

Does A “Wide Gulf” Really Separate Anarchism from Marxism?

By Postliterate

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Lenin infamously wrote in his 1905 essay, *Socialism and Anarchism*:

“A wide gulf separates socialism from anarchism...”

At the time, what Lenin meant was that anarchism’s “*individualistic ideal*” [1] and its focus on merely hierarchy and not class in particular, made it counter to the ideas of Marxism. Some maintain that because anarchism is about merely rejection of hierarchy, it has no inherent quell with markets or even capital per se. Others maintain that anarchism taking large issue to the idea of central planning as a tool for liberation makes it unable to overcome capital. An article by the Marxist Tai Yang Yu called *Beware the “Inroads” Strategy and Anarchism* → <https://taiyangyu.medium.com/beware-the-inroads-strategy-and-anarchism-2c7aa1e07f84> saw this in particular as an example of the “*wide gulf*” separating Marxist socialism and anarchism:

“This means it is conceivable in the anarchist worldview for there to be public ownership of the means of production, yet still maintaining the existence of a class society.”

However, what I will attempt in this article is to bridge this supposed wide gulf. Specifically, I wish to demonstrate how a particular reading of Marx’s works, namely through value-form theory, can be paralleled quite easily

with the anarchist-communist ideals of Kropotkin, Malatesta, or even Goldman. While it is true that anarchists and Marxists often come from very different theoretical frameworks, with Marxists adopting communism as the final reconciliation of history, and with anarchists adopting it simply for freedom in the here and now, I see no reason why a particular reading of Marx (both as a new affirmation and a well-needed critique of him) shouldn't allow the imminent revolutionary projects of the two to coincide, and allow the two to reflect off of each other.

The essay is divided in three parts: first, on a particular reading of Marxism (value-form theory), second, on a particular reading of anarchism (Kropotkinian anarchist-communism), and third, on the attempt to liaise the two.

Value-Form Theory

This is not the first time → <https://diadelics.medium.com/the-end-of-history-communism-29290f4b985> I've discussed value-form theory, but hopefully it won't be my last. Value-form theory can be summed up in a quote from *Capital Vol. 1*:

“The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character.” (pg. 174, Fowkes' translation)

The idea of the value-form is much more encompassing than the commodity-form. The critique of the commodity-form has been (and still is) the most common reading of Marx; it is the reading which demonstrates the exploitation inherent in commodity production, from class conflict to anarchies of production. But it is also the reading which leads many to believe that Marx's project was primarily the creation of a society in which, as he wrote in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*:

“the individual producer gets back from society... exactly what he has given to it.”

In short, it is the justification for planned economies, and for the replacement of the money-commodity with “labor tokens.” Yet this is merely lower-stage communism, a society “*still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.*” The idea of labor in exchange for tokens which can then be exchanged for products was for Marx,

“Clearly, the same principle [...] at work here as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is an exchange of equal values.”

Both Engels and Marx would speak in high terms of the ability of a socialist society to accurately calculate endless labor-times for every product at immense speeds, and this tradition carries long into today, with Cockshott and Cottrell’s *Towards a New Socialism*, which although a marvel in imagination, still carries this bourgeois birthmark. This, too, was Baudrillard’s critique of Marxism in his *The Mirror of Production*: that Marxism, inheriting the extreme productivist language of capitalism, proves unable to free itself from the logic of capital, and that although communism is the culmination of history, as primitivism was its beginning, the productivism of Marx and Engels turned out in service of modernism’s fetish about progress and utility, rather than the end of it.

But through value-form theory, we see that Marx’s critique of capital is not merely of the fact that it renders production for an alien entity, one easily hijacked by the class struggle, but rather of the fact that production, as a separable task, exists at all. Indeed, if Marx’s critique was merely about exploitation within the productive process, he would have expanded little from Ricardo; it is the theory of the value-form which truly achieves Marx’s project in *Capital* of going beyond the previous political econo-

mists from which Marx inherited. Marx did not realize the Labor Theory of Value because he wanted society to be run exactly on its principles — that would be nothing short of bourgeois. [2]

In truth, it is only production for its own sake that can free itself from the value-form, the foundation of capitalist society. The retention of production needed for the acquisition of a wage in lower-stage communism is merely the continuation of the process of estranged labor on new principles; it should come as no surprise that the hijacking of this process by political planners in many past socialist experiments played out similarly to the development of class society, as Cockshott and Cottrell wrote in their introduction to *Towards a New Socialism*:

“Starting from the question of how the extraction of a surplus product was possible in a planned but undemocratic system, the cult of Stalin’s personality appears not as a mere ‘aberration’, but as an integral feature of the system. Stalin: at once the inspirational leader, making up in determination and grit for what he lacked in eloquence and capable of promoting a sense of participation in a great historic endeavour, and the stern and utterly ruthless liquidator of any who failed so to participate (and many others besides). The Stalin cult, with both its populist and its terrible aspects, was central to the Soviet mode of extraction of a surplus product.” (pg. 5)

Another point to be made is the completely irreconcilable nature of the lower and higher stages of communist society. Not only does the lower-stage simply reproduce capitalist relations in an act of revolutionary regression, but there exists no link between this stage and the end of the value-form, neither in Marx’s writings nor even in personal thought outside of Marx. It could be argued that it seems that these were not two necessary stages, but rather that the first was merely higher-stage communism as it would emerge early out of bourgeois relations — but how can it be possible that the lower should naturally slide into the higher? Engels made it clear that a communist society can only sketch out the beginnings of its

system and then attempt to parse general trends overtime, but that the final stage cannot be understood for sure until it arrives. Yet Marx makes no explanation on this. A society in which non-scarce goods are available to all, but in which scarce goods must be exchanged for labor tokens, cannot naturally just become a society in which all goods, scarce or not, are available to all. A society of labor tokens would simply reproduce the value-form until a new revolution would be needed to overturn it for higher-stage communism.

It is also important to understand that because if labor is the category of a society of the value-form, so too is the class of laborers — the proletariat — nothing more than a class formed by capitalist relations. In this sense,

“...the wish to decouple Marxian critique from the class struggle — appears, no matter how heretical, to offer a plausible solution to the problem of the failure of the working class to perform its ‘historic task’: through the idea that the workers’ movement was *never* really revolutionary in itself, and that the really revolutionary perspective lay simply in Marx’s ‘esoteric’ vision [value-form theory].”

— Endnotes, *Communisation and Value-Form Theory* → <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/communisation-and-value-form-theory>.

The proletariat is as indebted to capitalist relations as the bourgeois, and although it is only from this class — the exploited class — that the system can be abolished, the notion of some inherent class consciousness in this class is nothing less than strange. They would need to develop what the SI simply calls a “revolutionary consciousness” the same as anyone else, and exclusion of class traitors would seem strange also.

Furthermore, simply emphasizing the proletariat in society, i.e. the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” cannot overturn the value-form either. The same goes for the establishment of what the *Théorie Communiste* calls “republics of labor.” The “proletarian society,” the society of labor and its flourishing, etc. are all wholly unable to free themselves from bourgeois

categories. Their central mistake is in believing that the hell of capital is that it takes labor and turns it against us, rather than constructing labor altogether; their other mistake is in viewing capitalist society as predominantly a power struggle between two opposing and unequal classes, rather than simply a product of a more foundational relation: the value-form. The end of class is not the domination of society by bourgeois categories, but the end of the value-form in the here and now.

In this sense, capitalist relations continue as long as we keep constructing half-fixes to the value-form. It can only be escaped by direct and unceasing effort for its death immediately. While Engels was correct that no society could do so alone and that it is only a global revolution which can afford to escape the necessities of the global market, the attempt to construct some new republic of labor for global communist society is regressive and counter-intuitive.

Anarchist-Communism

Anarchism began as a pro-market ideal in the writings of Proudhon. Feuding extensively with Marx, Proudhon insisted that his conception of a market economy based on use and occupancy rights, rather than private property as an uncompromising right, could provide a free society void of exploitation. In his view, exchange between producers would be kept in check by the natural flow of entropy, or what is today called the restriction of the “diseconomies of scale,” whereby overly large firms would quickly have to become violent to retain their property, and in absence of a state, would simply be expropriated by poor masses who need it.

Unfortunately, Marx never seriously engaged with this position, and *The Poverty of Philosophy* remains nothing more than a mild frustration for followers of Proudhon. However, we can conclude that the historic emergence of private property and of class could have easily emerged from out of true “free market” models like Proudhons’, from out of some primitive exchange that grew in size and complexity overtime. Suffice it to say that it

was Marx's critique of capital beginning with the contradiction between use-values and exchange-values embodied in the commodity, with the latter appearing in capitalist society in particular, that provided the deep foundation for the exploitation seen today.

But market anarchism is not even the dominant anarchism today. Rather, the gift economies of Kropotkin or Goldman, or the ideas of "anarcho-communism," emergent first in Bakunin, appear as the mainstream anarchist movement. This section will deal in particular with Kropotkin, as his ideas of evolutionary human biology, zoology, etc. represent closest and clearest the type of "human nature" which Marx, too, understood so well.

In the Kropotkinian view (particularly the opinions expressed in his most-known *The Conquest of Bread*), humans have amassed great wealth and innovation over the years, but this is paralleled with uneven distribution of such wealth. From this view, human production and innovation (i.e. the accumulation of wealth) is viewed as natural and therefore apolitical, and it is the *distribution* of wealth that has determined the politics of societies across time. Kropotkin extends this to all of humanity's creations, saying that none of it, from bridges and roads to machine inventions to philosophical ideas to poetic writings, can be said to be anything but public property, derived from the labor of all in some way and from nature, and therefore belonging to all. From here, the attempt to privatize it, to legally enforce patents, territorial boundaries, and private property in general, has been nothing short of robbery, resulting in the abject poverty still seen in staggering numbers across the globe.

The other crucial idea in Kropotkin, seen best in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, is the simple notion that it was not competition that gave us wealth or invention, but mutual aid. For Kropotkin, mutual aid is the "hidden factor" behind capitalism's attempts to turn all spheres of life into individualistic competition; i.e., behind every "competitive" firm are hundreds

or thousands who have to work together — naturally engaging in ideas of reciprocity — to make any of it work, and conversely, pure examples of competition have been “always injurious to the species.” [3]

While undoubtedly Marx would have argued bitterly with Kropotkin as he did with Bakunin, it was largely Marx’s cold acceptance of the mainstream understanding of his political economy, and his love for the working class as revolutionary subject that held him back the most. [4] Furthermore, if we are not to become nothing less than religious fanatics, we must know where to see Marx’s theories go wrong and critique them, even as Marxists.

This much aside, the parallels between Kropotkin’s man who struggles throughout time but is forever exploited, and Marx’s fruits of labor which persist as necessities throughout time but are forever alienated with exchange-values and estranged labor, are not hard to see.

The only contradiction (albeit minor) among Marxists of value-form theory (aka “communizers”) and anarchists have been that the latter often retain rhetoric about the “necessity of labor” and the sort — Kropotkin certainly does so in *The Conquest of Bread*. However, not only has today that changed as automation has made “work is shit, abolish it!” a common slogan among anarchists, but in general the theory of the value-form naturally lends itself to an understanding of the struggle towards communism that is much closer to the idea of the “anarchist-communists” than to the Leninists (and their myriad derivatives) or even the Councilists. Whether or not communizers decide to side with the anarchists is not of my immediate concern, but what is an attempt to honestly bridge the two in light of a long history of misunderstanding and distancing.

Bridging the Gulf

The value-form cannot be overcome with new class actions, new exchanges, new labor, or new economic calculations; they must all be overcome as soon as possible. The goal is not some new owners of the means of

production, but no particular owners at all. Only through direct expropriation of all and instantaneous replacement by a gift economy can the value-form be exploded at all, not through some half-patchwork.

“The revolution is communisation; it does not have communism as a project and result, but as its very content.” (Roland Simon, *The Present Moment*)

And yet we find these same ideas, and even similar wordings, in the writings of Kropotkin and those of his camp.

“Dictatorship of the proletariat would signify the dictatorship of everybody, which is to say, it would be a dictatorship no longer, just as government by everybody is no longer a government in the authoritarian, historical and practical sense of the word. But the real supporters of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ do not take that line...” (Malatesta, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*)

At this point it almost becomes clear why so many Marxists rely on caricatures and misunderstandings of anarchism in order to invent their “wide gulf.” Indeed from *The Poverty of Philosophy* to *On Authority to Socialism and Anarchism* to *Anarchism or Socialism?* to even the present misconceptions that persist of it in Žižek, for example, there have been a slew of essentially lies about what anarchism is or how it could relate to Marxism. The same may be true in the other direction as well, I suppose.

[1] This essay will not deal with this brutal misconception about anarchism in particular, but suffice it to say that the mainstream anarchist movement’s understanding of the individual can best be summed in a quote by Malatesta in *Mutual Aid*:

“The strongest man is the one who is the least isolated; the most independent is the one who has most contacts and friendships and thereby a wider field for choosing his close collaborators; the most developed

man is he who best can, and knows how to, utilise Man's common inheritance as well as the achievements of his contemporaries."

See also my essay *Marxism and the Individual: A Progressive and Reactionary View* → <https://medium.com/@postliterate/marxism-and-the-individual-a-progressive-and-reactionary-view-f3cf8dc09d3b>.

[2] Funnily enough, in the first section in the GIK's *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, it grapples with the issue of Engels, regarding socialism, both saying that,

"The proletariat conquers state power and as its first act proclaims the means of production to be state property." (pg. 362)

in *Anti-Dühring* and then later stating in *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* (agreeing with Marx here):

"the social foundation of communism [is] an 'Association of Free and Equal Producers'."

[3] These ideas, as utopian as they sound, have come to be supported by figures such as Elinor Ostrom (as well as her husband's work), who developed a holistic theory on the development and sustaining of common-pool resource institutions (CPRs) which transcend both state intervention and market logic, winning a Nobel Prize for doing so. See *Governing the Commons*.

[4] Marxist speaker John Molyneux noted that Marx's discovery of the "revolutionary potential of the working class" was among the first political theories Marx ever fathomed, before his in-depth work on political economy.