeoisie can, and has, ruled economically under an actual dictatorship, the same cannot be said to be the case with the working class. Every class society is marked by a clear division between order takers and order givers: to think that such a division can be implemented in a socialist revolution and for it to remain socialist is pure naivety. As the Bolshevik revolution showed, representative government is the first step in the political expropriation of the working class from control over their fate:

"Can this ideal ever become ours? Can the socialist workers dream of reconstituting in the same terms as before the bourgeois revolution? Can they in their turn dream of reinforcing the central government by surrendering to it the whole economic realm and confiding the direction of all their affairs -- political, economic, social, to a representative government? Should such a compromise between royal power and the bourgeoisie become the ideal of the socialist worker?"

"Obviously not." [Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 143]

Marxism, in short, confuses the matter. Trotsky, for example, is comparing the actions of class society aiming to maintain minority rule with those a socialist revolution aiming to end classes. While a minority class need not participate **en mass** in the political process (not least because it "participates" indirectly by its ownership and control of the means of production), the question arises does this apply to the transition from class society to a classless one? Can the working class **really** can be "expropriated" politically and still remain "the ruling class"? Moreover, Trotsky fails to note that the working class was **economically** and **politically** expropriated under Stalinism. This is unsurprising, as both forms of expropriation had occurred when he and Lenin held the reins of state power.

Yet Trotsky's confused ramblings do serve a purpose in showing how the Marxist theory of the state can be used to rationalise the replacement of popular power by party power. With such ideological baggage, can it be a surprise that the Marxist theory of the state helped ensure that the Russian working class did **not** become the ruling class post-October: it ensured that the Bolshevik party and its state machine did. This was confirmation of Kropotkin's analysis that *"[t]o ask an institution which represents a historical growth that it serves to destroy the privileges that it strove to develop is to acknowledge you are incapable of understanding what a historical growth is in the life of societies. It is to ignore this general rule of all organic nature, that new functions require new organs, and that they need to develop them themselves. It is to acknowledge that you are too lazy and too timid in spirit to think in a new direction, imposed by a new evolution."* Even if, as promised in theory by Lenin, a new state is built, if it maintains the same organisational principles as the old state (and it has, anarchists stress, if it is to be considered a state) then it would be *"a tragic error"* to think it will *"lend itself perfectly to new functions: that it will become the instrument, the framework, to germinate a new life, to establish freedom and equality on economic foundations, to eradicate monopolies, to awaken society and march to the conquest of a future of freedom and equality!"* [**Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 352 and p. 275]

To conclude, The first steps towards party dictatorship can be found in such apparently "libertarian" works as Lenin's **State and Revolution** with its emphasis on "representation" and "centralisation." The net effect of this was to centralise power into fewer and fewer hands, replacing the essential constructive working class participation and self-activity required by a social revolution with top-down rule by a few party leaders. Such rule could not avoid becoming bureaucratised and coming into conflict with the real aspirations and interests of those it claimed to represent. In such circumstances, in a conflict between the "workers' state" and the actual workers, the Marxist theory of the state, combined with the assumptions of vanguardism (see [section H.5](#)), made the shift to party dictatorship inevitable. The authoritarian tendencies of the Bolshevik regime surfaced from the start -- unsurprisingly, given the role of the state in history and the features it had to develop to execute that role. This is why anarchists *"see in the State, not only in its present form but in its very essence and in all the forms that it may take, an obstacle to the social revolution: the greatest hindrance to the birth of a society based on equality and freedom, the historic form developed to prevent this blossoming."* [Kropotkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 233]

While Leninists seek to explain the degeneration of the Bolshevik regime purely in terms of objective circumstances (such as the civil war), as we discuss in [section 3](#) of the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#), its root causes lie elsewhere -- namely in the vision of socialism as being centralised rather than federalist. The Marxist theory of the state undermined working class power due to the structures it favoured and the blindness to the dangers this inherent expropriation produced. The strange paradox of Leninism, namely that the theoretical dictatorship of the proletariat was, in practice, a dictatorship **over** the proletariat comes as no surprise. In spite of Lenin announcing *"all power to the soviets"* he remained committed to a disciplined party wielding centralised power. This regime soon expropriated the soviets while calling the subsequent regime "Soviet." Rather than create the authoritarian tendencies of the Bolshevik state the "objective factors" facing Lenin's regime simply increased their impact for the preconditions for the minority rule which the civil war intensified to extreme levels already existed within Marxist theory and, as such, were reflected in Bolshevik practice. Consequently, a Leninist revolution which avoided the (inevitable) problems facing a revolution would still create some kind of

class society simply because it reproduces minority rule by creating a "workers' state" as its first step.

3 How did Engels' "*On Authority*" affect the revolution?

We have noted the flaws in Engels' infamous diatribe against anarchism in [section H.4](#). Here we discuss how its caricature of anarchism helped disarm the Bolsheviks theoretically to the dangers of their own actions, so helping to undermine the socialist potential of the Russian revolution. Simply put, Engels' essay contained the germs from which Lenin and Trotsky's support for one-man management flowed. It provided the Marxist orthodoxy required to undermine real working class power by confusing all forms of organisation with "*authority*" and equating the necessity of self-discipline with "*subordination*" to one will. Engels' infamous essay helped Lenin to destroy self-management in the workplace and replace it with appointed "*one-man management*" armed with "*dictatorial powers*." Thus socialist tendencies towards workers' self-management of production were eliminated in favour of typically bourgeois forms as Engels' essay proclaimed that both were based "on authority" and both were equally "authoritarian" as the other -- given this, there were no theoretical basis to question replacing the one by the other.

For Lenin and Trotsky, familiar as they were with Engels' "*On Authority*," it was a truism that **any** form of organisation was based on authority and so authoritarian. Consequently, it did not really matter **how** that authority was constituted and so Marxism's agnostic attitude to the patterns of domination and subordination within society allowed one-man management -- and party dictatorship -- for, after all, "*Soviet socialist democracy and individual management and dictatorship are in no way contradictory . . . the will of a class may sometimes be carried by a dictator, who sometimes does more alone and is frequently more necessary.*" [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 30, p. 476] That such domination in production was a key factor in the capitalist class being the ruling class under capitalism (their control over the production process and its product ensuring their position in the social hierarchy regardless of the political forms of a society) was as overlooked as the obvious implications of what would happen if workers were placed in the same situation as part of a "socialist" system.

Like Engels, Lenin defended the principle of authority. The dictatorship of the Party over the proletariat found its apology in this principle, thoroughly grounded in the practice of bureaucracy and modern factory production. Authority, hierarchy, and the need for submission and domination is inevitable given large-scale production, they argued and no foreseeable change in social relations could ever overcome this blunt necessity. As such, it was (fundamentally) irrelevant **how** a workplace is organised as, no matter what, it would be "*authoritarian*." Thus "*one-man management*" would be, basically, the same as worker's self-management via an elected factory committee -- if not, indeed, superior as leading Bolsheviks soon came to conclude (strangely the well-documented increases in productivity shown by increased workers' participation -- as noted in [section J.5.12](#) -- seem to disappear once a socialist state is placed in control of production).

According to Engels, any form of joint activity required as its "*first condition*" a "*dominant will that settles all subordinate questions, whether this will is represented by a single delegate or a committee charged with the execution of the resolutions of the majority of persons interested. In either case there is very pronounced authority.*" Thus the "*necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that.*" Collective life, he stressed, required "*a certain authority, no matter how delegated*" and "*a certain subordination, are things which,*

independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us." [**The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 732]

Lenin was aware of these arguments, even quoting from this essay in his **State and Revolution**. So he was aware that for Engels, collective decisions meant *"the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way."* Thus there was no difference if *"they are settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a majority vote."* The more advanced the technology, the greater the *"despotism"*: *"The automatic machinery of a big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalist who employ workers ever have been."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 731] Engels, then, had used the modern factory system of mass production as a direct analogy to argue against the anarchist call for workers' councils and self-management in production, for workers' autonomy and participation, as any form of joint production was *"authoritarian"*. It is unsurprising that modern-day Marxists are hard pressed to discover any demand for workers' control of production in Marx or Engels and have to, at best, settle for interpreting passing positive comments about co-operatives under capitalism or placing their own assumptions and hopes into phrases like *"associated producers"* (as one Marxist admits: *"Marx's picture of life and organisation in the first stage of communism is very incomplete. There is no discussion of such obviously important developments as workers' control. We can only guess how much power workers enjoy in their enterprises"* [Bertell Ollman, **Social and Sexual Revolution**, pp. 65-6]). Indeed, the **Communist Manifesto** makes no mention of the kind of workers' control advocated by Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin, limiting itself to the call of *"centralis[ing] all instruments of production in the hands of the State"* [**Marx-Engels Collected Works**, vol. 6, p. 504] Like Engels, Lenin stressed the necessity of central authority in industry and central planning.

Thus this text, reflective of a wider perspective which placed nationalisation of property by the state at the core of socialism, ensured the creation of state capitalism under the Bolsheviks. This is the moment in Marxist theory when the turn from economics to technics, from proletarian control to technocracy, from workers' self-management to appointed state management was ensured. Henceforth the end of any critique of alienation in mainstream Marxism was theoretically justified: submission to technique under hierarchical authority effectively prevents active participation in the social production of values. What was listed as a demand in 1848 became fixed for there was no alternative. Worse, when the demand for workers' self-management of production was raised -- whether by the workers' themselves or by dissident Marxists -- then it could be, and was, dismissed as "petty-bourgeois" and an "anarcho-syndicalist deviation."

As we discuss in [section H.3.14](#) Lenin's short-lived support for workers' control in 1917 was always limited and placed within a statist context so draining it of any liberatory potential. Indeed, a close reading of Lenin's arguments made during 1917 show that he did not favour workers' self-management of production at all, raising the idea of *"workers' control"* only after workers themselves spontaneously raised the slogan and practice during the revolution but interpreting that slogan in his own way, placing it within a statist context and within institutions inherited from capitalism (see [section H.3.12](#)). Once in power, it was (unsurprisingly) **his** vision of socialism and workers' control that was implemented, **not** the workers' factory committees and, it must be stressed -- as Lenin repeatedly stressed against the left in his own party -- that the core of that vision had been raised **before** the October revolution.

This vision can be best seen in the article *"The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government"* written before the start of the civil war, in April 1918. This work begins by arguing that "[t]hanks to the peace which has been achieved" the Bolsheviks had "gained an opportunity to concentrate its efforts for a while on the most important and most difficult aspect of the socialist revolution, namely the task of organisation." The Bolsheviks, who had "managed to complete the conquest of power," now faced "the principal task of convincing people" and doing "**practical organisational work.**" Only when this was done "will it be possible to say that Russia **has become** not only a Soviet, but also a socialist, republic." [**Collected Works**, vo. 27, p. 237 and pp. 242-3]

Sadly, this "organisation" was riddled with authoritarianism and was fundamentally top-down in nature. Lenin's "socialist" vision was simply state capitalism -- as he himself noted in May 1917, state capitalism "is a complete **material** preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism" and so socialism "is nothing but the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly." It is "merely state-capitalist monopoly **which is made to serve the interests of the whole people** and has to that extent **ceased** to be capitalist monopoly." [**Collected Works**, vol. 25, p. 359 and p. 358] However, what interests us here is that his arguments to justify the "socialist" policies he presented are similar to those put forward by Engels in *"On Authority."* As such, we can only reach the following conclusions. Firstly, that the "state capitalist" vision of socialism imposed upon Russia by the Bolsheviks was what they had always intended to introduce. It was their limited support for workers' control in 1917 that was atypical and not part of their tradition, **not** their policies once in power (as modern day Leninists assert). Secondly, that this vision had its roots in classical Marxism, specifically Engels' *"On Authority"* and the identification of socialism with nationalised property (see [section H.3.13](#) for more on this).

That Engels' diatribe had a negative impact on the development of the Russian revolution can easily be seen from Lenin's arguments. For example, Lenin argues that the "tightening of discipline" and "harmonious organisation" calls "for coercion -- coercion precisely in the form of dictatorship." He did not object to granting "individual executives dictatorial power (or 'unlimited' powers)" and did not think "the appointment of individual, dictators with unlimited power" was incompatible with "the fundamental principles of the Soviet government." After all, "the history of revolutionary movements" had "shown" that "the dictatorship of individuals was very often the expression, the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of revolutionary classes." He notes that "[u]ndoubtedly, the dictatorship of individuals was compatible with bourgeois democracy." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 263 and p. 267-8] It would be churlish to note that previous revolutionary movements had not been **socialist** in nature and did not aim to **abolish** classes. In such cases, the government appointing people with dictatorial powers would not have harmed the nature of the revolution, which was transferring power from one minority class to another. Likewise, the dictatorship of the capitalist within production is a key reason why they are the ruling class within capitalism even with bourgeois democracy -- placing workers under such a regime in the name of socialism would, surely, also mean placing the "dictators with unlimited power" into the position of the ruling class and so make soviet democracy as limited as its bourgeois form. Moreover, for many workers getting rid of the dictator (the boss) in the workplace was why they had made the revolution in the first place.

Lenin mocked the "exceedingly poor arguments" of those who objected, saying that they "demand of us a higher democracy than bourgeois democracy and say: personal dictatorship is absolutely incompatible with your, Bolshevik (i.e. not bourgeois, **but socialist**) Soviet

democracy." As the Bolsheviks were "not anarchists," he admitted the need "coercion" in the "transition from capitalism to socialism," its form being determined "by the degree of development of the given revolutionary class, and also by special circumstances." In general, he stressed, there was "absolutely **no** contradiction in principle between Soviet (**that is, socialist**) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals." [Op. Cit., p. 268] Which is, of course, sophistry as dictatorship by a few people in some aspects of life will erode democracy in others. For example, being subject to the economic power of the capitalist during work harms the individual and reduces their ability to participate in other aspects of social life. Why should being subject to "red" bosses be any different?

In particular, Lenin argued that "individual dictatorial power" was required because "large-scale machine industry" (which is the "foundation of socialism") calls for "absolute and strict **unity of will**, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people . . . But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one." He reiterated that the "**unquestioning subordination** to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry." The people must "**unquestioningly obey the single will** of the leaders of labour." And so it was a case (for the workers, at least) of "[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers." [Op. Cit., pp. 268-9 and p. 316]

The parallels with Engels' "On Authority" could not be clearer, as are the fallacies of Lenin's assertions (see, for example, [section H.4.4](#)). Lenin, like Engels, uses the example of modern industry to bolster his arguments. Yet the net effect of Lenin's argument was to eliminate working class economic power at the point of production. Instead of socialist social relationships, Lenin imposed capitalist ones. Indeed, no capitalist would disagree with Lenin's workplace regime -- they try to create such a regime by breaking unions and introducing technologies and techniques which allow them to control the workers in order to increase their labour and reduce the amount of the product they need to share with its creators. Unsurprisingly, Lenin also urged the introduction of two such techniques, namely "piece-work" and "applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system." [Op. Cit., pp. 23-4] As Trotskyist Tony Cliff reminds us, "the employers have at their disposal a number of effective methods of disrupting th[e] unity [of workers as a class]. Once of the most important of these is the fostering of competition between workers by means of piece-work systems." He notes that these were used by the Nazis and the Stalinists "for the same purpose." [State Capitalism in Russia, pp. 18-9] Obviously piece-work is different when Lenin introduces it! Similarly, when Trotsky notes that "[b]lind obedience is not a thing to be proud of in a revolutionary," it is somewhat different when Lenin calls upon workers to do so (or, for that matter, Trotsky himself when in power -- see [section 6](#) for Trotsky's radically different perspective on blind obedience of the worker to "his" state in 1920!).

The net effect of these policies, as anarchist Peter Arshinov noted a few years later, was that the "fundamental fact" of the Bolshevik revolution was "that the workers and the peasant labourers remained within the earlier situation of 'working classes' -- producers managed by authority from above." Bolshevik political and economic ideas may have "remov[ed] the workers from the hands of individual capitalists" but they "delivered them to the yet more rapacious hands of a single ever-present capitalist boss, the State. The relations between the workers and this new boss are the same as earlier relations between labour and capital . . .

Wage labour has remained what it was before, except that it has taken on the character of an obligation to the State. . . . It is clear that in all this we are dealing with a simple substitution of State capitalism for private capitalism." [**The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 35 and p. 71] Moreover, Lenin's position failed to understand that unless workers have power at the point of production, they will soon lose it in society as a whole. Which, of course, they soon did in Bolshevik Russia, even in the limited form of electing a "revolutionary" government. The **economic** dominance of the bourgeoisie ensures the political dispossession of the working class: why expect the introduction of capitalist social relations in production to have different outcomes just because Lenin was the head of the government? Libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton states what should be an obvious point for anti-capitalists:

"We hold that the 'relations of production' -- the relations which individuals or groups enter into with one another in the process of producing wealth -- are the essential foundations of any society. A certain pattern of relations of production is the common denominator of all class societies. This pattern is one in which the producer does not dominate the means of production but on the contrary both is 'separated from them' and from the products of his own labour. In all class societies the producer is in a position of subordination to those who manage the productive process. Workers' management of production -- implying as it does the total domination of the producer over the productive process -- is not for us a marginal matter. It is the core of our politics. It is the only means whereby authoritarian (order-giving, order-taking) relations in production can be transcended and a free, communist or anarchist, society introduced.

*"We also hold that the means of production may change hands (passing for instance from private hands into those of a bureaucracy, collectively owning them) **without this revolutionising the relations of production**. Under such circumstances -- and whatever the formal status of property -- the society is still a class society for production is still managed by an agency other than the producers themselves. Property relations, in other words, do not necessarily reflect the: relations of production. They may serve to mask them -- and in fact they often have."* [**The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. vii-viii]

So while the causes of the failure of the Russian Revolution were many fold, the obvious influence of Engels' "*On Authority*" on the fate of the workers' control movement should be noted. After all, Engels' argument confuses the issues that Bakunin and other anarchists were trying to raise (namely on the nature of the organisations we create and our relationships with others). If, as Engels argues, all organisation is authoritarian, then does this mean that there is no real difference between organisational structures? Is a dictatorship just the same as a self-managed group, as they are both organisations and so both authoritarian? If so, surely that means the kinds of organisation we create are irrelevant and what **really** matters is state ownership? Such logic can only lead to the perspective that working class self-management of production is irrelevant to socialism and, unfortunately, the experience of the Russian Revolution tends to suggest that for mainstream Marxism this is the case. The Bolsheviks imposed distinctly capitalist social structures while arguing that they were creating socialism. In this they were shaped by the works of Marx and Engels in which state ownership and centralisation were always stressed while workers' self-management (industrial democracy) was never mentioned -- unlike in the works of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin who all placed it at the core of their vision of socialism.

Authority, hierarchy, and the need for submission and domination is inevitable, given the current mode of production, Marxist leaders argued. And, as Engels had stressed, no foreseeable change in social relations could ever overcome this blunt necessity -- hence no need for workers' self-management of production as state control would be just as authoritarian. By equating **agreement** with **authority** (i.e. hierarchy) and dismissing the importance of revolutionising the social relationships people create between themselves, Engels opened the way for the Bolsheviks' advocacy of "*one-man management*." His essay is at the root of mainstream Marxism's agnostic attitude to the patterns of domination and subordination within society and was used to justify one-man management. Likewise, it allowed the Bolsheviks to pretend that by placing the worker under socialism in exactly the same situation as the worker under capitalism (i.e., a wage-slave to a boss rather than master of the workplace) would have no wider impact.

As such, the dubious inheritance of classical Marxism had started to push the Bolshevik revolution down an authoritarian path and create economic structures and social relationships which were in no way socialist and, moreover, laid the foundations for Stalinism. Even if the civil war had not occurred, capitalist social relationships would have been dominant within "socialist" Russia -- with the only difference being that rather than private capitalism it would have been state capitalism.

In another way Engels identification of organisation with authority affected the outcome of the revolution. As **any** form of organisation involved, for Engels, the domination of individuals and so was authoritarian then the nature of the socialist state was as irrelevant as the way workplaces were run. As both party dictatorship and soviet democracy meant that the individual was "*dominated*" by collective decisions, so both were equally authoritarian. As such, the transformation of the soviet state into a party dictatorship did not fundamentally mean a change for the individuals subject to it. Little wonder that no leading Bolshevik called the end of soviet democracy and its replacement by party dictatorship as a "retreat" or even as something to be worried about -- this was a major theme in Trotsky's **Terrorism and Communism**, for example. More, they all argued the opposite, namely that party dictatorship was essential and not an issue to be worried about and announced this to the world's revolutionaries at the Second Congress of the Communist International: "*the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.*" [Zinoviev, **Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, p. 152] Indeed, it was "*ridiculously absurd, and stupid*" to "*a contrast, in general, between the dictatorship of the masses and the dictatorship of the leaders.*" [Lenin, **The Lenin Anthology**, p. 568]

While Engels may have been horrified to see such arguments, unfortunately his words opened the way for them. This analogy by the SWP's Tony Cliff of the relationship between the party and the working class provides an insight:

*"In essence the dictatorship of the proletariat **does not** represent a combination of abstract, immutable elements like democracy and centralism, independent of time and space. The actual level of democracy, as well as centralism, depends on three basic factors: 1. the strength of the proletariat; 2. the material and cultural legacy left to it by the old regime; and 3. the strength of capitalist resistance. The level of democracy feasible must be indirect proportion to the first two factors, and in inverse proportion to the third. The captain of an ocean liner can allow football to be played on his vessel; on a tiny raft in a stormy sea the level of tolerance is far lower."* [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 179]

Ignoring the obvious points (such as comparing working class freedom and democracy to a game!), we can see shades of Engels in Cliff's words. Let us not forget that Engels argued that "*a ship on the high seas*" at a "*time of danger*" required "*the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that.*" [Op. Cit., p. 732] Here Cliff is placing the party into the Captain's role and the workers as the crew. The Captain, in Engels argument, exercised "*imperious authority.*" In Cliff's, the party decides the freedoms which working class people are allowed to have -- and so subjects them to its "*imperious authority.*"

Little wonder Bolshevism failed. By this simple analogy Cliff shows the authoritarian essence of Bolshevism and who really has "*all power*" under that system. Like the crew and passengers dominated by the will of the captain, the working class under Leninism will be dominated by the party. It does not bode well that Cliff thinks that democracy can be "*feasible*" in some circumstances but not others and it is up to those in power (i.e. the party leaders) to determine when it was. In his rush to justify Bolshevik party dictatorship in terms of "objective conditions" he clearly forgot his earlier comments that the "*liberation of the working class can only be achieved through the action of the working class. Hence one can have a revolution with more or less violence, with more or less suppression of civil rights of the bourgeoisie and its hangers-on, with more or less political freedom, but one cannot have a revolution, as the history of Russia conclusively demonstrates, without workers' democracy -- even if restricted and distorted. Socialist advance must be gauged by workers' freedom, by their power to shape their own destiny . . . Without workers' democracy the immediate means leads to a very different end, to an end that is prefigured in these same means.*" [Op. Cit., p. 110] Yet, with his defence of the Bolshevik dictatorship as a workers' state even as it was breaking strikes and killing rebel workers at Kronstadt, it seems obvious that this principle no longer applies if Lenin and Trotsky are the captains of the ship of state - then such considerations are less important. When it is Lenin wielding "*imperious authority*" then workers' democracy **can** be forgotten and the regime remain a "workers' state" for the category of "*hangers on*" is a general catch-all one which, if Bolshevik practice is anything to go by, can include rebel workers -- if not in fact the vast bulk of the working class (see [section H.6.3](#) for the extensive repression of strikes and other forms of working class protest under Lenin and Trotsky from 1918 onwards).

To conclude, rather than the anti-authoritarians not knowing "*what they are talking about,*" "*creating nothing but confusion,*" "*betraying the movement of the proletariat*" and "*serv[ing] the reaction,*" it was Engels' essay that aided the Bolshevik counter-revolution and helped, in its own small way, to lay the foundations for Leninist tyranny and state capitalism. [Engels, Op. Cit., p. 733] Ultimately, "*On Authority*" helped give Lenin the ideological premises with which to undermine workers' economic power during the revolution, recreate capitalist social relations, and call it "socialism." This ill-thought-out diatribe had ramifications even Engels would never have guessed (but were obvious at the time to libertarians). His use of the modern factory system to argue against the anarchist call for workers' councils, federalism and workers' autonomy, for participation, for self-management, became the basis for re-imposing **capitalist** relations of production in revolutionary Russia.

4 How did the Bolshevik vision of "democracy" affect the revolution?

As discussed in [section H.3.2](#), Marx and Engels had left their followers with a contradictory legacy as regards "*socialism from below.*" On the one hand, their praise for the Paris

Commune and its libertarian ideas pointed to a participatory democracy run from below. On the other, Marx's comments during the German Revolution in 1850 that the workers must "*strive for . . . the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority*" because "*the path of revolutionary activity*" can "*proceed only from the centre*" suggests a top-down approach. He stressed that centralisation of power was essential to overcome local autonomy, which would allow "*every village, every town and every province*" to put "*a new obstacle in the path*" the revolution due to "*local and provincial obstinacy.*" [Marx-Engels Reader, p. 509]

Building upon this contradictory legacy, Lenin unambiguously stressed the "*from above*" aspect of it (see [section H.3.3](#)). The only real exception to this perspective occurred in 1917, when Lenin was trying to win mass support for his party. However, even this support for democracy from below was always tempered with comments such as "*when the state will be a proletarian state, when it will be an instrument of violence exercised by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, we shall be fully and unreservedly in favour of a strong state power and of centralism.*" [Collected Works, Vol. 26, p. 116]

Once in power, the libertarian promises of 1917 were quickly forgotten while the authoritarian ones were applied. Unsurprisingly, modern day Leninists argue that this was due to the difficult circumstances facing the Bolsheviks at the time. They argue that the words of 1917 represent the true democratic vision of Bolshevism. Anarchists are not impressed. After all, for an idea to be useful it must be practical -- even in "exceptional circumstances." If the Bolshevik vision is not robust enough to handle the problems that have affected every revolution then we have to question the validity of that vision or the strength of the commitment its supporters hold it.

Given this, the question becomes which of these two aspects of Marxism was considered its "essence" by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Obviously, it is hard to isolate the real Bolshevik vision of democracy from the influence of "objective factors." However, we can get a taste by looking at how the Bolsheviks acted and argued during the first six months in power. During this period, the problems facing the revolution were hard but not as bad as those facing it after the Czech revolt at the end of May 1918 and then the rise of the White Armies as well as imperialist intervention (mostly in the form of supplying the Whites although some troops were sent onto Russia territory).

So the question as to whether the Bolsheviks were forced into authoritarian and hierarchical methods by the practical necessities of the civil war or whether all this was inherent in Leninism all along, and the natural product of Leninist ideology, can be answered by looking at the record of the Bolsheviks prior to the civil war. And the obvious conclusion is that the record of the initial months of Bolshevik rule point to a less than democratic approach which suggests that authoritarian policies were inherent in Leninism and, as such, pointed the revolution onto a path where further authoritarian policies were not only easy to implement, but had to be as alternative options had been eliminated by previous decisions. Moreover, Bolshevik ideology itself made such policies easy to accept and to justify.

As discussed in [section H.6](#), it was during this period that the Bolsheviks started to gerrymander soviets and disband any they lost elections to, undermine the factory committees and basically handed the factories to the state bureaucracy. Lenin argued for and implemented one-man management, piecework, Taylorism and other things Stalinism is

condemned for. In the army, Trotsky disbanded by decree the soldier committees and elected officers.

How Trotsky defended this policy of appointing officers is significant. It mirrors Lenin's argument in favour of appointed one-man management and, as such, reflects the basic Bolshevik vision of democracy. By looking at his argument we can see how the Bolshevik vision of democracy fatally undermined the Russian Revolution and its socialist content. The problems of the civil war simply worsened the abscess in democracy created by Lenin and Trotsky in early 1918.

Trotsky acknowledged that that *"the soldier-workers and soldier-peasants" needed "to elect commanders for themselves" in the Tzarist army "not [as] military chiefs, but simply [as] representatives who could guard them against attacks of counter-revolutionary classes."* However, in the new Red Army this was not needed as it was the *"workers' and peasants' Soviets, i.e. the same classes which compose the army"* which was building it. He blandly asserted that *"[h]ere no internal struggle is possible."* To illustrate his point he pointed to the trade unions. *"The metal workers," he noted, "elect their committee, and the committee finds a secretary, a clerk, and a number of other persons who are necessary. Does it ever happen that the workers should say: 'Why are our clerks and treasurers appointed, and not elected?' No, no intelligent workers will say so."* [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 112-3]

Thus in less than six months, Lenin's call in **State and Revolution** that *"[a]ll officials, without exception, [would be] elected and subject to recall at any time"* was dismissed as the demand that *"no intelligent"* worker would raise. [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 302] But, then again, Trotsky **was** in the process of destroying another apparent "principle" of Leninism, namely (to quote, like Lenin, Marx) *"the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people."* [quoted by Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 300]

Trotsky continues his argument. The Trade union committee, he asserts, would say *"[y]ou yourselves have chosen the committee. If you don't like us, dismiss us, but once you have entrusted us with the direction of the union, then give us the possibility of choosing the clerk or the cashier, since we are better able to judge in the matter than you, and if our way of conducting business is bad, then throw us out and elect another committee."* After this defence of elected dictatorship, he states that the *"Soviet government is the same as the committee of a trade union. It is elected by the workers and peasants, and you can at the All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, at any moment you like, dismiss that government and appoint another."* Until that happens, he was happy to urge blind obedience by the sovereign people to their servants: *"But once you have appointed it, you must give it the right to choose the technical specialists, the clerks, the secretaries in the broad sense of the word, and in military affairs, in particular."* He tried to calm the nerves of those who could see the obvious problems with this argument by asking whether it was *"possible for the Soviet government to appoint military specialists against the interests of the labouring and peasant masses?"* [Op. Cit., p. 113]

And the answer to that question is, of course, an empathic yes. Even looking at his own analogy, namely that of a trade union committee, it is obvious that an elected body can have interests separate from and in opposition to those who elected it. The history of trade unionism is full of examples of committees betraying the membership of the unions. And, of course, the history of the Soviet government under Lenin and Trotsky (never mind Stalin!)

shows that just because it was once elected by a majority of the working people does not mean it will act in their best interests.

Trotsky even went one better. *"The army is now only in the process of formation,"* he noted. *"How could the soldiers who have just entered the army choose the chiefs! Have they have any vote to go by? They have none. And therefore elections are impossible."* [Op. Cit., p. 113] If only the Tsar had thought of that one! If he had, he could still have been in power. And, needless to say, Trotsky did not apply that particular logic to himself. After all, he had no experience of holding governmental office or building an army (or even being in combat). Nor did any of the other Bolshevik leaders. By the logic of his argument, not only should the workers not been allowed to vote for a soviet government, he and his fellow Bolsheviks should not have assumed power in 1917. But, clearly, sauce for the goose is definitely **not** sauce for the gander.

For all his talk that the masses could replace the Bolsheviks at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Trotsky failed to realise that these proposals (and other ones like it) ensured that this was unlikely to happen. Even assuming that the Bolsheviks had not gerrymandered and disbanded soviets, the fact is that the Bolshevik vision of "democracy" effectively hollowed out the grassroots participation required to make democracy at the top anything more than a fig-leaf for party power. He honestly seemed to believe that eliminating mass participation in other areas of society would have no effect on the levels of participation in soviet elections. Would people subjected to one-man management in the workplace and in the army really be truly free and able to vote for parties which had not appointed their bosses? Could workers who were disenfranchised economically and socially remain in political power (assuming you equate voting a handful of leaders into power with *"political power"*)? And does being able to elect a representative every quarter to the All-Russian congress really mean that the working class was really in charge of society? Of course not.

This vision of top-down "democracy" can, of course, be traced back to Marx's arguments of 1850 and Lenin's comments that the *"organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy"* was *"to proceed from the top downward."* [Collected Works, vol. 7, pp. 396-7]. By equating centralised, top-down decision making by an elected government with "democracy," the Bolsheviks had the ideological justification to eliminate the functional democracy associated with the factory and soldiers committees. In place of workers' and soldiers' direct democracy and self-management, the Bolsheviks appointed managers and officers and justified because a workers' party was in power. Needless to say, a state which eliminates functional democracy in the grassroots will not stay democratic in any meaningful sense for long. At best, it will be like a bourgeois republic with elections where people elect a party to misrepresent them every four or so years while real economic, political and social power rests in the hands of a few. At worse, it would be a dictatorship with "elections" whose results are known beforehand.

The Leninist vision of "democracy" is seen purely as a means of placing the party into power. Thus power in society shifts to the top, to the leaders of the centralised party in charge of the centralised state. The workers' become mere electors rather than actual controllers of the revolution and are expected to carry out the orders of the party without comment. In other words, a decidedly bourgeois vision of "democracy." Anarchists, in contrast, seek to dissolve power back into the hands of society and empower the individual by giving them a direct say in the revolution through their workplace and community assemblies and their councils and conferences.

This vision was not a new development. Far from it. While, ironically enough, Lenin's and Trotsky's support for the appointment of officers/managers can be refuted by looking at Lenin's **State and Revolution**, the fact is that the undemocratic perspectives they are based on can be found in Lenin's **What is to be Done?**. This suggests that his 1917 arguments were the aberration and against the true essence of Leninism, not his and Trotsky's policies once they were in power (as Leninists like to argue).

Particularly ironic, given Trotsky's trade union committee analogy, was Lenin's comment that "*Bernstein [the arch revisionist and reformist] combats 'primitive democracy' . . . To prove that 'primitive democracy' is worthless, Bernstein refers to the experience of the British trade unions, as interpreted by the Webbs. Seventy years of development . . . convinced the trade unions that primitive democracy was useless, and they substituted ordinary democracy, i.e. parliamentarism, combined with bureaucracy, for it.*" Lenin replied that because the trade unions operated "*in absolute capitalist slavery*" a "*number of concessions to the prevailing evil, violence, falsehood, exclusion of the poor from the affairs of the 'higher' administration 'cannot be avoided.'* Under socialism much of the 'primitive' democracy will inevitably be revived, since, for the first time in history of civilised society, the **mass** of the population will rise to **independent** participation, not only in voting and elections, **but also in the everyday administration of affairs**" [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 361]

Obviously things looked a bit different once he and his fellow Bolshevik leaders were in power. Then the exclusion of the poor from the affairs of the "*higher*" administration was seen as normal practice, as proven by the practice of the trade unions! And as we note in [section H.3.8](#), this "*exclusion*" was taken as a key lesson of the revolution and built into the Leninist theory of the state.

This development was not unexpected. After all, as we noted in [section H.5.5](#), over a decade before Lenin had been less than enthralled by "*primitive democracy*" and more in agreement with Bernstein than he lets on in **State and Revolution**. In **What is to Be Done?**, he based his argument for centralised, top-down party organisation on the experiences of the labour movement in democratic capitalist regimes. He quotes the same book by the Webbs to defend his position. He notes that "*in the first period of existence in their unions, the British workers thought it was an indispensable sign of democracy for all members to do all the work of managing the unions.*" This involved "*all questions [being] decided by the votes of all the members*" and all "*official duties*" being "*fulfilled by all the members in turn.*" He dismisses "*such a conception of democracy*" as "*absurd*" and "*historical experience*" made them "*understand the necessity for representative institutions*" and "*full-time professional officials.*" Ironically, Lenin records that in Russia the "*'primitive' conception of democracy*" existed in two groups, the "*masses of the students and workers*" and the "*Economists of the Bernstein persuasion.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 162-3]

Forgetting that he had argued against "*primitive democracy*" in **What is to Be Done?**, Lenin later lambasted the opportunists and "*present Kautskyists*" for "*repeat[ing] the vulgar bourgeois jeers at 'primitive' democracy.*" Now, in 1917, it was a case that "*the transition from capitalism to socialism is impossible without some 'reversion' to 'primitive' democracy (how else can the majority, even the whole population, proceed to discharge state functions?)*" [Op. Cit., p. 302] Very true. As Leninism in power showed, the conscious elimination of "*primitive democracy*" in the army and workplace ensured that socialism was "*impossible.*" And this elimination was not justified in terms of "difficult" circumstances but

rather in terms of principle and the inability of working people to manage their own affairs directly.

Thus Trotsky's autocratic and top-down vision of democracy has its roots within Leninism. Rather than being forced upon the Bolsheviks by difficult circumstances, the eroding of grassroots, functional ("primitive") democracy was at the core of Bolshevism. Lenin's arguments in 1917 were the exception, not his practice after he seized power.

This fundamentally undemocratic perspective can be found today in modern Leninism. As well as defending the Bolshevik dictatorship during the civil war, modern Leninists support the continuation of party dictatorship after its end. In particular, they support the Bolshevik repression of the Kronstadt rebellion (see appendix ["What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"](#) for more details). As Trotsky put it in 1937, if the Kronstadt demand for soviet elections had been implemented then *"to free the soviets from the leadership [sic!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves . . . Social-Revolutionary-anarchist soviets would serve only as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship [sic!] to capitalist restoration."* He generalised this example, by pointing to the *"experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 90]

Modern day Leninists repeat this argument, failing to note that they sound like leftist Henry Kissingers (Kissinger, let us not forget, ensured US aid for Pinochet's coup in Chile and argued that *"I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people"*). Today we have Leninists combining rhetoric about democratic socialism, with elections and recall, with a mentality which justifies the suppression of working class revolt because they are not prepared to stand by and watch a country go capitalist due to the irresponsibility of its own people. Thus, in 1937, Trotsky expressed his support for the *"objective necessity"* of the *"revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party"* and, two years later, that the *"vanguard of the proletariat"* must be *"armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself."* [**Writings 1936-37**, pp. 513-4] If only modern day Leninists were as honest!

While few, however, explicitly proclaim the logic of this position (namely party dictatorship) most defend the Bolsheviks implementing this conclusion in practice (while often also asserting that Marxism is inherently democratic and that Stalinism cannot be socialist because it was not democratic!). Can we not conclude that, faced with the same problems the Bolsheviks faced, these modern day Leninists will implement the same policies? That they will go from party power to party dictatorship, simply because they know better than those who elected them on such matters? That answer seems all too obvious.

As such, the Bolshevik preference for centralised state power and of representative forms of democracy involved the substitution of the party for the class and, consequently, will facilitate the dictatorship **over** the proletariat when faced with the inevitable problems facing any revolution. As Bakunin put it, a *"people's administration, according to [the Marxists], must mean a people's administration by virtue of a small number of representatives chosen by the people . . . [I]t is a deception which would conceal the despotism of a governing minority, all the more dangerous because it appears as a sham expression of the people's will . . . [T]he vast majority, the great mass of people, would be governed by a privileged minority . . .*

[of] former workers, who would stop being workers the moment they became rulers or representatives, and would then come to regard the whole blue-collared world from governmental heights, and would not represent the people but themselves and their pretensions." So the Marxist state would be *"the reign of the scientific mind, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real of bogus learning, and the world will be divided into a dominant, science-based minority and a vast, ignorant majority. And then let the ignorant masses beware!"* [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 268, pp. 268-9 and p. 266]

In summary, Trotsky's deeply undemocratic justification for appointing officers, like Lenin's similar arguments for appointing managers, express the logic and reality of Bolshevism far better than statements made before the Bolsheviks seized power and never implemented. Sadly, modern Leninists concentrate on the promises of the election manifesto rather than the grim reality of Bolshevik power and its long standing top-down vision of "democracy." A vision which helped undermine the revolution and ensure its degeneration into a party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy.

5 What was the effect of the Bolshevik vision of "socialism"?

As we discussed in [section H.3.1](#), anarchists and most Marxists are divided not only by **means** but also by **ends**. Simply put, libertarians and Leninists do **not** have the same vision of socialism. Given this, anarchists are not surprised at the negative results of the Bolshevik revolution -- the use of anti-socialist means to attain anti-socialist ends would obviously have less than desirable results.

The content of the Bolshevik vision of "socialism" is criticised by anarchists on two main counts. Firstly, it is a top-down, centralised vision of "socialism." This can only result in the destruction of working class economic power at the point of production in favour of centralised bureaucratic power. Secondly, for Bolshevism nationalisation, **not** workers' self-management, was the key issue (reflecting, for example, **The Communist Manifesto** which stressed the former and fails to mention the latter). We will discuss the first issue here and the second in the [next section](#).

The Bolshevik vision of "socialism" was inherently centralised and top-down. This can be seen from the organisational schemas and arguments made by leading Bolsheviks before and immediately after the Revolution. For example, we discover Trotsky arguing in March 1918 that workplaces *"will be subject to policies laid down by the local council of workmen's deputies"* who, in turn, had *"their range of discretion . . . limited in turn by regulations made for each class of industry by the boards or bureaux of the central government."* He dismissed Kropotkin's communalist ideas by saying local autonomy was not *"suited to the state of things in modern industrial society"* and *"would result in endless frictions and difficulties."* As the *"coal from the Donets basin goes all over Russia, and is indispensable in all sorts of industries"* you could not allow *"the organised people of that district [to] do what they pleased with the coal mines"* as they *"could hold up all the rest of Russia."* [contained in Al Richardson (ed.), **In Defence of the Russian Revolution**, p. 186]

Lenin repeated this centralised vision in June of that year, arguing that *"Communism requires and presupposes the greatest possible centralisation of large-scale production throughout the*

country. The all-Russian centre, therefore, should definitely be given the right of direct control over all the enterprises of the given branch of industry. The regional centres define their functions depending on local conditions of life, etc., in accordance with the general production directions and decisions of the centre." He continued by explicitly arguing that "[t]o deprive the all-Russia centre of the right to direct control over all the enterprises of the given industry . . . would be regional anarcho-syndicalism, and not communism." [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 292]

Thus the Bolshevik economic ideal was centralised and top-down. As in the Bolshevik party itself, the lower organs were controlled by the higher ones (and as we will discuss, these higher ones were not directly elected by the lower ones). The problems with this vision are many fold.

Firstly, to impose an "ideal" solution would destroy a revolution -- the actions and decisions (**including what others may consider mistakes**) of a free people are infinitely more productive and useful than the decisions and decrees of the best central committee. Moreover, a centralised system by necessity is an imposed system (as it excludes by its very nature the participation of the mass of the people in determining their own fate). Thus **real** socialisation must proceed from below, reflecting the real development and desires of those involved. Centralisation can only result in replacing socialisation with nationalisation and the elimination of workers' self-management with hierarchical management. Workers' again would be reduced to the level of order-takers, with control over their workplaces resting not in their hands but in those of the state. This could not have a negative impact as Kropotkin noted in 1920:

"[The] tendency to centralise every detail of life in the hands of the Government . . . [has] the result that immense branches of the usual activities of the nation have been brought to a standstill . . .

"The ways to be followed for overthrowing an already weakened Government and taking its place are well known from history, old and modern. But when it comes to building up quite new forms of life -- especially new forms of production and exchange -- without having any examples to imitate; when everything has to be worked out by men on the spot, then an all-powerful centralised Government which undertakes to supply every inhabitant with every lamp-glass and every match to light the lamp proves absolutely incapable of doing that through its functionaries, no matter how countless they may be -- it becomes a nuisance. It develops . . . a formidable bureaucracy. . .

*"The immense constructive work that is required from a Social Revolution cannot be accomplished by a central Government, even if it had to guide it in its work something more substantial than a few Socialist and Anarchist booklets. It requires the knowledge, the brains, and the willing collaboration of a mass of local and specialised forces, which alone can cope with the diversity of economical problems in their local aspects. To sweep away that collaboration and to trust to the genius of party dictators is to destroy all the independent nuclei, such as Trade Unions . . . and the local distributive Co-operative organisations -- turning them into bureaucratic organs of the party, as is being done now. But this is the way **not** to accomplish the Revolution; the way to render its realisation impossible." [Direct Struggle Against Capital, pp. 488-90]*

This, it should be noted, confirmed earlier warnings: *"The anarchists consider, therefore, that to hand over to the State all the main sources of economical life -- the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on -- as also the management of all the main branches of industry, in addition to all the functions already accumulated in its hands . . . would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism."* [Op. Cit., 165]

Secondly, Trotsky seems to think that workers at the base of society would be so unchanged by a revolution that they would hold their fellow workers ransom. And, moreover, that other workers would let them. That, to say the least, seems a strange perspective. But not as strange as thinking that giving extensive powers to a central body will **not** produce equally selfish behaviour (but on a wider and more dangerous scale). The basic fallacy of Trotsky's argument is that the centre will not start to view the whole economy as its property (and being centralised, such a body would be difficult to effectively control). Indeed, Stalin's power was derived from the state bureaucracy which ran the economy in its own interests. Not that did not suddenly arise with Stalin. It was a feature of the Soviet system from the start. Samuel Farber, for example, notes that, *"in practice, [the] hypercentralisation [pursued by the Bolsheviks from early 1918 onwards] turned into infighting and scrambles for control among competing bureaucracies"* and he points to the *"not untypical example of a small condensed milk plant with few than 15 workers that became the object of a drawn-out competition among six organisations including the Supreme Council of National Economy, the Council of People's Commissars of the Northern Region, the Vologda Council of People's Commissars, and the Petrograd Food Commissariat."* [Before Stalinism, p. 73]

In other words, centralised bodies are not immune to viewing resources as their own property and doing as they please with it. Compared to an individual workplace, the state's power to enforce its viewpoint against the rest of society is considerably stronger and the centralised system would be harder to control. The requirements of gathering and processing the information required for the centre to make intelligent decisions would be immense, thus provoking a large bureaucracy which would be hard to control and soon become the **real** power in the state. A centralised body, therefore, effectively excludes the mass participation of the mass of workers -- power rests in the hands of a few people which, by its nature, generates bureaucratic rule. If that sounds familiar, it should. It is precisely what **did** happen in Lenin's Russia and laid the basis for Stalinism.

Thirdly, to eliminate the dangers of workers' self-management generating "propertarian" notions, the workers' have to have their control over their workplace reduced, if not eliminated. This, by necessity, generates bourgeois social relationships and, equally, appointment of managers from above (which the Bolsheviks did embrace). Indeed, by 1920 Lenin was boasting that in 1918 he had *"pointed out the necessity of recognising the dictatorial authority of single individuals for the pursue of carrying out the Soviet idea"* and even claimed that at that stage *"there were no disputes in connection with the question"* of one-man management. [quoted by Brinton, Op. Cit., p. 65] While the first claim is true (Lenin argued for one-man management appointed from above before the start of the Civil War in May 1918) the latter one is not true (excluding anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and Maximalists, there were also the dissent *"Left Communists"* in the Bolshevik party itself).

Fourthly, centralism was not that efficient. The central bodies the Bolsheviks created had little knowledge of the local situation and often gave orders that contradicted each other or had little bearing to reality, so encouraging factories to ignore the centre: *"it seems apparent*

that many workers themselves . . . had now come to believe . . . that confusion and anarchy [sic!] at the top were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic . . . Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council. . . issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs." [William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, p. 116] The Bolsheviks, as Lenin had promised, built from the top-down their system of "unified administration" based on the Tsarist system of central bodies which governed and regulated certain industries during the war. [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 36] This was very centralised and very inefficient (see [section H.6.2](#) for more discussion). Emma Goldman saw "inefficiency of the Bolshevik regime and the corruption of their bureaucracy first-hand and gave a telling example:

"In Kharkoff I saw the demonstration of the inefficiency of the centralised bureaucratic machine. In a large factory warehouse there lay huge stacks of agricultural machinery. Moscow had ordered them made 'within two weeks, in pain of punishment for sabotage.' They were made, and six mouths already had passed without the 'central authorities' making any effort to distribute the machines to the peasantry, which kept clamouring for them in their great need. It was one of the countless examples of the manner in which the Moscow system 'worked,' or, rather, did not work." ["The Crushing of the Russian Revolution", **To Remain Silent is Impossible**, p. 40]

She was in no doubt that "it was the centralisation of the State and its resultant complex machinery of bureaucratic officialdom that made the best efforts of the Bolsheviks . . . futile and barren". [Op. Cit., p. 59] The civil war simply made a bad regime worse -- and provide a useful excuse for its failings. Having little real understanding of the circumstances on the ground, meant that they could not compare their ideological assumptions and preferences to reality. As an example, the Bolshevik idea that "big" was automatically "more efficient" and "better" had a negative impact on the revolution. In practice, as Thomas F. Remington notes, this simply resulted generated waste:

"The waste of scarce materials at [the giant] Putilov [plant] was indeed serious, but not only political unrest had caused it. The general shortage of fuel and materials in the city took its greatest toll on the largest enterprises, whose overhead expenditures for heating the plant and firing the furnaces were proportionally greater than those for smaller enterprises. This point -- explained by the relative constant proportions among needed inputs to producers at any given point in time -- only was recognised latter. Not until 1919 were the regime's leaders prepared to acknowledge that small enterprises, under the conditions of the time, might be more efficient in using resources: and not until 1921 did a few Bolsheviks theorists grasp the economic reasons for this apparent violation of their standing assumption that larger units were inherently more productive. Thus not only were the workers accused of politically motivated resistance, but the regime blamed them for the effects of circumstances which the workers had no control." [**Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 106]

All in all, the Bolshevik vision of socialism was a disaster. Centralism was a source of massive economic mismanagement and, moreover, bureaucratisation from the start. As anarchists had long predicted which was why during the revolution they argued for an

alternative in the form of the factory committees and their federation. Sadly this was not part of the Bolshevik vision. At best they were tacked onto this vision as a (very) junior partner (as in 1917) or they were quickly marginalised and then dumped when they had outlived their usefulness in securing Bolshevik power (as in 1918).

While some Leninists like to paint the economic policies of the Bolsheviks in power as being different from what they called for in 1917, the truth is radically different. For example, Tony Cliff of the UK's "Socialist Workers Party" asserts, correctly, that in April 1918 the *"defence of state capitalism constituted the essence of his economic policy for this period."* However, he also states that this was *"an entirely new formulation,"* which was not the case in the slightest. [Cliff, **Op. Cit.**, p. 69] As Lenin himself acknowledged in 1917 and afterwards.

Lenin, in fact, had always confused state capitalism with socialism. *"State capitalism,"* he wrote, *"is a complete **material** preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism **there are no gaps.**"* He argued that socialism *"is nothing but the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. In other words, Socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly **made to benefit the whole people; by this token it ceases to be capitalist monopoly.**"* [**Collected Works**, vol. 25, p. 359 and p. 358] This was in May, 1917. A few months later, he was talking about how the institutions of state capitalism could be taken over and used to create socialism (see [section H.3.12](#)). Unsurprisingly, when defending Cliff's *"new formulation"* against the "Left Communists" in the spring of 1918 he noted that he had given his *"'high' appreciation of state capitalism . . . before the Bolsheviks seized power."* And, as Lenin noted, his praise for state capitalism can be found in his **State and Revolution** and so it was *"significant that [his opponents] did **not** emphasise **this**"* aspect of his 1917 ideas. [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 27, p. 341 and p. 354] Unsurprisingly, modern-day Leninists do not emphasise that element of Lenin's ideas either.

And, indeed, his praise for state capitalism and its forms of social organisation **can** be found in his **State and Revolution**:

*"the **post-office** [is] an example of the socialist system . . . At present . . . [it] is organised on the lines of a state **capitalist** monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organisations of a similar type . . . the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Overthrow the capitalists . . . Our immediate object is to organise the **whole** of national economy on the lines of the postal system . . . It is such a state, standing on such an economic basis, that we need."* [**Essential Works of Lenin**, pp. 307-8]

And:

*"**All** citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state . . . **All** citizens becomes employees and workers of a single countrywide state "syndicate". All that is required is that they should work equally, do their proper share of work, and get equal pay" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 348]*

Lenin repeatedly pointed to the German war economy and the post office as illustrations of socialist organisation. These were created within capitalism by the capitalist State and had, unsurprisingly, a bureaucratic, centralised, controlled from above character. Unsurprisingly, then, that the Bolshevik vision of "socialism" was little more than state-organised capitalism. Anarchists, in contrast, pointed to working class organs as examples of what a socialist

economy would be like. Rather than the post office, we suggested federations of producer co-operatives or unions -- and in Russia in 1917, factory committees. These may have also been created within capitalism but **in opposition to it by those directly exploited and oppressed by capital**. As Kropotkin noted a few years earlier:

*"Most statist-socialists . . . do not even trouble themselves to clarify what they mean by a socialist State which would nevertheless not be **the State as sole-capitalist and All employees of the State**. When we tell them that this is what they want, they get annoyed; but they do not explain what other form of [social] organisation they intend to establish."* [Modern Science and Anarchy, p. 220]

Given this, Lenin's rejection of the factory committee as the basis for socialism comes as no surprise. As we noted in [section H.3.14](#), rather than promote workers' control, Lenin effectively undermined it. Murray Bookchin points out the obvious:

"In accepting the concept of worker's control, Lenin's famous decree of November 14, 1917, merely acknowledged an accomplished fact; the Bolsheviks dared not oppose the workers at this early date. But they began to whittle down the power of the factory committees. In January 1918, a scant two months after 'decreeing' workers' control, Lenin began to advocate that the administration of the factories be placed under trade union control. The story that the Bolsheviks 'patiently' experimented with workers' control, only to find it 'inefficient' and 'chaotic,' is a myth. Their 'patience' did not last more than a few weeks. Not only did Lenin oppose direct workers' control within a matter of weeks . . . even union control came to an end shortly after it had been established. By the summer of 1918, almost all of Russian industry had been placed under bourgeois forms of management." [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, pp. 127-8]

Significantly, even his initial vision of workers' control was hierarchical, centralised and top-down, with the "higher workers' control bodies" were to be "composed of representatives of trade unions, factory and office workers' committees, and workers' co-operatives." The decisions of the lower bodies "may be revoked only by higher workers' control bodies." [quoted by Cliff, **Op. Cit.**, p. 10] As Maurice Brinton notes:

"there [was] . . . a firm hierarchy of control organs . . . each Committee was to be responsible to a 'Regional Council of Workers' Control', subordinated in turn to an 'All-Russian Council of Workers' Control'. The composition of these higher organs was decided by the Party.

"The trade unions were massively represented in the middle and higher strata of this new pyramid of 'institutionalised workers' control.' For instance the All-Russian Council of Workers' Control was to consist of 21 'representatives': 5 from the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets, 5 from the Executive of the All-Russian Council of Trade Unions, 5 from the Association of Engineers and Technicians, 2 from the Association of Agronomists, 2 from the Petrograd Trade Union Council, 1 from each All-Russian Trade Union Federation numbering fewer than 100,000 members (2 for Federations of over this number)... and 5 from the All-Russian Council of Factory Committees! The Factory Committees often under anarcho-syndicalist influence had been well and truly 'cut down to size'." [Op. Cit., p. 18]

The Supreme Economic Council, established by the Soviet government demonstrated how to **really** mismanage the economy.

As such, the economic developments proposed by Lenin in early 1918 and onwards were **not** the result of the specific problems facing the Russian revolution. The fact is while the dire problems facing the Russian revolution undoubtedly made many aspects of the Bolshevik system worse, they did not create them. Rather, the centralised, bureaucratic and top-down abuses Leninists like to distance themselves from where, in fact, built into Lenin's socialism from the start. A form of socialism Lenin and his government explicitly favoured and created in opposition to other, authentically proletarian, versions.

The path to state capitalism was the one Lenin wanted to tread. It was not forced upon him or the Bolsheviks. And, by re-introducing wage slavery (this time, to the state) the Bolshevik vision of socialism helped undermine the revolution, workers' power and built the foundations of Stalinism.

6 How did Bolshevik preference for nationalisation affect the revolution?

As discussed in the [last section](#), unlike anarchism, for Bolshevism nationalisation, **not** workers' self-management, was the key issue in socialism. In [section H.3.14](#), Lenin had proclaimed the necessity for appointed one-man managers and implementing "state capitalism" in April 1918. Neither policy was thought to harm the socialist character of the regime. As Trotsky stressed in 1920, the decision to place a manager at the head of a factory instead of a workers' collective had no political significance:

"It would be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy of the collective will of the workers and not at all in the form in which individual economic organisations are administered."
[**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 162]

Nor was this considered a bad thing or forced upon the Bolsheviks as a result of terrible circumstances. Quite the reverse: "I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully." [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 162-3] This evaluation fits perfectly into Bolshevik ideology and practice before and after the party seized power. One can easily find dozens of quotations from Lenin expressing the same idea.

Needless to say, Trotsky's "collective will of the workers" was simply a euphemism for the Party, whose dictatorship **over** the workers he glibly justified:

"We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of the party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the . . . party . . . [that] the Soviets . . . [became] transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour."

In this 'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class." [Op. Cit., p. 109]

While Trotsky's honesty on this matter is refreshing (unlike his followers today who hypocritically talk about the "leadership" of the Bolshevik party) we can say that this was a **fatal** position to take. Indeed, for Trotsky **any** system (including the militarisation of labour) was acceptable as the key "*differences . . . is defined by a fundamental test: who is in power?*" -- the capitalist class or the proletariat (i.e. the party) [Op. Cit., pp. 171-2] Thus working class control over their own affairs was of little importance: "*The worker does not merely bargain with the Soviet State; no, he is subordinated to the Soviet State, under its orders in every direction -- for it is his State.*" [Op. Cit., p. 168] This, of course, echoed his own arguments in favour of appointment (see [section 4](#)) and Lenin's demands for the "*exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals*" in the workplace (see [section 3](#)) in early 1918. Cornelius Castoriadis points out the obvious:

"The role of the proletariat in the new State was thus quite clear. It was that of enthusiastic and passive citizens. And the role of the proletariat in work and in production was no less clear. On the whole, it was the same as before -- under capitalism -- except that workers of 'character and capacity' [to quote Trotsky] were to be chosen to replace factory managers who had fled." [The Role of the Bureaucracy in the birth of the Bureaucracy, p. 99]

Trotsky's position, it should be noted, remained consistent. In the early 1930s he argued (in respect to Stalin's regime) that "*anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.*" ["The Class Nature of The Soviet State", **Writings 1933-34**, p. 104] Obviously, if the prime issue is property and not who **manages** the means of production (or even "the state") then having functioning factory-committees becomes as irrelevant as having democratic soviets when determining whether the working class is in power or not.

(As an aside, we should not be surprised that Trotsky could think the workers were the "*ruling class*" in the vast prison-camp which was Stalin's USSR, given that he thought the workers were the "*ruling class*" when he and Lenin headed the Bolshevik party dictatorship! Thus we have the strange division Leninists make between Lenin's dictatorship and Stalin's. When Lenin presides over a one-party dictatorship, breaks strikes, bans political parties, bans Bolshevik factions, and imprisons and shoots political dissidents these are all regrettable but necessary steps in the protection of the "proletarian state." When Stalin does the exact same thing, a few years later, they are all terrible examples of the deformation of this same "proletarian state"!)

For anarchists (and other libertarian socialists) this was and is nonsense. Without workers' self-management in production, socialism cannot exist. To focus attention of whether individuals own property or whether the state does is fundamentally a red-herring. Without workers' self-management of production, private capitalism will simply have been replaced by **state** capitalism. As one anarchist active in the factory committee movement argued in January, 1918, it is "*not the liberation of the proletariat when many individual plunderers are changed for one very powerful plunderer -- the state. The position of the proletariat remains the same.*" Therefore, "[w]e must not forget that the factory committees are the nuclei of the

future socialist order" nor must we forget *"that the state . . . will try to maintain its own interests at the expense of the interests of the workers. There is no doubt that we will be witnesses of a great conflict between the state power in the centre and the organisations composed exclusively of workers which are found in the localities."* He was proved right. Instead of the state-capitalist Bolshevik vision, the anarchists argued that factory committees *"be united on the basis of federalism, into industrial federations"* and *"poly-industrial soviets of national economy."* [quoted by Frederick I. Kaplan, **Bolshevik Ideology and the Ethics of Soviet Labour**, p. 163 and p. 166] Only in that way could **real** socialism be created.

The reason is obvious. It is worth quoting Cornelius Castoriadis at length on why the Bolshevik system was doomed to failure:

"So we end up with the uncontested power of managers in the factories, and the Party's exclusive 'control' (in reality, what kind of control was it, anyway?). And there was the uncontested power of the Party over society, without any control. From that point on, nobody could prevent these two powers from merging, nor could anyone stop the two strata embodying them from merging, nor could the consolidation of an irremovable bureaucracy ruling over all sectors of social life be halted. The process may have been accelerated or magnified by the entry of non-proletarian elements into the Party, as they rushed to jump on the bandwagon. But this was a consequence, and not a cause, of the Party's orientation . . .

"Who is to manage production . . .? . . . the correct answer [is] the collective organs of labouring people. What the party leadership wanted, what it had already imposed - - and on this point there was no difference between Lenin and Trotsky -- was a hierarchy directed from above. We know that this was the conception that triumphed. We know, too, where this 'victory' led . . .

"In all Lenin's speeches and writings of this period, what recurs again and again like an obsession is the idea that Russia ought to learn from the advanced capitalist countries; that there are not a hundred and one different ways of developing production and labour productivity if one wants to emerge from backwardness and chaos; that one must adopt capitalist methods of 'rationalisation' and management as well as capitalist forms of work 'incentives.' All these, for Lenin, are just 'means' that apparently could freely be placed in the service of a radically different historical end, the building of socialism.

*"Thus Trotsky, when discussing the merits of militarism, came to separate the army itself, its structure and its methods, from the social system it serves. What is criticisable in bourgeois militarism and in the bourgeois army, Trotsky says in substance, is that they are in the service of the bourgeoisie. Except for that, there is nothing in them to be criticised. The sole difference, he says, lies in this: '**Who is in power?**' Likewise, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not expressed by the 'form in which individual economic enterprises are administered.'*

"The idea that like means cannot be placed indifferently into the service of different ends; that there is an intrinsic relationship between the instruments used and the result obtained; that, especially, neither the army nor the factory are simple 'means' or 'instruments,' but social structures in which are organised two fundamental aspects of human relations (production and violence); that in them can be seen in condensed

form the essential expression of the type of social relations that characterise an era -- this idea, though perfectly obvious and banal for Marxists, was totally 'forgotten.' It was just a matter of developing production, using proven methods and structures. That among these 'proofs' the principal one was the development of capitalism as a social system and that a factory produces not so much cloth or steel but proletariat and capital were facts that were utterly ignored.

*"Obviously, behind this 'forgetfulness' is hidden something else. At the time, of course, there was the desperate concern to revive production as soon as possible and to put a collapsing economy back on its feet. This preoccupation, however, does not fatally dictate the choice of 'means.' If it seemed obvious to Bolshevik leaders that the sole effective means were capitalist ones, it was because they were imbued with the conviction that capitalism was the only effective and rational system of production. Faithful in this respect to Marx, they wanted to abolish private property and market anarchy, but not the type of organisation capitalism had achieved at the point of production. They wanted to modify the **economy**, not the relations between people at work or the nature of labour itself.*

"At a deeper level still, their philosophy was to develop the forces of production. Here too they were the faithful inheritors of Marx -- or at least one side of Marx, which became the predominant one in his mature writings. The development of the forces of production was, if not the ultimate goal, at any rate the essential means, in the sense that everything else would follow as a by-product and that everything else had to be subordinated to it. . .

*"To manage the work of others -- this is the beginning and the end of the whole cycle of exploitation. The 'need' for a specific social category to manage the work of others in production (and the activity of others in politics and in society), the 'need' for a separate business management and for a Party to rule the State -- this is what Bolshevism proclaimed as soon as it seized power, and this is what it zealously laboured to impose. We know that it achieved its ends. Insofar as ideas play a role in the development of history -- and, **in the final analysis**, they play an enormous role -- the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy." [Op. Cit., pp. 100-4]*

Therefore, we "may therefore conclude that, contrary to the prevailing mythology, it was not in 1927, or in 1923, or even in 1921 that the game was played and lost, but much earlier, during the period from 1918 to 1920." Thus 1921 saw "the beginning of the reconstruction of the productive apparatus. This reconstruction effort, however, was already firmly set in the groove of bureaucratic capitalism." [Op. Cit., p. 99] In this, they simply followed the economic ideas Lenin had expounded in 1917 and 1918, but in an even more undemocratic way.

Ironically, proof that libertarians are right on this issue can be found in Trotsky's own work. In 1936, he argued that the "demobilisation of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war. Thus on all sides the masses were pushed away gradually from actual participation in the leadership of the country." [The Revolution Betrayed, pp. 89-90] Needless to say, he failed to note who had abolished the

election of commanders in the Red Army in March 1918, namely himself. Similarly, he failed to note that the masses had been *"pushed . . . from actual participation in the leadership of the country"* well before the end of the civil war and that, at the time, he was not concerned about it. Equally, it would be churlish to note that back in 1920 he thought that *"'Military' qualities . . . are valued in every sphere. It was in this sense that I said that every class prefers to have in its service those of its members who, other things being equal, have passed through the military school . . . This experience is a great and valuable experience. And when a former regimental commissary returns to his trade union, he becomes not a bad organiser."* [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 173]

In 1937 Trotsky asserted that *"liberal-anarchist thought closes its eyes to the fact that the Bolshevik revolution, with all its repressions, meant an upheaval of social relations in the interests of the masses, whereas Stalin's Thermidorian upheaval accompanies the reconstruction of Soviet society in the interest of a privileged minority."* [Trotsky, *"Stalinism and Bolshevism"*, **Writings 1936-37**, p. 427] Yet Stalin's *"upheaval"* was built upon the social relations created when Lenin and Trotsky held power. Nationalisation, one-man management, centralisation, and so on were originally advocated and implemented by Lenin and Trotsky. The bureaucracy did not have to expropriate the working class economically -- "real" Bolshevism had already did so. Nor can it be said that the social relations associated with the political sphere had fundamentally changed under Stalin. He had, after all, inherited the one-party state from Lenin and Trotsky. In a nutshell, Trotsky is talking nonsense.

Simply put, as Trotsky himself indicates, Bolshevik preference for nationalisation helped ensure the creation and subsequent rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Rather than be the product of terrible objective circumstances as his followers suggest, the Bolshevik state capitalist economic system was at the heart of their vision of what socialism was. The civil war simply brought the underlying logic of vision into the fore.

7 How did Bolshevik preference for centralism affect the revolution?

The next issue we will discuss is centralisation. Before starting, it is essential that it be stressed that anarchists are **not** against co-ordinated activity and organisation on a large scale. Anarchists stress the need for federalism to meet the need for such work (see [section A.2.9](#), for example). As such, our critique of Bolshevik centralism is **not** a call for "localism" or isolation (as many Leninists assert). Rather, it is a critique of **how** the social co-operation essential for society will be conducted. Will it be in a federal (and so bottom-up) way or will it be in a centralised (and so top-down) way?

It goes almost without saying that Bolshevik ideology was centralist in nature. Lenin repeatedly stressed the importance of centralisation, arguing constantly that Marxism was, by its very nature, centralist (and top-down -- [section H.3.3](#)). Long before the revolution, Lenin had argued that within the party it was a case of *"the transformation of the power of ideas into the power of authority, the subordination of lower Party bodies to higher ones."* [**Collected Works**, vol. 7, p. 367] Such visions of centralised organisation were the model for the revolutionary state. In 1917, he repeatedly stressed that the Bolsheviks *"are centralists by conviction, by their programme and by the entire tactics of their Party"* and after the revolution they would *"we shall be fully and unreservedly in favour of a strong state power and of centralism."* [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 26, p. 116] Once in power, they did not disappoint.

Anarchists argue that this prejudice in favour of centralisation and centralism is at odds with Leninist claims to be in favour of mass participation. It is all fine and well for Trotskyist Tony Cliff to quote Lenin arguing that under capitalism the "*talent among the people*" is "*merely suppressed*" and that it "*must be given an opportunity to display itself*" and that this can "*save the cause of socialism*," it is something else for Lenin (and the Leninist tradition) to favour organisational structures that allow that to happen. Similarly, it is fine to record Lenin asserting that "*living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves*" but it is something else to justify the barriers Leninist ideology placed in the way of it by its advocacy of centralism. [quoted by Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 20 and p. 21]

The central contradiction of Leninism is that while it (sometimes) talks about mass participation, it has always preferred an organisational form (centralism) which hinders, and ultimately destroys, the participation that **real** socialism needs.

That centralism works in this way should come as no surprise. After all, it is based on centralising power at the top of an organisation and, consequently, into a few hands. It was for this precise reason that **every** ruling class in history has utilised centralisation against the masses. As we indicated in [section B.2.5](#), centralisation has always been the tool of minority classes to disempower the masses. In the American and French revolutions, centralisation of state power was the means used to destroy the revolution, to take it out of the hands of the masses and concentrate it into the hands of a minority. In France:

"From the moment the bourgeoisie set themselves against the popular stream they were in need of a weapon that could enable them to resist pressure from the bras nus [working people]; they forged one by strengthening the central power . . . [This was] the formation of the state machinery through which the bourgeoisie was going to enslave the proletariat. Here is the centralised state, with its bureaucracy and police . . . [it was] a conscious attempt to reduce . . . the power of the people." [Daniel Guerin, **Class Struggle in the First French Republic**, p. 176]

The reason is not hard to understand -- mass participation and class society do not go together. Thus, "*the move towards bourgeois dictatorship*" saw "*the strengthening of the central power against the masses.*" [Guerin, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 177-8] "*To attack the central power,*" argued Kropotkin, "*to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more.*" [**Words of a Rebel**, p. 143] In summary:

*"the Jacobin club was **the bulwark of the bourgeoisie coming to power against the egalitarian tendencies of the people** . . . [and so] having known how to prevent the people from taking the communist and egalitarian path . . . [which meant it] did not tolerate within itself any local power, such as a sovereign Commune, any professional power, such as trade unions, no will except that of the Jacobins of the Convention -- which necessarily, inevitably, led to the dictatorship of the police of the Committee of General Security . . . That is why the Jacobins broke the strength of the Communes . . . that is why they did not accept the slightest provincial independence, nor the slightest functional independence in the organisation of the crafts, in education, in scientific researches, in Art . . . It was the absorption of the whole national life, concentrated into a pyramid of functionaries. And this whole was to be used to enrich*

a certain class of citizens and at the same time maintain all the rest -- that is to say, the whole nation except the privileged -- in poverty . . .

*"But then, we are led to wonder, how it is possible that the socialists of the second half of the nineteenth century adopted the ideal of the **Jacobin State** when this ideal had been designed from the viewpoint of the bourgeois, in direct opposition to the egalitarian and communist tendencies of the people which had arisen during the Revolution?" [Kropotkin, **Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 364-6]*

Can we expect a similar concentration of the central power under the Bolsheviks to have a different impact? And, as discussed in [section H.6](#) we find a similar marginalisation of the working class from its own revolution. Rather than being actively participating in the transformation of society, they were transformed into spectators who simply were expected to implement the decisions made by the Bolsheviks on their behalf. Bolshevik centralisation quickly ensured the disempowerment of working class people. Unsurprisingly enough, given its role in class society and in bourgeois revolution, Bolshevik centralisation likewise undermined the socialist content of the revolution in favour of new forms of oppression and exploitation.

Therefore, anarchists argue, centralism cannot help but generate minority rule, not a classless society. Representative, and so centralised, democracy, argued Malatesta, *"substitutes the will of a few for that of all . . . and in the name of a fictitious collective interest, rides roughshod over every real interests, and by means of elections and the vote, disregards the wishes of each and everyone."* [Errico Malatesta: **His Life and Ideas**, p. 147]

This is rooted in the nature of the system, for democracy does not mean, in practice, "rule by all the people." Rather, it *"would be closer to the truth to say 'government of the majority of the people."* And even this is false, as *"it is never the case that the representatives of the majority of the people are in the same mind on all questions; it is therefore necessary to have recourse again to the majority system and thus we will get closer still to the truth with 'government of the majority of the elected by the majority of the electors.'" This, obviously, "is already beginning to bear a strong resemblance to minority government."* And so, *"it is easy to understand what has already been proven by universal historical experience: even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force."* And so centralism turns democracy into little more than picking masters. Therefore, anarchists argue, *"those who really want 'government of the people' . . . must abolish government."* [Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 78]

The Russian Revolution is a striking confirmation of this libertarian analysis. By applying centralism, the Bolsheviks disempowered the masses and concentrated power into the hands of the party leadership. This places power in a distinct social class and subject to the pervasive effects of their concrete social circumstances within their institutional position. As Bakunin predicted with amazing accuracy:

"The falsehood of the representative system rests upon the fiction that the executive power and the legislative chamber issuing from popular elections must, or even can for that matter, represent the will of the people . . . the instinctive aims of those who govern . . . are, because of their exceptional position diametrically opposed to the instinctive popular aspirations. Whatever their democratic sentiments and intentions may be, viewing society from the high position in which they find themselves, they

cannot consider this society in any other way but that in which a schoolmaster views the pupils. And there can be no equality between the schoolmaster and the pupils. . . . Whoever says political power says domination. And where domination exists, a more or less considerable section of the population is bound to be dominated by others. . . . those who do the dominating necessarily must repress and consequently oppress those who are subject to the domination . . . [This] explains why and how men who were democrats and rebels of the reddest variety when they were a part of the mass of governed people, became exceedingly moderate when they rose to power. Usually these backslidings are attributed to treason. That, however, is an erroneous idea; they have for their main cause the change of position and perspective . . . if there should be established tomorrow a government . . . made up exclusively of workers, those . . . staunch democrats and Socialists, will become determined aristocrats, bold or timid worshippers of the principle of authority, and will also become oppressors and exploiters." [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 218]

However, due to the inefficiencies of centralised bodies, this is not the end of the process. Around the new ruling bodies inevitably springs up officialdom. This is because a centralised body does not know what is happening in the grassroots. Therefore it needs a bureaucracy to gather and process that information and to implement its decisions. In the words of Bakunin:

"where is the head, however brilliant it may be, or if one wishes to speak of a collective dictatorship, were it formed of many hundreds of individuals endowed with superior faculties, where are those brains powerful enough and wide-ranging enough to embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real interests, aspirations, wishes and needs whose sum total constitutes the collective will of a people, and to invent a social organisation can which can satisfy everybody? This organisation will never be anything but a Procrustean bed which the more or less obvious violence of the State will be able to force unhappy society to lie down on. . . . Such a system . . . would lead inevitably to the creation of a new State, and consequently to the formation of a governmental aristocracy, that is, an entire class of people, having nothing in common with the mass of people . . . [and would] exploit the people and subject them." [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, pp. 204-6]

As the bureaucracy is permanent and controls information and resources, it soon becomes the main source of power in the state. The transformation of the bureaucracy from servant to the master soon results. The "official" government is soon controlled by it, shaping its activities in line with its interests. Being highly centralised, popular control is even more limited than government control -- people would simply not know where real power lay, which officials to replace or even what was going on within the distant bureaucracy. Moreover, if the people did manage to replace the correct people, the newcomers would be subject to the same institutional pressures that corrupted the previous members and so the process would start again (assuming they did not come under the immediate influence of those who remained in the bureaucracy). Consequently, a new bureaucratic class develops around the centralised bodies created by the governing party. This body would soon become riddled with personal influences and favours, so ensuring that members could be sheltered from popular control. As Malatesta argued, they *"would use every means available to those in power to have their friends elected as the successors who would then in turn support and protect them. And thus government would be passes to and fro in the same hands, and **democracy**, which is the alleged government of all, would end up, as usual, in an **oligarchy**, which is the government of a few, the government of a class."* [Anarchy, pp. 36-7]

This state bureaucracy, of course, need not be dictatorial nor the regime it rules/administers be totalitarian (for example, bourgeois states combine bureaucracy with many real and important liberties). However, such a regime is still a class one and socialism would still not exist -- as proven by the state bureaucracies and nationalised property within bourgeois society.

So the danger to liberty of combining political **and** economic power into one set of hands (the state's) is obvious. As Kropotkin argued:

*"the state was, and continues to be, the chief instrument for permitting the few to monopolise the land, and the capitalists to appropriate for themselves a quite disproportionate share of the yearly accumulated surplus of production. Consequently, while combating the present monopolisation of land, and capitalism altogether, the anarchists combat with the same energy the state, as the main support of that system. Not this or that special form, but the state altogether . . . The state organisation, having always been, both in ancient and modern history . . . the instrument for establishing monopolies in favour of the ruling minorities, cannot be made to work for the destruction of these monopolies. The anarchists consider, therefore, that to hand over to the state all the main sources of economical life -- the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on - as also the management of all the main branches of industry, in addition to all the functions already accumulated in its hands (education, state-supported religions, defence of the territory, etc.), would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism. True progress lies in the direction of decentralisation, both **territorial** and **functional**, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, **in lieu** of the present hierarchy from the centre to the periphery."*
[Anarchism, p. 286]

Thus we have the basic argument **why** centralism will result in the continuation of class society. Does the Bolshevik experience contradict this analysis? Essentially, it confirms to Kropotkin's predictions on the uselessness of "revolutionary" government:

"Instead of acting for themselves, instead of marching forward, instead of advancing in the direction of the new order of things, the people confiding in their governors, entrusted to them the charge of taking initiative. This was the first consequence of the inevitable result of elections. . . Shut up in the city hall, charged to proceed after the forms established by the preceding governments, these ardent revolutionists, these reformers found themselves smitten with incapacity and sterility. . . but it was not the men who were the cause for this failure -- it was the system. . .

"The will of the bulk of the nation once expressed, the rest would submit to it with a good grace, but this is not how things are done. The revolution bursts out long before a general understanding has come, and those who have a clear idea of what should be done the next day are only a very small minority. The great mass of the people have as yet only a general idea of the end which they wish realised, without knowing much how to advance towards that end, and without having much confidence in the direction to follow. The practical solution will not be found, will not be made clear until the change will have already begun. It will be the product of the revolution itself, of the people in action, -- or else it will be nothing, incapable of finding solutions

which can only spring from the life of the people. . . The government becomes a parliament with all the vices of a middle-class parliament. Far from being a 'revolutionary' government it becomes the greatest obstacle to the revolution and at last the people find themselves compelled to put it out of the way, to dismiss those that but yesterday they acclaimed as their children.

"But it is not so easy to do so. The new government which has hastened to organise a new administration in order to extend its domination and make itself obeyed does not understand giving up so easily. Jealous of maintaining its power, it clings to it with all the energy of an institution which has yet had time to fall into senile decay. It decides to oppose force with force, and there is only one means then to dislodge it, namely, to take up arms, to make another revolution in order to dismiss those in whom the people had placed all their hopes." [Op. Cit., pp. 240-2]

By the spring and summer of 1918, the Bolshevik party had consolidated its power. It had created a new state, marked as all states are by the concentration of power in a few hands and bureaucracy. Effective power became concentrated into the hands of the executive committees of the soviets from top to bottom. Faced with rejection at soviet election after soviet election, the Bolsheviks simply disbanded them and gerrymandered the rest. At the summit of the new state, a similar process was at work. The soviets had little real power, which was centralised in Lenin's new government. This is discussed in more detail in [section H.6](#). Thus centralisation quickly displaced popular power and participation. As predicted by Russia anarchists in November 1917:

*"Once their power is consolidated and 'legalised', the Bolsheviks -- who are Social Democrats, that is, men of centralist and authoritarian action -- will begin to rearrange the life of the country and of the people by governmental and dictatorial methods, imposed by the centre. The[y] . . . will dictate the will of the party to all Russia, and command the whole nation. Your Soviets and your other local organisations will become little by little, simply executive organs of the will of the central government. In the place of healthy, constructive work by the labouring masses, in place of free unification from the bottom, we will see the installation of an authoritarian and statist apparatus which would act from above and set about wiping out everything that stood in its way with an iron hand. The Soviets and other organisations will have to obey and do its will. That will be called 'discipline.'" [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 235]*

From top to bottom, the new party in power systematically undermined the influence and power of the soviets they claimed to be ensuring the power of. This process had begun, it should be stressed **before** the start of the civil war in May, 1918. Thus Leninist Tony Cliff is wrong to state that it was "*under the iron pressure of the civil war*" which forced the Bolshevik leaders "*to move, as the price of survival, to a one-party system.*" [**Revolution Besieged**, p. 163] From the summer of 1918 (i.e. before the civil war even started), the Bolsheviks had turned from the first of Kropotkin's "revolutionary" governments (representative government) to the second, dictatorship, with sadly predictable results. By 1919 they were publicly admitting it and in 1920 were arguing for its necessity at the Second Congress of the Communist International.

So far, the anarchist predictions on the nature of centralised revolutionary governments had been confirmed. Being placed in a new social position and, therefore, different social

relationships, produced a dramatic revision on the perspectives of the Bolsheviks. They went from being in favour of party power to being in favour of party dictatorship. They acted to ensure their power by making accountability and recall difficult, if not impossible, and simply ignored any election results which did not favour them.

What of the second prediction of anarchism, namely that centralisation will recreate bureaucracy? That, too, was confirmed. After all, some means were required to gather, collate and provide information by which the central bodies made their decisions. Thus a necessary side-effect of Bolshevik centralism was bureaucracy, which, as is well known, ultimately fused with the party and replaced Leninism with Stalinism. The rise of a state bureaucracy started immediately with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. Instead of the state starting to "wither away" from the start it grew:

"The old state's political apparatus was 'smashed,' but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity. After the transfer of government to Moscow in March 1918 it continued to expand . . . As the functions of the state expanded so did the bureaucracy, and by August 1918 nearly a third of Moscow's working population were employed in offices [147,134 employed in state institutions and 83,886 in local ones. This was 13.7% of the total adult population and 29.6% of the independent population of 846,095]. The great increase in the number of employees . . . took place in early to mid-1918 and, thereafter, despite many campaigns to reduce their number, they remained a steady proportion of the falling population . . . At first the problem was dismissed by arguments that the impressive participation of the working class in state structures was evidence that there was no 'bureaucratism' in the bureaucracy. According to the industrial census of 31 August 1918, out of 123,578 workers in Moscow, only 4,191 (3.4 percent) were involved in some sort of public organisation . . . Class composition is a dubious criterion of the level of bureaucratism. Working class participation in state structures did not ensure an organisation against bureaucratism, and this was nowhere more true than in the new organisations that regulated the economic life of the country." [Richard Sakwa, "The Commune State in Moscow in 1918," pp. 429-449, **Slavic Review**, vol. 46, no. 3/4, pp. 437-8]

The "bureaucracy grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between 'people' and 'officials,' which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about 'bureaucratic excesses,' lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder." [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 242]

Overtime, this permanent collection of bodies would become the real power in the state, with the party members nominally in charge really under the control of an unelected and uncontrolled officialdom. This was recognised by Lenin in the last years of his life. As he noted in 1922:

"Let us look at Moscow . . . Who is leading whom? The 4,700 responsible Communists the mass of bureaucrats, or the other way round? I do not believe that you can say that the Communists are leading this mass. To put it honestly, they are not the leaders, but the led." [quoted by Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 13]

By the end of 1920, there were five times more state officials than industrial workers -- 5,880,000 were members of the state bureaucracy. Emma Goldman later noted that "*Moscow was the seat of Government with more State functionaries than workers, bureaucratic to the last degree*" and most factories were in a "*palpably neglected and deserted condition*" in which "*Soviet officials and members of the Communist **yacheika** (cell) far outnumbered the actual producers.*" She "*wished [she] could still believe that it was only the blockade and not general inefficiency and the bureaucratic Frankenstein monster which were mainly responsible for the situation. No governmental machinery can cope with great social issues*" while Soviet officials and leading communists had private kitchens, servants, special privileges and "*housing arrangements disclosed similar favouritism and injustice.*" [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 768, p. 826 and pp. 753-4]

This makes perfect sense as "*on coming to power the Bolsheviks smashed the old state but rapidly created their own apparatus to wage the political and economic offensive against the bourgeois and capitalism. As the functions of the state expanded, so did the bureaucracy . . . following the revolution the process of institutional proliferation reached unprecedented heights.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet C**ommunists in Power, p. 191] And with bureaucracy came the abuse of it simply because it held **real** power:

"The prevalence of bureaucracy, of committees and commissions . . . permitted, and indeed encouraged, endless permutations of corrupt practices. These ranged from the style of living of communist functionaries to bribe-taking by officials. With the power of allocation of scarce resources, such as housing, there was an inordinate potential for corruption." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 193]

The growth in **power** of the bureaucracy should not, therefore, come as a major surprise given that had existed from the start in sizeable numbers and had grown as the tasks it was responsible for grew. However, for the Bolsheviks "*the development of a bureaucracy*" was a puzzle, "*whose emergence and properties mystified them.*" However, it should be noted that, "*[f]or the Bolsheviks, bureaucratism signified the escape of this bureaucracy from the will of the party as it took on a life of its own.*" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182 and p. 190] This was the key. They did not object the usurpation of power by the party (indeed they placed party dictatorship at the core of their politics and universalised it to a general principle for **all** "socialist" revolutions). Nor did they object to the centralisation of power and activity (and so the bureaucratisation of life). They only objected to it when the bureaucracy was not doing what the party wanted it to. Indeed, this was the basic argument of Trotsky against Stalinism (see [section 3](#) of the appendix on "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)"). As Camillo Berneri noted in 1936:

"The Leninist opposition has good reason to point out to the world proletariat the deformations, deviations and degenerations of Stalinism, but if the oppositional diagnosis is almost always correct, the oppositional aetiology is almost always inadequate. Stalinism is only the consequence of the Leninist set up of the political problem of the social revolution. To oppose the effects without going back to the causes, to the original sin of Bolshevism (bureaucratic dictatorship as a function of the dictatorship of the party), is equivalent to arbitrarily simplifying the chain of causality which leads from the dictatorship of Lenin without any great breaks in continuity. Liberty within a party which denies the free play of competition amongst the progressive parties within the soviet system would today be a spectacular miracle.

..

"When Trotsky wrote (6th September 1935): 'The historical absurdity of an autocratic bureaucracy in a "classless" society cannot and will not endlessly endure,' he was saying an absurd thing about the 'historical absurdity.' In history there is no absurdity. An autocratic bureaucracy is a class, therefore it is not absurd that it should exist in a society where classes remain: bureaucratic and proletarian. If the USSR were a 'classless' society, it would also be a society without a bureaucratic autocracy, which is the natural fruit of the permanent existence of the State.

"It is because of its function as the party controlling the State machine that the Bolshevik Party became a centre of attraction for careerist petty bourgeois elements and for lazy and opportunist workers.

*"The bureaucratic wound has not been opened and infected by Stalinism: it is contemporaneous with the Bolshevik dictatorship." ["The State and Classes", **The State - Or Revolution**, pp. 86-7]*

Which confirmed anarchist theory: *"This phenomenon of the reconstitution of classes 'by means of the State' was foreseen by us and virulently denounced by us. The Leninist opposition did not succeed in deepening their aetiological examination of the phenomenon, and it is because of this that they did not come to revise the Leninist position in the face of the problems of the State and revolution." [Op. Cit., p. 93]* Indeed, faced with this unexpected rise of bureaucracy, the Bolsheviks tried to combat it and explain it. They failed to achieve the latter, as they failed in the former. Given the Bolshevik fixation for all things centralised, they simply added to the problem rather than solve it. Thus we find that *"[o]n the eve of the VIII Party Congress Lenin had argued that centralisation was the only way to combat bureaucratism."* [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 196]

While leading Bolsheviks uttered time and time again their hatred of bureaucracy, their ideological prejudices and assumptions simply were unable to comprehend the root cause of the problem and so were unable to solve the problem. Unsurprisingly, Lenin's "anti-bureaucratic" policies in the last years of his live were *"organisational ones. He purposes the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection to correct bureaucratic deformations in the party and state -- and this body falls under Stalin's control and becomes highly bureaucratic in its own right. Lenin then suggests that the size of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection be reduced and that it be merged with the Control Commission. He advocates enlarging the Central Committee. Thus it rolls along; this body to be enlarged, this one to be merged with another, still a third to be modified or abolished. The strange ballet of organisational forms continues up to his very death, as though the problem could be resolved by organisational means."* This was due to Lenin being "[p]aralyzed by a simplistic body of Marxist formulas." [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 131]

Failing to understand the links between centralism and bureaucracy, Lenin had to find another source for the bureaucracy. He found one, *"argu[ing] that the low cultural level of the working class prevented mass involvement in management and this led to bureaucratism. . . the new state could only reply on a minuscule layer of workers while the rest were backward because of the low cultural level of the country."* However, such an explanation is by no means convincing: *"Such culturalist assertions, which could neither be proved or disproved but which were politically highly effective in explaining the gulf, served to blur the political and structural causes of the problem. The working class was thus held responsible for the failings of the bureaucracy. At the end of the civil war the theme of the backwardness*

of the proletariat was given greater elaboration in Lenin's theory of the declassing of the proletariat." [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 195] Given that the bureaucracy had existed from the start, it is hard to say that a more "cultured" working class would have been in a better position to control the officials of a highly centralised state bureaucracy. Given the problems workers in "developed" nations have in controlling their (centralised) union and State bureaucracies, Lenin's explanation seems simply inadequate and, ultimately, self-serving.

Simply put, adding to the tasks which the State manages will, by necessity, add to the numbers of bureaucrats needed. As Kropotkin noted in 1909, "[i]t is often thought that it would be easy for a revolution to economise in the administration by reducing the number of officials. This was certainly not the case during the Revolution of 1789–1793, which with each year extended the functions of the State". [**The Great French Revolution**, vol. 2., p. 460] This structure would be "literally inundated by thousands" of issues, which, in turn, take "thousands of functionaries. . . most of them corruptible" in order "to read, classify, evaluate all these, to pronounce on the smallest detail," while "the flood [of issues] always rose!" [Kropotkin, "The State: Its Historic Role", **Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 269] As such, bureaucracy does not afflict just peasant countries as Lenin was wont to suggest for there is bureaucracy in capitalist countries as well (then and now) -- indeed, it has grown steadily as the State was given more and more functions and activities to do. As Camillo Berneri put it:

"The unitary and centralising State, be it bourgeois or Bolshevik, is a lead cloak which suffocates the economic and political life of a nation . . . A Bolshevik State that wanted to centralise powers and functions in a Bolshevik-like bureaucracy would only foster, like the current government, parasitic functions to the detriment of all productive functions . . . A socialist government that wanted to do everything would end up in centralisation, that is in the most mammoth and irresponsible bureaucracy.

..

*"One of the necessities of centralised regimes is bureaucracy, which is all the more parasitic, oppressive and irresponsible, the more the government tends to concentrate the administration of the various branches of the economic and legal life of the nation into its hands. . . [It] will be swamped by complaints, questions, petitions, befuddled by requests and protests . . . The need will therefore remain, on the part of the custodians of central power, to get help from other people who will not lend their labour free of charge: that is, for officials. These officials will have to be earnestly supervised by their superiors . . . Therefore bureau chiefs will be needed . . . In centralised schemes the intermediary becomes necessary. Hence lobbying and favouritism." ["State and Bureaucracy", **The State - Or Revolution**, pp. 69-70]*

Nor was this centralism particularly efficient. You need only read Goldman's or Berkman's accounts of their time in Bolshevik Russia to see how inefficient and wasteful centralisation and its resultant bureaucracy was in practice (see **My Disillusionment in Russia** and **The Bolshevik Myth**, respectively). This can be traced, in part, to the centralised economic structures favoured by the Bolsheviks. Rejecting the alternative vision of socialism advocated and, in part created, by the factory committees (and supported wholeheartedly by the Russian Anarchists at the time), the Bolsheviks basically took over and used the "state capitalist" organs created under Tsarism as the basis of their "socialism" (see [section 5](#)). As Lenin promised **before** seizing power:

*"Compulsory syndication, i.e., compulsory amalgamation in associations under state control -- this is what capitalism has prepared the way for, this is what has been carried out in Germany by the Junkers' state, this is what can be easily carried out in Russia by the Soviets, by the proletarian dictatorship, and this is what will **provide us with a state apparatus** that will be universal, up-to-date, and non-bureaucratic."* [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 108]

In practice, Lenin's centralised vision soon proved to be a disaster (see [section H.6](#)). It was highly inefficient and simply spawned a vast bureaucracy. There was an alternative, for the only reason that industry did not totally collapse in Russia during the early months of the revolution was the activity of the factory committees. However, such activity was not part of the Bolshevik vision of centralised socialism and so the factory committees were **not** encouraged. At the very moment when mass participation and initiative is required (i.e. during a revolution) the Bolsheviks favoured a system which killed it. As Kropotkin summarised to Emma Goldman in Russia:

"The Communists, irrevocably adhering to the idea of a centralised State, were doomed to misdirect the course of the Revolution. Their end being political supremacy, they had inevitably become the Jesuits of socialism, justifying all means to attain their purpose. Their methods, however, paralysed the energies of the masses and terrorized the people. Yet without the people, without the direct participation of the toilers in the re-construction of the country nothing creative and essential could be accomplished . . . The basic factor in such an upheaval is the organisation of the economic life of the country. The Russian Revolution proved that we must prepare for that. He had come to the conclusion that syndicalism was likely to furnish what Russia lacked most: the channel through which the industrial and economic upbuilding of the country could flow. He was referring to anarcho-syndicalism, indicating that such a system, by aid of the co-operatives, would save future revolutions the fatal blunders and fearful suffering Russia was passing through. (863-4)" [Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2., pp. 76-7]

The libertarian alternative -- based on federal functional and territorial self-management -- encourages the initiative and participation needed for social change:

"[I]n the federal system each council, having its share of the administration, can be made up of a few people who can carry out their tasks with a few hours' work a day; many employees are thus eliminated and many expenses abolished. These elected administrators have a specific, well-defined responsibility and are under the immediate and continuous control of the voters who, being interested in the proper functioning of that administration, will keep their eyes open and will intervene to prevent any problems . . . In [such] a small administration you see at a glance the revenue and expenditure and the right of control of contributors and interested parties is not hindered by complicated bureaucratic procedures.

"The federal system has a social, educational as well as an economic value.

"All this participation of the citizens in the administrative life of the nation contributes to the development and improvement of their civic capabilities." [Berneri, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 71-2]

No system is perfect. Any system will take time to develop fully. Of course the factory committees made mistakes and, sometimes, things were pretty chaotic with different factories competing for scarce resources. But that does not prove that factory committees and their federations were not the most efficient way of running things under the circumstances (or other, more stable, ones). Unless, of course, you share the Bolsheviks a dogmatic belief that central planning is always more efficient. Moreover, attacks on the factory committees for lack of co-ordination by pro-Leninists seem less than sincere, given the utter lack of encouragement (and, often, actual barriers) the Bolsheviks placed in the way of the creation of federations of factory committees [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 19] Ultimately, Bolshevik centralism (as well as being extremely inefficient) also ensured that the control of production and the subsequent surplus would be in the hands of the state and, so, class society would continue. In Russia, capitalism became state capitalism under Lenin and Trotsky.

So Bolshevik support for centralised power ensured that minority power replaced popular power, which, in turn, necessitated bureaucracy to maintain it. Bolshevism retained statist and capitalist social relations and, as such, could not develop socialist ones which, by their very nature, imply egalitarianism in terms of social influence and power (i.e. the abolition of concentrated power, both economic and political). By being centralists, the Bolsheviks systematically eliminated mass participation and ensured the replacement of popular power with party power. This saw the rebirth of non-socialist social relationships within society, so ensuring the defeat of the socialist tendencies and institutions which had started to grow during 1917.

It cannot be said that this centralism was a product of the civil war. As best it could be argued that the civil war extenuated an existing centralist spirit into ultra-centralism, but it did not create it. After all, Lenin was stressing that the Bolsheviks were "*centralists by conviction, by their programme and by the entire tactics of their party*" in 1917. Ironically, he never realised (nor cared, after the seizure of power) that this position precluded his call for an "*apparatus [which] provides a bond with the people. . . so intimate, so indissoluble, so easily verifiable and renewable, that nothing even remotely like it existed in the previous state apparatus*" and which, "*without any bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus.*" [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 177 and p. 103] Given that centralism exists to ensure minority rule, we should not be surprised that party power replaced popular participation and self-government quickly after the October Revolution. Writing in September 1918, a Russian anarchist portrays the results of Bolshevik ideology in practice:

"Within the framework of this dictatorship [of the proletariat] . . . we can see that the centralisation of power has begun to crystallise and grow firm, that the apparatus of the state is being consolidated by the ownership of property and even by an anti-socialist morality. Instead of hundreds of thousands of property owners there is now a single owner served by a whole bureaucratic system and a new 'statified' morality.

"The proletariat is gradually being enserfed by the state. The people are being transformed into servants over whom there has risen a new class of administrators -- a new class . . . Isn't this merely a new class system looming on the revolutionary horizon . . .

"The resemblance is all too striking . . . And if the elements of class inequality are as yet indistinct, it is only a matter of time before privileges will pass to the administrators. We do not mean to say . . . that the Bolshevik party set out to create a new class system. But we do say that even the best intentions and aspirations must inevitably be smashed against the evils inherent in any system of centralised power. The separation of management from labour, the division between administrators and workers flows logically from, centralisation. It cannot be otherwise . . . we are presently moving not towards socialism but towards state capitalism.

"Will state capitalism lead us to the gates of socialism? Of this we see not the slightest evidence . . . Arrayed against socialism are . . . thousands of administrators. And if the workers . . . should become a powerful revolutionary force, then it is hardly necessary to point out that the class of administrators, wielding the state apparatus, will be a far from weak opponent. The single owner and state capitalism form a new dam before the waves of our social revolution. . .

"Is it at all possible to conduct the social revolution through a centralised authority? Not even a Solomon could direct the revolutionary struggle or the economy from one centre . . ." [M. Sergven, cited by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 123-5]

Subsequent developments proved this argument correct. Working class revolts were crushed by the state and a new class society developed. Little wonder, then, Alexander Berkman's summary of what he saw first hand in Bolshevik Russia a few years later:

*"Mechanical centralisation, run mad, is paralysing the industrial and economic activities of the country. Initiative is frowned upon, free effort systematically discouraged. The great masses are deprived of the opportunity to shape the policies of the Revolution, or take part in the administration of the affairs of the country. The government is monopolising every avenue of life; the Revolution is divorced from the people. A bureaucratic machine is created that is appalling in its parasitism, inefficiency and corruption. In Moscow alone this new class of **sovbugs** (Soviet bureaucrats) exceeds, in 1920, the total of office holders throughout the whole of Russia under the Tsar in 1914 . . . The Bolshevik economic policies, effectively aided by this bureaucracy, completely disorganise the already crippled industrial life of the country. Lenin, Zinoviev, and other Communist leaders thunder philippics against the new Soviet bourgeoisie, -- and issue ever new decrees that strengthen and augment its numbers and influence." [The Russian Tragedy, p. 26]*

Bakunin would not have been remotely surprised. As such, the Bolshevik revolution provided a good example to support Malatesta's argument that *"if . . . one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government . . . it follows. . . that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, being able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing."* [**Anarchy**, pp. 38-9]

By confusing "state action" with collective working class action, the Bolsheviks effectively eliminated the latter in favour of the former. The usurpation of all aspects of life by the

centralised bodies created by the Bolsheviks left workers with no choice but to act as isolated individuals. Can it be surprising, then, that Bolshevik policies aided the atomisation of the working class by replacing collective organisation and action by state bureaucracy? The potential for collective action **was** there. You need only look at the strikes and protests directed **against** the Bolsheviks to see that was the case (see [section H.6.3](#)). Ironically, Bolshevik policies and ideology ensured that the collective effort and action of workers was directed not at solving the revolution's problems but resisting Bolshevik tyranny.

That centralism concentrates power in a few hands can be seen even in Leninist accounts of the Russian revolution. To take one example, Tony Cliff may assert that the "*mistakes of the masses were themselves creative*" but when push comes to shove, he (like Lenin) simply does not allow the masses to make such mistakes and, consequently, learn from them. Thus he defends Lenin's economic policies of "*state capitalism*" and "*one-man management*" (and in the process misleadingly suggests that these were **new** ideas on Lenin's part, imposed by objective factors, rather than, as Lenin acknowledged, what he had advocated all along -- see [section 5](#)). Thus we discover that the collapse of industry (which had started in the start of 1917) meant that "*[d]rastic measures had to be taken.*" But never fear, "*Lenin was not one to shirk responsibility, however unpleasant the task.*" He called for "*state capitalism,*" and there "*were more difficult decisions to be accepted. To save industry from complete collapse, Lenin argued for the need to impose one-man management.*" So much for the creative self-activity of the masses, which was quickly dumped -- precisely at the time when it was most desperately needed. And it is nice to know that in a workers' state it is not the workers who decide things. Rather it is Lenin (or his modern equivalent, like Cliff) who would have the task of not shirking from the responsibility of deciding which drastic measures are required. [Op. Cit., p. 21, p. 71 and p. 73] So much for "workers' power"!

Ultimately, centralism is designed to exclude the mass participation anarchists have long argued is required by a social revolution. It helped to undermine what Kropotkin considered the key to the success of a social revolution -- "*the people becom[ing] masters of their destiny.*" [Anarchism, p. 133] In his words:

*"We understand the revolution as a widespread popular movement, during which in every town and village within the region of revolt, the masses will have to take it upon themselves **the work of construction upon communistic bases**, without awaiting any orders and directions from above . . . As to representative government, whether self-appointed or elected . . . , we place in it no hopes whatever. We know beforehand that it will be able to do nothing to accomplish the revolution as long as the people themselves do not accomplish the change by working out on the spot the necessary new institutions . . . nowhere and never in history do we find that people carried into government by a revolutionary wave, have proved equal to the occasion.*

"In the task of reconstructing society on new principles, separate men . . . are sure to fail. The collective spirit of the masses is necessary for this purpose . . . a socialist government . . . would be absolutely powerless without the activity of the people themselves, and that, necessarily, they would soon begin to act fatally as a bridle upon the revolution." [Op. Cit., pp. 188-190]

The Bolshevik revolution and its mania for centralism proved him right. The use of centralisation helped ensure that workers' lost any meaningful say in their revolution and helped alienate them from it. Instead of the mass participation of all, the Bolsheviks ensured

the top-down rule of a few. Unsurprisingly, as mass participation is what centralism was designed to exclude. Wishful thinking on behalf of the Bolshevik leaders (and their later-day followers) could not (and can not) overcome the structural imperatives of centralisation and its role in society. Nor could it stop the creation of a bureaucracy around these new centralised institutions.

8 How did the aim for party power undermine the revolution?

As well as a passion for centralisation and state capitalism, Bolshevism had another aim which helped undermine the revolution. This was the goal of party power (see [section H.3.11](#)). Given this, namely that the Bolsheviks had, from the start, aimed for party power it should not come as too surprising that Bolshevik dictatorship quickly replaced soviet democracy.

Given this obvious fact, it seems strange for modern day Leninists to blame the civil war for the Bolsheviks substituting their rule for the masses. After all, when the Bolshevik Party took power in October 1917, it did "substitute" itself for the working class and did so deliberately and knowingly. As we note in [section 2](#), this usurpation of power by a minority was perfectly acceptable within the Marxist theory of the state, a theory which aided this process no end.

Thus the Bolshevik party would be in power, with the "conscious workers" ruling over the rest. The question instantly arises of what happens if the masses turn against the party. If the Bolsheviks embody "the power of the proletariat", what happens if the proletariat reject the party? The undermining of soviet power by party power and the destruction of soviet democracy in the spring and summer of 1918 answers that specific question (see [section H.6.1](#)). This should have come as no surprise, given the stated aim (and implementation) of party power plus the Bolshevik identification of party power with workers' power. It is not a great step to party dictatorship **over** the proletariat from these premises (particularly if we include the underlying assumptions of vanguardism -- see [section H.5.3](#)). A step, we must stress, that the Bolsheviks quickly took when faced with working class rejection in the soviet elections of spring and summer of 1918.

Nor was this destruction of soviet democracy by party power just the result of specific conditions in 1917-8. This perspective had been in Russian Marxist circles well before the revolution. As we discuss in [section H.5.3](#), vanguardism implies party power and give the ideological justification for party dictatorship over the masses. Once in power, the logic of vanguardism came into its own, allowing the most disgraceful repression of working class freedoms to be justified in terms of "Soviet Power" and other euphemisms for the party.

The identification of workers' power with party power has deeply undemocratic results, as the experience of the Bolshevik proves. However, these results were actually articulated in Russian socialist circles before hand. At the divisive 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democrats, which saw the split into two factions (Bolshevik and Menshevism) Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, argued as follows:

"Every particular democratic principle must be considered not in itself, abstractly, . . . the success of the revolution is the highest law. And if, for the success of the revolution's success, we need temporarily to restrict the functioning of a particular

*democratic principle, then it would be criminal to refrain from imposing that restriction. . . And we must take the same attitude where the question of the length of parliaments is concerned. If, in an outburst of revolutionary enthusiasm, the people elect a very good parliament . . . it would suit us to try and make that a **long Parliament**; but if the elections turned out badly for us, we should have to try and disperse the resulting parliament not after two years but, if possible, after two weeks."* [RSDLP, **Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP**, p. 220]

Another delegate argued that "[t]here is not a single one among the principles of democracy which we ought not to subordinate **to the interests of our Party** . . . we must consider democratic principles exclusively from the standpoint of the most rapid achievement of that aim [i.e. revolution], from the standpoint of the interests of our Party. If any particular demand is against our interests, we must not include it." To which, Plekhanov replied, "I fully associate myself with what Comrade Posadovksy has said." [Op. Cit., p. 219 and p. 220] Lenin "agreed unreservedly with this subordination of democratic principles to party interests." [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 211]

Plekhanov at this time was linked with Lenin, although this association lasted less than a year. After that, he became associated with the Mensheviks (before his support for Russia in World War I saw him form his own faction). Needless to say, he was mightily annoyed when Lenin threw his words back in his face in 1918 when the Bolsheviks disbanded the Constituent Assembly. Yet while Plekhanov came to reject this position (perhaps because the elections had not "turned out badly for" his liking) it is obvious that the Bolsheviks embraced it and keenly applied it to elections to soviets and unions as well as Parliaments once in power. But, at the time, he sided with Lenin against the Mensheviks and it can be argued that the former applied these teachings of that most respected pre-1914 Russian Marxist thinker.

This undemocratic perspective can also be seen when, in 1905, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks, like most of the party, opposed the soviets. They argued that "*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*" [quoted by Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] Thus the soviets could not reflect workers' interests because they were elected by the workers!

The Bolsheviks saw the soviets as a rival to their party and demanded it either accept their political program or simply become a trade-union like organisation. They feared that it pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the "*subordination of consciousness to spontaneity*" and under the label "*non-party*" allow "*the rotten goods of bourgeois ideology*" to be introduced among the workers. [quoted by Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 78 and p. 79] In this, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were simply following Lenin's **What is to be Done?**, in which Lenin had argued that the "*spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 82] Lenin in 1905, to his credit, rejected these clear conclusions of his own theory and was more supportive of the soviets than his followers (although "*he sided in principle with those who saw in the soviet the danger of amorphous nonpartisan organisation.*" [Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 81]).

This perspective, however, is at the root of all Bolshevik justifications for party power after the October revolution. For the Bolsheviks in power, the soviets were less than important.

The key for them was to maintain Bolshevik party power and if soviet democracy was the price to pay, then they were more than willing to pay it. As such, Bolshevik attitudes in 1905 are significant:

*"Despite the failure of the Bolshevik assault on the non-partisanship of the [St.] Petersburg Soviet, which may be dismissed as a passing episode . . . the attempt . . . is of particular significance in understanding the Bolshevik's mentality, political ambitions and **modus operandi**. First, starting in [St.] Petersburg, the Bolshevik campaign was repeated in a number of provincial soviets such as Kostroma and Tver, and, possibly, Sormovo. Second, the assault reveals that from the outset the Bolsheviks were distrustful of, if not hostile towards the Soviets, to which they had at best an instrumental and always party-minded attitude. Finally, the attempt to bring the [St.] Petersburg Soviet to heel is an early and major example of Bolshevik take-over techniques hitherto practised within the narrow confines of the underground party and now extended to the larger arena of open mass organisations such as soviets, with the ultimate aim of controlling them and turning them into one-party organisations, or, failing that, of destroying them."* [Israel Getzler, "The Bolshevik Onslaught on the Non-Party 'Political Profile' of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies October-November 1905", **Revolutionary History**, pp. 123-146, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 124-5]

The instrumentalist approach of the Bolsheviks post-1917 can be seen from their arguments and attitudes in 1905. On the day the Moscow soviet opened, a congress of the northern committees of the Social Democratic Party passed a resolution stating that a "council of workers deputies should be established only in places where the party organisation has no other means of directing the proletariat's revolutionary action . . . The soviet of workers deputies must be a technical instrument of the party for the purpose of giving political leadership to the masses through the RSDWP [the Social-Democratic Party]. It is therefore imperative to gain control of the soviet and prevail upon it to recognise the program and political leadership of the RSDWP." [quoted by Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 79]

This perspective that the party should be given precedence can be seen in Lenin's comment that while the Bolsheviks should "go along with the unpoliticalised proletarians, but on no account and at no time should we forget that animosity among the proletariat toward the Social Democrats is a remnant of bourgeois attitudes . . . Participation in unaffiliated organisations can be permitted to socialists only as an exception . . . only if the independence of the workers party is guaranteed and if within unaffiliated organisations or soviets individual delegates or party groups are subject to unconditional control and guidance by the party executive." [quoted by Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 81] These comments have clear links to Lenin's argument in 1920 that working class protest against the Bolsheviks showed that they had become "declassified" (see [section H.6.3](#)). It also ensures that Bolshevik representatives to the soviets are not delegates from the workplace, but rather a "transmission belt" (to use a phrase from the 1920s) for the decisions of the party leadership. In a nutshell, Bolshevik soviets would represent the party's central committee, not those who elected them. As Oskar Anweiler summarised:

"The 'revolutionary genius' of the people, which Lenin had mentioned and which was present in the soviets, constantly harboured the danger of 'anarcho-sindicalist tendencies' that Lenin fought against all his life. He detected this danger early in the development of the soviets and hoped to subdue it by subordinating the soviets to the

*party. The drawback of the new 'soviet democracy' hailed by Lenin in 1906 is that he could envisage the soviets only as **controlled** organisations; for him they were the instruments by which the party controlled the working masses, rather than true forms of a workers democracy." [Op. Cit., p. 85]*

As we noted in [section H.3.11](#), Lenin had concluded in 1907 that while the party could "utilise" the soviets "for the purpose of developing the Social-Democratic movement," the party "must bear in mind that if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous." [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 210] Thus the means by which working class can manage their own affairs would become "superfluous" once the party was in power. As Samuel Farber argues, Lenin's position before 1917 was "clearly implying that the party could normally fulfil its revolutionary role without the existence of broad class organisations . . . Consequently, Lenin's and the party's eventual endorsement of the soviets in 1905 seems to have been tactical in character. That is, the Bolshevik support for the soviets did not at the time signify a theoretical and/or principled commitment to these institutions as revolutionary organs to overthrow the old society, let alone as key structural ingredients of the post-revolutionary order. Furthermore, it is again revealing that from 1905 to 1917 the concept of soviets did not play an important role in the thinking of Lenin or of the Bolshevik Party . . . [T]hese strategies and tactics vis-a-vis the soviets . . . can be fairly seen as expressing a predisposition favouring the party and downgrading the soviets and other non-party class organisations, at least in relative terms." [Before Stalinism, p. 37] Such a perspective on the soviets can be seen once the party was in power when they quickly turned them, without concern, into mere fig-leaves for party power.

It cannot be mere coincidence that the ideas and rhetoric against the soviets in 1905 should resurface again once the Bolsheviks were in power. For example, in 1905, in St. Petersburg "the Bolsheviks pressed on" with their campaign and, "according to the testimony of Vladimir Voitinskii, then a young Bolshevik agitator, the initial thrust of the Bolshevik 'plan' was to push the SRs [who were in a minority] out of the Soviet, while 'the final blow' would be directed against the Mensheviks. Voitinskii also recalled the heated argument advanced by the popular agitator Nikolai Krylenko ('Abram') for the 'dispersal of the Soviet' should it reject the 'ultimatum' to declare its affiliation with the RSDP." [Getzler, **Op., Cit.**, pp. 127-8] This mirrored events in 1918. Then "at the local political level" Bolshevik majorities were attained ("by means fair, foul and terrorist") "in the plenary assemblies of the soviets, and with the barring of all those not 'completely dedicated to Soviet power' [i.e. Mensheviks and SRs] from the newly established network of soviet administrative departments and from the soviet militias. Soviets where Bolshevik majorities could not be achieved were simply disbanded." A similar process occurred at the summit of the new State. Thus "the October revolution marked [the soviets] transformation from agents of democratisation into regional and local administrative organs of the centralised, one-party Soviet state." [Israel Getzler, **Soviets as Agents of Democratisation**, p. 27 and pp. 26-7]

Can such an outcome really have **no** link at all with the Bolshevik position and practice before 1917 and, in particular, during the 1905 revolution? Obviously not. As such, we should not be too surprised or shocked when Lenin replied to a critic who assailed the "dictatorship of one party" in 1919 by clearly and unashamedly stating: "Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position because it is the party that has won, in the course of decades, the position of vanguard of the entire factory and industrial proletariat." [**Collected Works**, vol. 29, p. 535] Or when he

replied to a critic in 1920 that "[h]e says we understand by the words dictatorship of proletariat what is actually the dictatorship of its determined and conscious minority. And that is the fact." This "minority . . . may be called a party," Lenin stressed. [quoted by Arthur Ransome, **The Crisis in Russia 1920**, p. 35]

This perspective can be traced back to the underlying ideology expounded by the Bolsheviks before and during 1917. For example, mere days after seizing power in the October Revolution Lenin was stressing that the Bolsheviks' "present slogan is: No compromise, i.e. for a homogeneous Bolshevik government." He did not hesitate to use the threat to "appeal to the sailors" against the other socialist parties, stating "[i]f you get the majority, take power in the Central Executive Committee and carry on. But we will go to the sailors." [quoted by Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 26] Clearly soviet power was far from Lenin's mind, rejecting soviet democracy if need be in favour of party power. Strangely, Cliff (a supporter of Lenin) states that Lenin "did not visualise one-party rule" and that the "first decrees and laws issued after the October revolution were full of repetitions of the word 'democracy.'" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 161 and p. 146] He goes on to quote Lenin stating that "[a]s a democratic government we cannot ignore the decision of the masses of the people, even though we disagree with it." Cliff strangely fails to mention that Lenin also applied this not only to the land decree (as Cliff notes) but also to the Constituent Assembly. "And even if," Lenin continued, "the peasants continue to follow the Socialist Revolutionaries, even if they give this party a majority in the Constituent Assembly, we shall still say -- what of it?" [**Lenin, Collected Works**, vol. 26, pp. 260-1] But the Bolsheviks disbanded the Constituent Assembly after one session. The peasants had voted for the SRs and the Assembly went the same way as Lenin's promises. And if Lenin's promises of 1917 on the Assembly proved to be of little value, then why should his various comments to soviet democracy be considered any different?

Thus Bolshevik ideology had consistently favoured party power and had a long term ideological preference for it. Combine this aim of party power with a vanguardism position (see [section H.5](#)) and party dictatorship will soon result. Neil Harding summarises the issue well:

"There were a number of very basic axioms that lay at the very heart of the theory and practice of Leninism with regard to the party . . . It was the party that disposed of scientific or objective knowledge. Its analysis of the strivings of the proletariat was, therefore, privileged over the proletariat's own class goals and a single discernible class will was, similarly, axiomatic to both Marxism and Leninism. Both maintained that it was the communists who alone articulated these goals and this will -- that was the party's principal historical role.

*"At this point, Leninism (again faithful to the Marxist original) resorted to a little-noticed definitional conjuring trick -- one that proved to be of crucial importance for the mesmeric effect of the ideology. The trick was spectacularly simple and audacious -- the class was defined as class only to the extent that it conformed to the **party's** account of its objectives, and mobilised itself to fulfil them. . . . The messy, real proletarians -- the aggregation of wage workers with all their diverse projects and aspirations -- were to be judged by their progress towards a properly class existence by the party that had itself devised the criteria for the class existence." [**Leninism**, pp. 173-4]*

This authoritarian position, which allows "socialism" to be imposed by force upon the working class, lies at the core of Leninism. Ironically, while Bolshevism claims to be **the** party of the working class, representing it essentially or exclusively, they do so in the name of possessing a theory that, qua theory, can be the possession of intellectuals and, therefore, has to be "introduced" to the working class from outside (see [section H.5.1](#) for details).

This means that Bolshevism is rooted in the identification of "class consciousness" with supporting the party. If the workers protested against the policies of the party, this represented a fall in class consciousness and, therefore, working class resistance placed "class" power in danger. If, on the other hand, the workers remained quiet and followed the party's decision then, obviously, they showed high levels of class consciousness. The net effect of this position was, of course, to justify party dictatorship. Which, of course, the Bolsheviks did create **and** justified ideologically.

Thus the Bolshevik aim for party power results in disempowering the working class in practice. Moreover, the assumptions of vanguardism ensure that only the party leadership is able to judge what is and is not in the interests of the working class. Any disagreement by elements of that class or the whole class itself can be dismissed as "wavering" and "vacillation." While this is perfectly acceptable within the Leninist "from above" perspective, from an anarchist "from below" perspective it means little more than pseudo-theoretical justification for party dictatorship **over** the proletariat and the ensuring that a socialist society will **never** be created. Ultimately, socialism without freedom is meaningless -- as the Bolshevik regime proved time and time again.

As such, to claim that the Bolsheviks did not aim to "substitute" party power for working class power seems inconsistent with both Bolshevik theory and practice. Lenin had been aiming for party power from the start, identifying it with working class power. As the party was the vanguard of the proletariat, it was duty bound to seize power and govern on behalf of the masses and, moreover, take any actions necessary to maintain the revolution -- even if these actions violated the basic principles required to have any form of meaningful workers' democracy and freedom. Thus the "dictatorship of the proletariat" had long become equated with party power and, once in power, it was only a matter of time before it became the "dictatorship of the party." And once this did occur, none of the leading Bolsheviks questioned it. The implications of these Bolshevik perspectives came clear after 1917, when the Bolsheviks raised the need for party dictatorship to an ideological truism.

Thus it seems strange to hear some Leninists complain that the rise of Stalinism can be explained by the rising "independence" of the state machine from the class (i.e. party) it claimed to be in service of. Needless to say, few Leninists ponder the links between the rising "independence" of the state machine from the proletariat (by which most, in fact, mean the "vanguard" of the proletariat, the party) and Bolshevik ideology. As noted in [section H.3.8](#), a key development in Bolshevik theory on the state was the perceived need for the vanguard to ignore the wishes of the class it claimed to represent and lead. For example, Victor Serge (writing in the 1920s) considered it a truism that the "*party of the proletariat must know, at hours of decision, how to break the resistance of the backward elements among the masses; it must know how to stand firm sometimes against the masses . . . it must know how to go against the current, and cause proletarian consciousness to prevail against lack of consciousness and against alien class influences.*" [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 218]

The problem with this is that, by definition, **everyone** is backward in comparison to the vanguard party. Moreover, in Bolshevik ideology it is the party which determines what is and is not "*proletarian consciousness*." Thus we have the party ideologue presenting self-justifications for party power **over** the working class. Now, if the vanguard is to be able to ignore the masses then it must have power **over** them. Moreover, to be independent of the masses the machine it relies on to implement its power must also, by definition, be independent of the masses. Can we be surprised, therefore, with the rise of the "independent" state bureaucracy in such circumstances? If the state machine is to be independent of the masses then why should we expect it not to become independent of the vanguard? Surely it must be the case that we would be far more surprised if the state machine did **not** become "independent" of the ruling party?

Nor can it be said that the Bolsheviks learned from the experience of the Russian Revolution. This can be seen from Trotsky's 1937 comments that the "*proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. In itself the necessity for state power arises from the insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity*." Thus "*state power*" is required **not** to defend the revolution against reaction but from the working class itself, who do not have a high enough "*cultural level*" to govern themselves. At best, their role is that of a passive supporter, for "*[w]ithout the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power*." While soviets "*are the only organised form of the tie between the vanguard and the class*" it does not mean that they are organs of self-management. No, a "*revolutionary content can be given . . . only by the party. This is proved by the positive experience of the October Revolution and by the negative experience of other countries (Germany, Austria, finally, Spain)*." ["*Stalinism and Bolshevism*", **Writings 1936-37**, p. 426]

Sadly, Trotsky failed to explicitly address the question of what happens when the "*masses*" stop having "*confidence in the vanguard*" and decides to support some other group. After all, if a "*revolutionary content*" can only be given by "*the party*" then if the masses reject the party then the soviets can no longer be revolutionary. To save the revolution, it would be necessary to destroy the democracy and power of the soviets. Which is **exactly** what the Bolsheviks did do in 1918. By equating popular power with party power Bolshevism not only opens the door to party dictatorship, it invites it in, gives it some coffee and asks it to make itself a home! Nor can it be said that Trotsky ever appreciated Kropotkin's "*general observation*" that "*those who preach dictatorship do not in general perceive that in sustaining their prejudice they only prepare the way for those who later on will cut their throats*." [**Anarchism**, p. 244]

In summary, it cannot be a coincidence that once in power the Bolsheviks acted in ways which had clear links to the political ideology it had been advocating before hand. As such, the Bolshevik aim for party power helped undermine the real power of working class people during the Russian revolution. Rooted in a deeply anti-democratic political tradition, it was ideologically predisposed to substitute party power for soviet power and, finally, to create -- and justify -- the dictatorship **over** the proletariat. The civil war may have shaped certain aspects of these authoritarian tendencies but it did not create them.