

A Conversation About Marxism
Thoughts on Ron Tabor's
The Tyranny of Theory

A Contribution to the Anarchist
Critique of Marxism

(Black Cat Press, Edmonton, Canada, 2013)



Introduction


Ron Tabor, in his 2013 book, *The Tyranny of Theory—A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism* (Black Cat Press), presents an incisive and provocative critique of Marxism. Ron's central point is that Marxism is totalitarian in its outlook, and a prescription for the establishment and maintenance of totalitarian societies. Ron is not the first person to see totalitarianism in Marxism; many others, before and after the Bolshevik-led October 1917 Revolution, have ascribed this trait to Marx. What makes Ron's book particularly valuable and unique is that he comes to his critique from the left, that is to say, from the perspective of anti-capitalist revolutionary. Ron's analysis grows out of his experience with, and then gradual rejection of, first, Trotskyism, and then Leninism, as revolutionary expressions of Marxism. *The Tyranny of Theory* takes as its departure point Ron's previous analyses of, first, the state capitalist nature of the Soviet Union, and subsequently, Lenin and the Bolsheviks' theory and practice. Thus, unlike many people who have abandoned left-wing perspectives and activities in favor of liberal, pro-capitalist or even arch-conservative perspectives, Ron has steadfastly maintained a commitment to what some (including this writer) would refer to as the ideals of Marxism—the creation of a cooperative, democratic, egalitarian society, organized by and in the interests of the immense majority of people. However, Ron argues that it is a profound mistake to see socialism with a democratic and libertarian soul as Marxist in any sense. In other words, Ron maintains that the single most consistently accepted critique of capitalism and call for the revolutionary alternative of socialism, is not merely useless but is, in its very essence, a totalitarian worldview that leads to the creation of totalitarian societies.

The aim of this conversation is to further explore the important questions raised by Ron in *The Tyranny of Theory*. Is Marxism totalitarian, or does it merely have totalitarian aspects? Which of Ron's arguments are fully convincing, and which are open to further consideration? Is an analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of Marxism sufficient to make the case for Marxism as totalitarianism? Or does this conclusion rest in good measure on the actions and results of movements led by self-proclaimed Marxists such as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, or Castro? In other words, if these individuals had not used Marxism as their banner, would a philosophical argument alone be sufficient to label Marxism as totalitarian? Do these individuals and movements represent the playing out of Marxist theory with predictable results, or have these individuals so thoroughly distorted Marx's views that they should not be held up as proof of the totalitarian nature of Marxist theory?

Why should we care about Marxism?

The answer to the question, “why should we care about Marxism?” lies in another question: what is socialism? Ask 50 people; you will get 50 different answers. It is hard to think of a concept that has more varied definitions—and more varied proponents and detractors. The “why” of this is very much bound up in the compelling and provocative critique of Marxism provided by Ron Tabor in his *The Tyranny of Theory*.

At its simplest level, socialism suggests a system in which the decisions about the production and distribution of goods are not made privately, but are determined by the people or society, rather than by the owners and controllers of great wealth. The assumption behind socialism is that a people-controlled economic system (and, therefore, social and political system), would be far more just and democratic than a private ownership/private-profit system. While many peo-




ple who consider themselves socialists, or who might be attracted to socialism, might agree on the above definition, there is little agreement on what socialism is beyond this definition. What does it mean to say that the “people” or “society” will determine what is produced and distributed? How will this be done? One way might be from the bottom up—that is to say, through the organization of local cooperatives, councils, planning organizations, that assess needs and productive capabilities in their area, and then cooperate regionally, nationally, and internationally in decision-making over the production and distribution of goods and services. Another way might be from the top down—that is to say, the national government, however defined or constituted, would assess needs and productive capacities and make decisions over the production and distribution of goods. And, of course, at least in theory, there might be a mix of these two approaches.

The “from the bottom up” path has a decidedly participatory and democratic feel to it—local people directly involved in discussion, debate and decision-making over important aspects of their lives, and ceding tasks (and therefore some power) to geographically wider bodies as needed and determined locally. Control and authority rests in local hands; power devolves upward only in the manner and to the degree local committees desire it. A century of experience with societies describing themselves as socialist, or Communist or Marxist has demonstrated that when a centralized power establishes itself as the controller and director of decision-making over production and distribution, the result is neither participatory, nor democratic; quite the contrary, the (apparent) elimination of private capital as the driving force of production and distribution has merely resulted in the substitution of state-controlled (and in this sense private) capital calling the shots. Moreover, in the absence of the degree of pluralism that exists in free-market capitalist societies, these state capitalist societies are highly authoritarian at best, and (often in their Marxist-Leninist form) brutal, totalitarian dictatorships at worst.

So, why should we care about Marxism? In my view, the value of Marxism lies in its theories about and critique of capitalism, and its theories about and advocacy of socialism, a radically different economic/political/social system. Marxism is not, as Ron points out, the only critique of capitalism, nor the only political framework that advocates a radical transformation of capitalist society. However, Marxism has been the predominant revolutionary anti-capitalist critique for a century or more.

There are many reasons for this, but one significant factor is that Marxism is highly compelling. Ron writes:

“...Marxism has many features that make it extremely attractive to people angry at the injustices of capitalism and anxious to make the world a better place. Perhaps most importantly in these times of economic crisis, it offers a detailed analysis of capitalism that has never been approached, let alone equaled in its cogency, breadth and depth. In addition, Marxism provides a moral indictment of the capitalist system, along with a vision of a just society and strategy and set of tactics to achieve it. Finally, it offers a unified conception of history and of human nature (while denying that such nature exists) and seems to answer all the fundamental questions that have consumed the minds of human beings for millennia.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 8)



Thus, if we care about socialism, we need to care about Marxism—certainly to understand it as theory, possibly to embrace parts of it that are valid or, if we are rejecting it in its entirety, to be crystal clear on the reasons why.

Is Marxism totalitarian? (Yes, but...)

In the first chapter of his book (“Marxism and its Historic Responsibility”), Ron states his central thesis: “The main thesis of my critique of Marxism is that it is, and must be held responsible for Communism.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 11) Ron defends his thesis by examining Marxism from several perspectives, but early on he states Marxism is totalitarian because it “its underlying philosophical assumptions imply it.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 25)

Ron devotes two chapters of his book to a detailed examination of Marxist philosophy. Valuable as this discussion may be, I believe that the “philosophical totalitarianism” of Marxism can be located at a less complex level. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels traced the economic/social organization of humanity from its earliest times to the young capitalist epoch in which they were writing. The key claims were: 1) societies had passed through several distinct forms of organization, each defined primarily by its dominant economic mode of production (“primitive communism,” slave society, feudalism, capitalism); 2) each of these societies was seen as an advance on the previous society; 3) the “motor force” of change from one stage of social organization to the next was identified as the class struggle; 4) each new economic/social/political order was seen as revolutionary in relation to the order that preceded it; 5) capitalism created conditions in which a tiny minority (the bourgeoisie) owned and controlled the means of finance, production and distribution, and a vast majority had a common condition of being exploited by the owning and ruling class. This majority-in-the-making was the working class; and, 6) as capitalism developed, this proletariat would grow ever larger, recognize its “property-less” condition, and thereby have both the compelling reasons for, and the wherewithal to, overthrow capitalism and establish the first society created by, organized by, and administered by the overwhelming majority—socialism.

If only Marx and Engels had left things there. But they didn’t. And this gets to the essence of one key aspect of Ron’s argument in *The Tyranny of Theory*. Writing in the 19th century, at a time when science seemed to explain “everything”—physics, nature, organization of work, psychology of humans, etc.—Marx believed that he had discovered for human society and its evolution, something parallel to what Darwin had uncovered related to natural science. Thus, they labeled their theory of socialism, scientific socialism. Their intention was to distinguish themselves from the prevalent notion of socialism of the time, utopian socialism, which often took the form of advocating various schemes to organize communities around communal, working and living principles. Marx and Engels viewed this approach as “utopian” because they recognized that capitalism had replaced feudalism not as a good idea emanating from a handful of forward-thinking social planners, imaginative novelists or entrepreneurs, but rather through a complex, prolonged, and at times forceful overthrow of the then existing relations of production and the class that profited from and defended those relations. Thus, Marx and Engels argued that socialism would not replace capitalism as the result of some utopian scheme, but rather through a complex and prolonged struggle centered on deeply rooted class antagonisms between the “old” and the “new.”

While Marx and Engels may have had understandable reasons for proclaiming scientific validity for their theories, their claim to scientific validity (of having discovered “truth”), turns advocacy of an ethically desirable ideal into something quite different. For if Marx and Engels had discovered the science of human history, if one stage of society is destined to give way to the next, and then

the next, and then the next...then each new stage of history is inevitable. In other words, the march of history is absolute and “Truth” has been revealed. This is the cornerstone of Ron’s argument in *The Tyranny of Theory*: that the Marxist view of history—the view that a known future exists within the present—is a totalitarian outlook, philosophically, and leads to totalitarian outcomes, practically. Why totalitarian? Because a given group of individuals, leaders, political parties, movements—it doesn’t matter who or what—acting “in the name of,” and “on behalf of,” or “in concert with” the inevitable march of history, can do no wrong. Anything they do is right. Anything they do is justified. Anything they do is necessary. No matter how messy.

So there’s the yes (Marxism is arguably philosophically totalitarian), but what about the “but?” Imagine this discussion was taking place in the early 20th century—no Lenin, no Bolsheviks, no October Revolution (and no Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung or Pol Pot). I think it is fair to argue that in such a context, we can imagine a reasonable person arguing:

“Marx was overwhelmingly ‘right on’—he exposed the evils of capitalism; he laid bare issues of base and superstructure that are highly compelling; he recognized the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in relation to feudalism, and its reactionary role as the purveyor and defender of capitalism; he issued a clear call to toiling masses everywhere (‘workers of the world unite’) to recognize their common, property-less condition as well as the possibility of a common collective future. Yes, he and that fellow Engels got a bit carried away by the ‘science’ of the thing. They were writing at a time when science seemed to explain ‘everything.’ They were wrong on that.”

My point is this: The philosophical analysis of totalitarian aspects of Marx’s and Engels’ views would be an abstraction—a correct, but not necessarily defining point—if it were not for the fact that subsequent events (the outcomes of movements that called themselves Marxist), seem to confirm that the totalitarian outlook in Marx’s philosophy actually leads to concrete and specific totalitarian societies. In other words, labeling Marxism as wholly totalitarian, purely on the basis of philosophical aspects of Marxism that are rooted in Marx’s infatuation with power and reach of 19th century science, is a mistake.

Ron rejects this point of view and argues that it is impossible to separate any one aspect of Marxism from another, and that all aspects taken together constitute Marxism’s philosophy:

“...the entirety of Marxism, both theory and practice, including its strategy (the organization of the workers as a class counterposed to other classes, the proletarian revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat) and tactics, constitutes a unified view of the world, a philosophy.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 22)

Nonetheless, I contend that Ron’s conclusions about Marxism rest to some significant degree on the actual outcomes created by supposedly Marxist movements beginning with the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. Specifically, a close examination of whether Lenin and the Bolsheviks meaningfully represent Marxism is highly relevant to assessing whether Marxism itself is or is not totalitarian. Thus, the rest of this article focuses on two key questions: 1) Were Lenin and the Bolsheviks (and, by extension, subsequent Marxist-Leninists) truly Marxists? 2) Is the Marxist conception of the state totalitarian? I believe that the perspective one takes on these questions greatly influences a judgment on whether Marxism is merely flawed, or is instead totalitarian at its core.

Was Lenin a Marxist? (Well, he said he was...)

Lenin was the principal leader of a section of an avowedly Marxist political party, (=the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party—RSDLP; he wrote books on aspects of Marxist theory; he spoke in Marxist terminology; and he claimed to be leading a Marxist-inspired socialist revolution. In short, Lenin said he was a Marxist. However, although Lenin considered himself a Marxist, over the course of his political career he revised Marx's views in significant ways (always framing these revisions in terms of the conditions that were peculiar to Russia). These changes to Marxist theory and practice were sufficiently distinct that Stalin was easily able to re-label Marxism, as "Marxism-Leninism." Marxism-Leninism is not Marxism.

Ron expresses some ambivalence regarding whether Lenin was a Marxist. In a series of articles that subsequently appeared as *A Look At Leninism* (1988), Ron argues that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were not democratic, libertarian socialists, but were instead authoritarian, state capitalists (a point of view that I agree with). Ron begins his analysis of Lenin's outlook by suggesting that Lenin was a prisoner of a "Marxist orthodoxy" that saw Russia as not sufficiently transformed from the feudal/agrarian stage to the bourgeois/capitalist stage to be ready for a working class-led socialist revolution. He goes on to argue, with merit, that this may have deeply influenced what type of society Lenin actually thought he was creating, and hence the authoritarian, state-capitalist outcome. However, Ron seems to recognize at least the possibility that Lenin may have broken with Marxism. He doesn't say this directly, but writes:

"Another argument against my hypothesis that the Bolsheviks were (despite themselves) bourgeois revolutionaries is that they thought of themselves as Marxists, studied Marxism, made it clear to the workers that they were socialists, recruited people to be socialists, etc. But calling yourself a Marxist doesn't automatically make you one." (*A Look at Leninism*, p. 13)

Since *A Look at Leninism* was written several years prior to *The Tyranny of Theory* it may not reflect later views. In *Tyranny*, Ron rejects any argument that the Bolsheviks and their various successors were not Marxists, and dismisses this argument on two grounds:

"In fact, almost every type of apologist for Marxism articulates a variant of this argument. Trotskyists insist that Lenin was true to Marx; Stalin distorted him. Maoists contend that Lenin and Stalin were Marxists; 'revisionism' began with Khrushchev.... The very posing of the argument (in whatever form) implies a critique of Marxism, for if the historical process had developed as Marx predicted, all debate over what is or isn't Marxism would be irrelevant. The socialist revolution a la Marx would have happened (or would be in the process of happening), and there would be nothing to argue about." (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 19)

These are not particularly strong arguments. As to the first, if one believes that Lenin and the Bolsheviks (the inspirers of Marxism-Leninism, the ideology used by all of the subsequent so-called Marxist movements/revolutions) were not Marxists, that is, had broken so significantly with Marxism as to give it a totalitarian content, it is not compelling for Ron to dismiss this view as "picking and choosing." It is not picking and choosing to see the entirety of the 20th-century revolutionary leftist movements as non-Marxist. Ron's second argument is simply circular. It dismisses a discussion over whether Lenin and the Bolsheviks were in fact Marxists by arguing that there would be nothing to debate if socialism was, as Marx believed, inevitable. But, of course, socialism is not inevitable. Marx believed this, but he was wrong.

In my view, Lenin was not a Marxist, and, the Bolsheviks were not Marxists, Stalin was not a Marxist, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not Marxist and Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party were not Marxists. All of these individuals and parties are at fundamental odds with Marxism as defined by the core writings of Marx. Admittedly, there have long been differences over what is or is not Marxism. (Marx famously said in the early 1880s, after reading a programmatic document written by French socialists, “If this is Marxism, than I am not a Marxist.”) As a result, it is a challenge to prove that Lenin was not a Marxist. What I will attempt to demonstrate is that the differences between Lenin’s theory and practice and that expressed in Marx’s writing are vast in relation to what I consider to be several key defining issues of Marxism. Marxism will be represented by a single work, *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and Engels in late 1847 and published in 1848 as the programmatic expression of the newly formed Communist League. While both Marx and Engels wrote many subsequent works that further elaborated aspects of their views, these subsequent writings did not fundamentally alter the core propositions presented in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Two areas from the Manifesto are essential to this discussion: 1) class; and, 2) consciousness and leadership. (A later section of this article will examine Marx’s views on the nature and role of the state and Ron’s critique of these views.)

1) Class

In Section 1 of *The Communist Manifesto* (“Bourgeois and Proletarians”) Marx and Engels wrote:

Society as a whole is breaking up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other— bourgeoisie and proletariat. (p. 10)


Nothing about the context for the Russian Revolution remotely resembles this expectation/prediction. Yet, these were the conditions under which Marx foresaw, and championed, a socialist revolution.

Marx and Engels went on to say:

“The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’” (p. 12)

Again, there was little in the Russian situation in 1917 that resembled this description of the development of capitalism and the rule of the bourgeoisie. It is true that the February Revolution had overthrown Tsar Nicholas II and ushered in a bourgeois-democratic government (in the form of the Provisional Government). However, the country as a whole remained overwhelmingly peasant and agricultural, the Russian nobility owned much of the land, and democratic institutions were weak or non-existent. 1917 Russia was at the front end of a significant period of industrial/capitalist development, which would likely include the broad establishment of bourgeois-democratic political institutions, and would almost certainly bring about the growth of a large industrial working class. However, in 1917 these workers, conscious as they may have been, made up less than 5% of the Russian population as a whole.

Marx and Engels stressed that the process of capitalist development would be slow and uneven, but that over time it would give birth to a modern working class that would grow numerically and mature politically. Thus, they write in the *Manifesto*:



“The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie....At this stage the laborers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition....But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more....Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate results, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers.” (pp. 18-19)

Here, Marx and Engels are describing the creation of a class, the conditions that weld it into a class, and the processes that begin to give that class identity and consciousness. These were not casual observations, things to take or leave. Quite the contrary, they were their central beliefs on the material basis for socialism, and how and why it would come about. The conditions in 1917 Russia do not remotely approximate the existence of such a class, ready to make in its own name, by its own acts, in its own interests, a working class-led socialist revolution.

The first section of *The Communist Manifesto* builds to the following conclusion:

“All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.” (p. 21)

This is a straight up statement of the nature of the working class movement that Marx and Engels foresaw, placed in the context of the centuries-long process that led from feudalism to capitalism and was now leading the way, in their view, to the development of capitalism in such a way as to make socialism a possible and necessary next step. Marx and Engels’ reference to this as “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in interests of the immense majority” is: 1) a central, defining tenet of Marxism; and, 2) not remotely similar to the revolution the Bolsheviks led and carried out. Twentieth century self-proclaimed Marxists read this passage and found one pretext or another to walk away from its meaning.

When Trotsky, in 1903, called for a workers’ government as an immediate aim of the revolutionary movement in Russia, Lenin answered:

“That cannot be! It cannot be because a revolutionary dictatorship can endure for a time only if it rests on the enormous majority of the people ... The proletariat constitutes a minority ... Anyone who attempts to achieve socialism by any other route without passing through the stage of political democracy, will inevitably arrive at the most absurd and reactionary conclusions, both economic and political.” (V. I. Lenin, *Sochinenya*, ix, p.14, quoted from Tony Cliff, *Trotsky on Substitutionism*)

Lenin, at least at this time, was well aware that a working class-led socialist revolution in early 20th century Russia would lead to anti-democratic and, in his words, “reactionary conclusions.” He was also aware that this was at odds with Marxism. Trotsky was aware of this as well. At the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (London, 1903), he stated: “The rule of the working class (is) inconceivable until the great mass of them (are) united in desiring it. Then they would be an overwhelming majority. This would not be the dictatorship of a little band of conspirators or a minority party, but of the

immense majority in the interests of the immense majority, to prevent counter-revolution. In short, it would represent the victory of true democracy.” (Quoted from Tony Cliff, *Trotsky on Substitutionism*)

Thus Trotsky, like Lenin, rules out the minority rule of the working class as the “dictatorship of a little band of conspirators or a minority party.” Each does this based on their understanding of Marxism. Marx himself, writing in the mid-19th century, drives home the point that all 20th century “vanguardists” have abandoned. Speaking to German socialists who, in Marx’s words, “flattered” the German workers, Marx declared:

“While we say to the workers: you have 15 or 20 years of bourgeois and national wars to go through, not merely to alter conditions but to alter yourselves and make yourselves fit to take political power, you tell them on the contrary that they must take over political power at once or abandon all hope.” (Quoted from Tony Cliff, *Trotsky on Substitutionism*)

2) Consciousness and leadership

The opening of Section 2 of *The Communist Manifesto* asks the question: “In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole?” Marx and Engels go on to answer:

“The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.” (p. 23)


No separate party to vie for leadership with other parties? No separate interests from the working class as a whole? No sectarian principles with which to lead the proletarian movement? This hardly sounds like Leninist-inspired Bolshevism. To be fair, Marx and Engels do suggest two programmatic points their movement ought to stand for. They write:

“The Communists are distinguished from other working class parties by this only:

“1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independent of all nationality.

“2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.” (p. 23)

These two points are striking. Each of them is designed to lend support to the idea that the proletariat is a class. Point #1 seeks to overcome the division of the working class into separate nationalities with separate national interests, counter-posing to this the notion of a common, international class interest (“Workers of the World Unite!). Point #2 makes the same fundamental point; where sections of the working class have, in one way or another, been pitted against each other, they (Communists) “always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.” There is little or nothing in the description by Marx and Engels of the role of Communists that matches that of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. How can the call for “no separate party opposed to other working class parties” be seen as remotely similar to the Bolshevik outlook? How can Marx’s declaration that Communists “have no interests separate and apart from the proletariat as a whole” be seen as Leninist? How

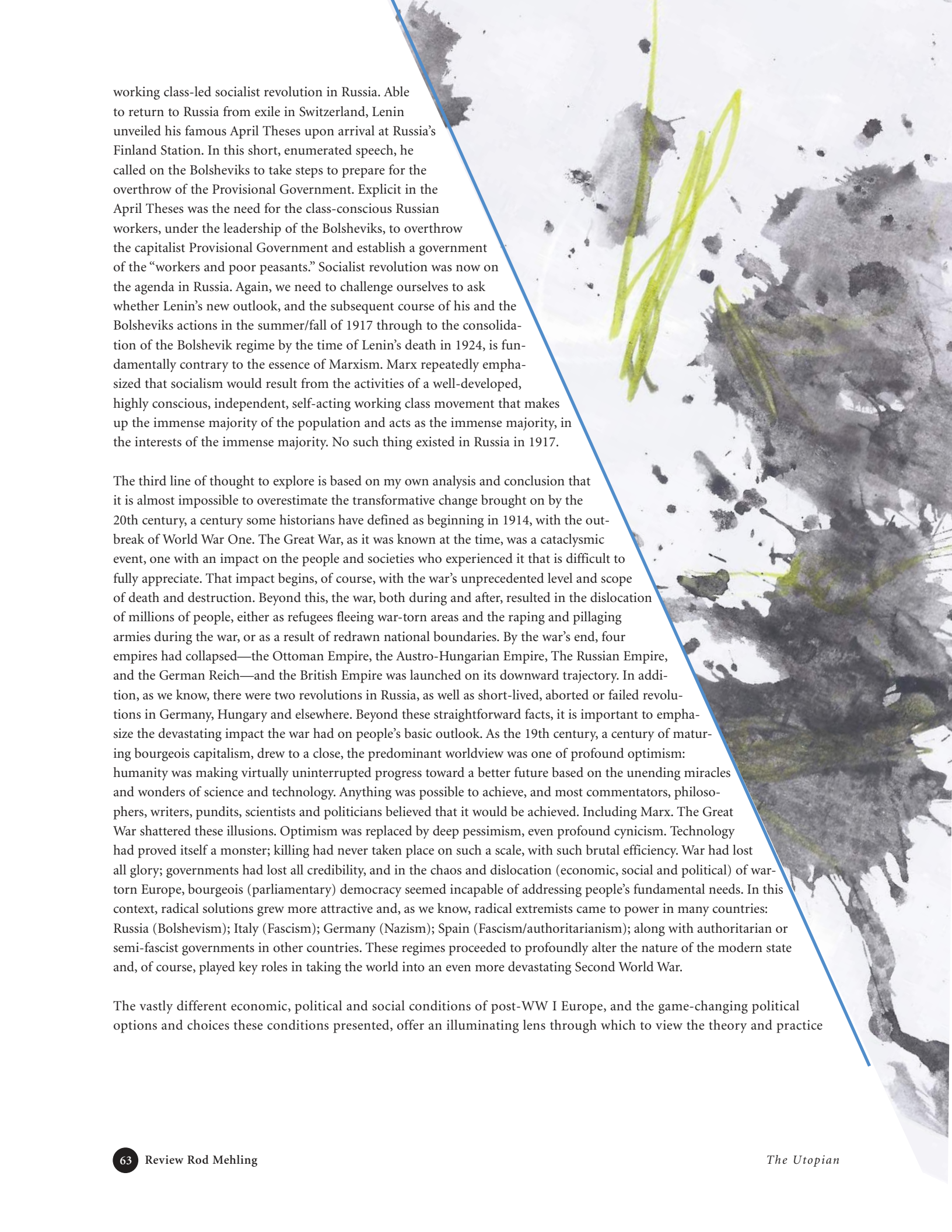


can the declaration of “no sectarian principles by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement” be squared with Lenin’s views? The entire history of the Bolshevik experience was to see the correctness and purity of the Bolshevik program as requiring not merely discussion and debate, but as demanding that a line in the sand be drawn. Standing on the other side of that line stood “class traitors” or “class enemies,” more dangerous than the bourgeoisie itself.

Lenin believed that: 1) workers were not capable of reaching socialist consciousness on their own (this consciousness could only be brought to them “from without,” by the revolutionary party; 2) the party was the “representative” of the working class not only in the sense that its “correct program” would provide “correct leadership,” but in the sense that the party was more important than the class, that, in fact, it could lead the working class against the real live workers. (And, so it did, dispersing the Constituent Assembly, refusing virtually any coalitions or alliances with other parties, persecuting Mensheviks, SR’s and Anarchists, murdering the Kronstadt sailors, and jailing, exiling and sometimes killing “backward workers.”) The vast disparity between the Bolshevik notion of consciousness and leadership and that expressed by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* is evident. Does it make sense to call Leninism Marxism? I do not think so.

This discussion leaves unanswered the following question: if Lenin fully understood that it was a break with Marxism to believe that a working class-led revolution in Russia was “on the agenda,” how did he (and Trotsky and other Marxists) jettison these views? And, once doing so, how did they manage to dress their new views up as Marxism? One answer lies in the occasional statements by Marx that suggest that Russia, due to its unique position in Europe, might have a “special path” to communism. There are several reasons why, in my view these statements by Marx do not support the actions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. First, it would be a mistake to stack a few random comments by Marx against the thrust of his systematic writings. Second, in the most relevant of these comments, Marx is not discussing the possibility that Russia could be ripe for a working class-led socialist revolution. Quite the contrary, Marx viewed Russia as an overwhelmingly peasant country with a virtually non-existent modern working class. What he noted was the unique communal traditions that existed among the Russian peasantry. In light of this communal tradition, Marx suggested that, in concert with a worldwide socialist revolution, Russia’s peasants might be able to skip over a capitalist stage of development and move directly to a “Communist communal peasant society.” In other words, Marx was speaking of a form of uniquely Russian peasant communalism that might survive and grow in an otherwise socialist world. Working class-led socialist revolution in Russian workers did not even figure remotely into Marx’s thinking.


A second line of thought is more complicated. Leon Trotsky, writing in the midst of the 1905 Russian Revolution, pointed to the extremely weak nature of the Russian bourgeoisie and posited that, since this bourgeoisie could not/would not carry out its “bourgeois-democratic” tasks, this job would fall to the revolutionary Russian proletariat. Further, once such a working class-led revolution had begun, in certain circumstances it might be possible to continue it directly through the “bourgeois stage” to a “socialist stage.” Hence, the phrase “Permanent Revolution.” Trotsky said that if the Russian revolution “sparked” a world revolution,” thereby providing the “material base” for socialism in Russia, the revolution could move from the bourgeois stage directly to the socialist stage. Lenin rejected Trotsky’s view as un-Marxist until World War I had broken out in 1914. Sometime between August 1914 and April 1917, Lenin recognized: 1) that war had created potentially revolutionary conditions in Europe (including Russia); and, 2) that the soviets (councils or committees) created by Russian workers in the midst of the February Revolution, then by soldiers, sailors and peasants in the revolution’s aftermath, provided an alternative form of government, radically different from typical (bourgeois) parliaments. In these circumstances, he changed his views on the possibility of a



working class-led socialist revolution in Russia. Able to return to Russia from exile in Switzerland, Lenin unveiled his famous April Theses upon arrival at Russia's Finland Station. In this short, enumerated speech, he called on the Bolsheviks to take steps to prepare for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. Explicit in the April Theses was the need for the class-conscious Russian workers, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, to overthrow the capitalist Provisional Government and establish a government of the "workers and poor peasants." Socialist revolution was now on the agenda in Russia. Again, we need to challenge ourselves to ask whether Lenin's new outlook, and the subsequent course of his and the Bolsheviks actions in the summer/fall of 1917 through to the consolidation of the Bolshevik regime by the time of Lenin's death in 1924, is fundamentally contrary to the essence of Marxism. Marx repeatedly emphasized that socialism would result from the activities of a well-developed, highly conscious, independent, self-acting working class movement that makes up the immense majority of the population and acts as the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority. No such thing existed in Russia in 1917.

The third line of thought to explore is based on my own analysis and conclusion that it is almost impossible to overestimate the transformative change brought on by the 20th century, a century some historians have defined as beginning in 1914, with the outbreak of World War One. The Great War, as it was known at the time, was a cataclysmic event, one with an impact on the people and societies who experienced it that is difficult to fully appreciate. That impact begins, of course, with the war's unprecedented level and scope of death and destruction. Beyond this, the war, both during and after, resulted in the dislocation of millions of people, either as refugees fleeing war-torn areas and the raping and pillaging armies during the war, or as a result of redrawn national boundaries. By the war's end, four empires had collapsed—the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, The Russian Empire, and the German Reich—and the British Empire was launched on its downward trajectory. In addition, as we know, there were two revolutions in Russia, as well as short-lived, aborted or failed revolutions in Germany, Hungary and elsewhere. Beyond these straightforward facts, it is important to emphasize the devastating impact the war had on people's basic outlook. As the 19th century, a century of maturing bourgeois capitalism, drew to a close, the predominant worldview was one of profound optimism: humanity was making virtually uninterrupted progress toward a better future based on the unending miracles and wonders of science and technology. Anything was possible to achieve, and most commentators, philosophers, writers, pundits, scientists and politicians believed that it would be achieved. Including Marx. The Great War shattered these illusions. Optimism was replaced by deep pessimism, even profound cynicism. Technology had proved itself a monster; killing had never taken place on such a scale, with such brutal efficiency. War had lost all glory; governments had lost all credibility, and in the chaos and dislocation (economic, social and political) of war-torn Europe, bourgeois (parliamentary) democracy seemed incapable of addressing people's fundamental needs. In this context, radical solutions grew more attractive and, as we know, radical extremists came to power in many countries: Russia (Bolshevism); Italy (Fascism); Germany (Nazism); Spain (Fascism/authoritarianism); along with authoritarian or semi-fascist governments in other countries. These regimes proceeded to profoundly alter the nature of the modern state and, of course, played key roles in taking the world into an even more devastating Second World War.

The vastly different economic, political and social conditions of post-WW I Europe, and the game-changing political options and choices these conditions presented, offer an illuminating lens through which to view the theory and practice




of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and the relationship of that theory and practice to Marxism. The war mobilized tens of millions of common citizens in a way no war had ever done before. Elite, professional armies were replaced by mass conscription. Incredibly large percentages of the young (and not so young) male population were drafted into these armies; tens of millions of other citizens were mobilized on the “home front.” Not only did this instill in the common citizenry a notion of newly-found rights—political rights, workers’ rights, women’s rights, national rights—but it also meant that the masses would be players on the political stage as never before. Thus, it is no accident that the distinctly 20th century phenomenon of fascism, used broadly to include the movements mobilized by both Mussolini and Hitler, makes its appearance in a post-WW I context. Fascism is not merely dictatorship; after all, kings, tsars and Kaisers were dictators for the most part. Rather, if fascism has a single, defining feature it is that it involves the organization and mobilization of a mass movement to bring its leader and ideology to power. Black Shirts, Brown Shirts, Storm Troopers, Squadristi, along with pageantry and propaganda via mass media—these are the hallmarks of Mussolini’s Fascism and Hitler’s Nazism. Their programs were designed to appeal to the masses; The word “Nazi,” after all, is the abbreviation of Nationalsozialiste (national socialist), and both Mussolini and Hitler claimed their movements stood for a “third way,” an alternative to both capitalism and socialism.

If we recognize that the 20th century path to power for non-traditional elites (people who were not industrialists, bankers, or their political representatives) lay through the masses, we have some greater context for why left-wing movements, including Leninists, Stalinists, Maoists, and Fidelistas, adopted a program with “mass appeal.” And what better program than Marxism? After all, Marx issued one of the most compelling calls ever for the toiling masses to rise up and take power into their own hands. Thus, I argue that we should give greater consideration than Ron does to the proposition that determined middle class intellectuals, with a burning desire to “make history,” dressed their ambitions and actions in a necessary and effective set of clothing. These individuals were “substitutionist” in every sense of the word: No bourgeoisie sufficiently developed and strong enough to carry out the democratic-capitalist revolution? Don’t worry, we’ve got it covered. No working class sufficiently developed and strong enough to carry out the socialist revolution? Don’t worry; we’ve got it covered. No democratic means available to carry out our “mission?” Don’t worry; we’ve got that covered too.

The strongest argument against this view lies in the following question: What in Marxism enabled all of these leaders/movements to credibly claim that they were Marxists? Or, as Ron puts it, “...is there something in Marxism that makes it prone to being ‘misinterpreted’...that leads, in other words, to totalitarianism?” (*Tyranny of Theory*, p. 20). In other words, Ron and others may accept some or all of the above, but still argue that it is precisely Marxism that gave Lenin and the Bolsheviks (and those that followed them) the specific theoretical and programmatic tools for their totalitarian actions.

Since Marx claimed that he recognized the “historic march of events,” Marxism provides perfect “cover” for pretty much anything, including, as a case in point, the brutal and dictatorial actions the Bolsheviks directed against those who stood in the way of their all-knowing regime. There is logic to this argument, and I do not seek to prove Ron wrong here. Rather, I have tried to offer certain context—from Marx’s own writings, from the views and actions of Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders, from the particular context of the period in which “Marxism-Leninism” came to power—to suggest that it



is worth further considering the possibility that Marxism did not lead to totalitarianism, but rather that it was hijacked, and then thoroughly distorted and misused by fanatical totalitarians who were seeking power.

As one example of this alternative view, let's look briefly at Ron's argument in *A Look at Leninism* that Lenin was a state capitalist because, among other things, he was an "orthodox Marxist" for much of his life. Ron argues that, since Lenin's Marxism led him to believe that Russia had to pass through a significant bourgeois-democratic, capitalist, phase of development, once in power he wound up acting like a...bourgeois capitalist. I think Ron's argument here stands matters on its head. Marx was right about Russia; it did not have a working class that could, in its own name and in its own interests, shape a democratic, libertarian, socialist, future. Lenin broke with Marxism and, with Trotsky, came up with many forceful arguments explaining why the Bolsheviks were leading a revolution "of and for the workers," or alternatively, "of an alliance of the workers and poor peasants." At times, this revolution was said to be going over immediately to socialism; at other times, it was passing through a short transitional stage of further capitalist development that would then lead to socialism. In the few short years (1917-24) that Lenin was alive following the October overthrow of the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks issued "socialist" decrees, then drew back from some of them, then turned to what they termed "War Communism" (during the Civil War, 1918-21). Following the disasters of War Communism, the Bolsheviks veered yet again in a sharply different direction, and, at Lenin's insistence, adopted the "New Economic Policy," a radical departure from War Communism that injected significant elements of capitalism into the Soviet economy. Whether Lenin believed each of these variants was correct, from 1917-1924, Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders consolidated their single-party rule, carrying out the ruthless suppression of any alternative parties or tendencies, claiming that the mistaken views of these groups made them "class enemies."

To restate my underlying contention: Marx's "scientist" philosophy is not sufficient by itself to label Marxism totalitarian. Such a conclusion rests in some significant measure on the subsequent actions of people who claimed that they were Marxists. If one sees these actions as "Marxist," then it becomes hard, if not impossible, to argue with the contention that Marxism is totalitarian. If, on the other hand, one sees the 20th century left-wing movements as having abandoned Marxism, then the conversation becomes a more open one.

Was Marx an advocate of a dictatorial state? (Well, isn't that what the dictatorship of the proletariat is?)

Two chapters of *The Tyranny of Theory* are devoted to a discussion of the Marxist concept of the state. In the first chapter, Ron discusses the views of Marx and Engels toward the state, both under capitalism and under socialism. He then presents his own analysis of the state. In the second chapter, Ron addresses the specific issue of the working class taking over the state, and places this concept in the context of his discussion of the state in general in the prior chapter. The issue of the state is complex, and involves the following three questions: 1) What is the state, and what is Marx's view of the state? 2) What should the role of the state be under socialism, and what is Marx's view of this role? 3) What did Marx mean (or not mean) by the term, "the dictatorship of the proletariat"?

At the outset of Chapter 2 ("The Marxist Theory of the State"), Ron makes clear the importance he attaches to Marxism's attitude toward the state: "...a given ideology may be totalitarian in its underlying logic, but if it lacks a focus on using the state as a means of transforming society, that is, of imposing its ideas, its totalitarianism will remain implicit." (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 29)

It is worth noting that in this passage, Ron has made one of my central arguments: he writes that the “underlying logic” of an ideology (in this case, Marxism) may be totalitarian, but if it lacks a practical form, that is, “a means of imposing its ideas”, its totalitarianism will remain, in Ron’s words, “implicit.” This is precisely my view of the philosophic totalitarianism of Marxism—it was implicit until it was made explicit by forces that had little in common with Marxism, other than their claim to “represent the masses.”

That said, let us turn to the issue of the state more broadly. Ron begins his discussion with a concise summary of Marx and Engels’ views of the state under capitalism, which I paraphrase here:

- The state grows out of conditions of “relative scarcity.”
- The state is controlled by the economically dominant class, allowing it to control and exploit other subordinate classes.
- While the state is usually directly controlled by the dominant class, under certain conditions it may be controlled by forces somewhat independent of either the bourgeoisie or the working class.
- The parliamentary democratic republic is the highest form of the state (at the time Marx and Engels were writing), but its democracy is illusory in the sense that the capitalist class dominates the state through its wealth and power.

Ron then puts forward his central tenet:

“...the state in capitalist society is a capitalist institution; its assumptions, structures, procedures, and everything else about it imply, reinforce, and reproduce capitalist relations. The capitalist state does not need to be controlled, directly or indirectly, by the capitalist class for it to serve the interests of that class and to preserve capitalist society as a whole; it does so because the state is at the center of, and is essential to, the entire system.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 42)

At first glance, this might seem like a passage straight out of *The Communist Manifesto*. Not so. Ron is distinguishing his concept of the state from that of Marx and Engels based on the extent to which the state is seen as independent of the capitalist class. Ron maintains that Marx and Engels viewed the state as independent entity, one that the capitalist class controls and uses, but nonetheless remains separate from capitalism itself. Ron offers an alternative view:

“...an essential element of the structure of class society, a kind of skeleton around which ruling class and society as a whole are organized; ruling class and state (and a web of hierarchies) are thoroughly intertwined. They are part of—in a sense, the apex of—a more or less unified hierarchical, authoritarian structure that dominates society.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p.41)

I find the difference between these two views, at least at this level, to be abstract, and without significance. We can agree that the capitalist state is overwhelmingly oppressive; whether a non-capitalist state, that is to say a state that not owned and controlled by the capitalist class and used as a tool for its collective rule, would of necessity be oppressive simply because it is “the state” depends on what type of state it is, how it is organized, how it is controlled, and what role it plays.

Ron sees it differently:

“...the Marxist view that the state is an instrument of the ruling class implies that the state can be taken over by the working class, and utilized for its own purposes.” (*The Tyranny of Theory*, p. 43)

However, Marx did not argue that the capitalist state could simply be taken over and used by the working class for its own purposes. Ron acknowledges that Marx and Engels often insisted that the “...proletariat cannot simply take over the existing state machine...” (*Tyranny*, p. 43)

He further acknowledges that, following the experience of the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx and Engels wrote that the failure of the Commune was that it did not “smash” the “existing state apparatus,” that is, it failed to recognize that the ruling capitalist class had built into the very fiber of the state, institutions and mechanisms that would undermine an egalitarian, working class majority-

based socialist democracy. Ron dismisses these clear statements by arguing that “this insistence (by Marx and Engels--RM) does not flow logically from the theory.” (*Tyranny*, p. 43) In other words, other aspects of Marxist theory, not Marx and Engels’ explicit writings on the state, dictate that Marx and Engels must actually have believed that the working class can simply take over and use the capitalist state. I don’t find this convincing.

Ron next argues that Marx and Engels’ view that the state can exist in a form independent of a specifically capitalist state implies that the state could be used to build a form of socialism that the workers do not control, specifically that a minority party might “misuse” the state in the service of building socialism. This argument is not convincing either. Could some minority, led by a party that claims to represent somebody else, use the state to oppress people? Of course it could. More to the point, of course it has. But this is not a telling argument about the nature and role of the state. If a minority seizes power and rules over the majority of people, bad things will happen. One theory of the state or another will not change that fact. If, on the other hand, the working class, as the immense majority, becomes conscious of itself as a class, chooses to end a system of private profit, vast disparity in wealth and power, and reorganize society in the interests of the “all,” it is likely that good things will happen. I do not think that the course—and ultimate success—of this unpredictable, uncharted development will depend on the difference between Ron’s formulations on the nature of the capitalist state and that of Marx and Engels. I do think that the question of how such a “movement of the majority” might reorganize society is important, and that Marx and Engels’ dismissal of this “utopian” reorganization was mistaken. It is a rich discussion on its own terms, and should be pursued. However, in its present form, the discussion suffers from some confusion and distortion, resulting from the fact that the underlying discussion that is taking place is actually over whether any form of state—no matter how defined—is oppressive, and therefore totalitarian. I would prefer to see this discussion in the context of how the majority of people, freed from the dictates of capitalism and the dictatorship of the capitalist class, might organize production, distribution and other essential features of a cooperative, pluralistic society. Where would direct, local planning and activity leave off, and where might regional, national or international cooperation and exchange begin? Is there any role whatsoever for something we might term a government in this process, and to what degree, and in what ways, is a government different than a “state”? Does a state, any state, have certain properties that act apart from anything human beings wish or desire, that is, is a state a living organism, rather than a functional arrangement? These are just a few of the questions that deserve full exploration. Yet, even if we agree that the different formulations on the nature of the state discussed above have less meaning than Ron suggests, we are still left with the fact that Marx and Engels referred to socialism in terms of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In Chapter 3 of *The Tyranny of Theory*, Ron focuses on Marx and Engels’ call for the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” It is hard to think of any more unfortunate words ever written. True, Marx was writing before the advent of modern totalitarianism. The specific form of 20th century dictatorship—fascism and Nazism on the right, and Stalinist “Communism” on the left—were still a half-century away. But the Bourbons, Hapsburgs, Hannovers and Romanovs were certainly autocrats, and even if dictatorial rule through the modern state was still being fashioned, Napoleon had already taken significant steps along that road. Why, then, did Marx and Engels use these words, and what did they mean? Is this evidence that a dictatorial state is inherent to Marxism, or is there another explanation?

As he does throughout the book, Ron presents an accurate summary of Marx and Engels' views on this issue. Ron states that Marx and Engels believed that: 1) The proletariat would conquer political power, and thereby become the ruling class; 2) It would then smash the capitalist state machine and create its own state, the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) This state would be "*unlike other states in history*" (emphasis added) because it would be the instrument of the immense majority to suppress the exploiting minority "in order to do away with exploitation altogether;" and, 4) As this state wrested capital from the bourgeoisie and increased society's productive capacity based on a "common plan," the basis would be laid for the state to "wither away." (*Tyranny*, pp. 55-6) Ron's central argument is that the focus Marx and Engels put on the state, their emphasis on its repressive tasks vis a vis the bourgeoisie, and their vagueness on how the state would eventually wither away, means that "the establishment of extremely repressive, brutal dictatorships by Marxists was not an historical accident but the logical consequence of their worldview." (*Tyranny*, p. 57)

Does this argument hold up, or does it rest to too great a degree on the fact that various social force and leaders, using the Marxist banner, created such states, irrespective of whether Marxist theory necessarily leads to this outcome? In other words, can we separate Marxist theory from the experience of 20th century minority movements that, under an anti-capitalist banner of one form or another, created radical dictatorships that transformed society in their own interests? Since to some degree this becomes a repetitive argument, my sole focus will be to challenge commonly held assumptions about Marx and Engels' use of and views on the phrase, "dictatorship of the proletariat."

Richard Hunt, in the preface to his work, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 1: "Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818-1850"), notes that Marx and Engels used the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" infrequently. More significantly, he locates the use of the term in a particular context, an effort to establish a united front with forces led by Louis Blanqui. Hunt's overall thesis is that "Marx and Engels were neither totalitarians nor garden-variety parliamentary democrats, neither 'Communists' nor 'Social Democrats.'" Hunt argues that what Marx and Engels "envisaged for the future society, from its very beginning, was a kind of participatory democracy organized without any professional leaders or administrators at all, which has nowhere been established in a national government, and which requires some effort of imagination and historical understanding...." (*Political Ideas*, p. xiii-xiv)

Although Marx and Engels used the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a bridge to the Blanquists, they went to great lengths to distinguish the content they give to the phrase from the content intended by the Blanquists. Hunt writes:

"The Blanquist conception of revolution involved a series of grim deductions from the central postulate concerning the political immaturity of the masses. Among these was the necessity of postponing democratic elections until after a temporary educational dictatorship. In diametric opposition to such views...Marx and Engels foresaw a prior maturation of the populace and revolution whose first act would be the establishment of universal suffrage and democratic institutors." (*Political Ideas*, p. 135)

During this period, Engels wrote:

"The working classes will have learned by experience that no lasting benefit whatever can be obtained for them by others, but that

they must obtain it themselves by conquering, first of all political power.” (Quoted from *Political Ideas*, p. 229)

Marx and Engels described a mature, self-conscious, self-acting working class taking political power. Though they used the term “dictatorship” (infrequently, and referring to the rule of a class), the argument here is that this use had nothing in common with the present-day conception of one-man, committee or minority party rule. Hunt argues that Marx and Engels fully retained the meaning of a class dictatorship described above, and in no sense adopted the Blanquist notion of the “educational dictatorship” of a minority. Hunt points out that Marx and Engels infrequently linked the term “dictatorship” to the working class (only a total of sixteen times, in eleven separate writings). (*Political Ideas*, p. 297) Not only were these uses infrequent, but according to a study by Hal Draper, they are found in three distinct periods: 1850-52; 1871-75; and 1890-93. Hunt argues the significance of this as follows:

“During the first two periods, and at no other time, Marx and Engels worked in united fronts with the Blanquists. This double coincidence can scarcely be accidental, and we will see that the final uses in the nineties fall into line too as a ‘sort of echo of 1875.’” (*Political Ideas*, p. 297)

Referencing Draper’s study, Hunt points out that over the course of the two full decades between the period of the Communist League and that of the second collaboration with Blanqui (the period following the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871), Marx and Engels never used the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The phrase is only used again in the aftermath of the suppression and is used in the direct context of a dialogue with Blanqui and his followers. Hunt quotes Engels as writing in 1874:

“Blanqui is essentially a political revolutionist. He is a socialist only through his sympathy with the sufferings of the people, but he has neither a socialist theory nor any concrete practical proposals for social redress. *In his political activity, he was mainly a ‘man of action,’ who believed that a small, well organized minority, by attempting a revolutionary surprise attack at the right moment, could raise forth the masses of the people with a few initial successes and thus make a successful revolution. . . . From Blanqui’s conception that every revolution is a surprise attack by a small revolutionary minority, there follows of itself the necessity for a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This would be, to be sure, a dictatorship not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small number who have made the surprise attack, and who are themselves previously organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals.*” (Quoted from *Political Ideas*, p. 310-11, emphasis added)

Engels’ rejection of a minority seizure of power, carried out by a party dominated by an elite group of leaders could not be more clearly stated. Moreover, it would be easy to substitute the name V.I. Lenin for Blanqui, and Bolsheviks for Blanquists in the highlighted portion of the passage. This is so because Lenin and the Bolsheviks were Blanquist, not Marxists.

Conclusion

It is fair to argue that this article has made too many excuses for Marxism. In the end, there is no way to prove that Marxism is not the

cause of the horrors that have been done in its name. As I said at the outset, the record of self-proclaimed Marxists presents the strongest possible indictment of Marxism itself. Nonetheless, I have tried to show that there are compelling reasons to reject the idea that there is fundamental continuity between Marxist theory and the theory and practice of Leninism (and Stalinism/Maoism/Castro-ism). Rather, it is more compelling to recognize the sharp break with Marxism that is embodied in the various 20th century movements that have mobilized masses for elitist, minority-based seizures of power, and that, of necessity (and sometimes by design) have resulted in dictatorial societies. These movements, left and right, are a hallmark of the post-World War I 20th century. The defining feature of these movements is their mobilization of masses to bring to power a radical minority, armed with a transformational program and led by a party/individual prepared to use dictatorial methods to impose that program on society. This is widely accepted as the defining feature of fascism in its varying forms. Our collective blindness—that is to say, the blindness of the left, including this writer—has resulted in a profound failure to recognize the extent to which Lenin’s Bolshevism, Mussolini’s Fascism, and Hitler’s Nazism are, in many respects, one and the same. If this is so, we need to ask if their roots are in 19th century ideologies (Marxism), or in unique and distinct 20th century realities.

Of course the culprit may be Marxism, if one believes that Marxism, in its essence—root and branch—is totalitarian. Ron believes this, based on his assessment of Marxism as a philosophy as well as on his assessment of Marxism’s attitude to the state. At the outset, I conceded that a worldview (philosophy) that believes it alone represents “truth,” thinks it knows the “march of history,” and posits that the outcomes it stands for as “inevitable” is, philosophically, totalitarian. Here, I simply re-state my belief that the 19th century context in which Marx and Engels wrote, combined with the overwhelmingly libertarian, self-actualizing and democratic underpinnings of their outlook, raise significant questions about whether what I have called the “scientism” of Marx and Engels is too much of an abstraction, by itself, to damn the whole.

Regarding the issue of the state: I feel the discussion initiated by Ron is an important starting point, but that it is incomplete in the extreme. Marx and Engels said the state was a tool of the capitalist class. Ron says the state is part and parcel of capitalism... and hangs Marxism on that difference. The fact is that there was a state before capitalism, just not a modern state. And the state under capitalism has been organized and controlled in vastly different ways—supposedly democratically by the people (“bourgeois democracy” in Marxist terms), more directly by the bourgeoisie in less democratic instances, and “on behalf of the bourgeoisie” in more extreme situations, right and left. In my view, this discussion would take on greater meaning if it centered on how a post-capitalist society—majority governed, democratically inspired, locally controlled, equality-driven, liberationist in its soul—might organize itself. Those of the anarchist tradition find fault with Marx on this score. Yet, those skeptical of the anarchist tradition are correct, in my view, to think that there has been a notable absence of compelling answers to this question from anarchist thought.

