

Read On Authority

How Engels Mocked at the Whole World

“On Authority” 150 Years Later

One of the most frequently cited Marxist essays against anarchism is Friedrich Engels’ [“On Authority,”](#) published in December 1873. Especially among new Marxists, the text is presented as the definitive refutation of anarchist theory, remaining just as powerful and relevant today as it was 150 years ago.

It’s not hard to see why this essay is popular. It is exceptionally short, being only four pages long, and is not overly technical. It is full of pithy remarks that are easily quotable and biting. Friedrich Engels also remains as one of the most influential figures for the development of Marxist thought, second only to Marx himself, being one of his closest confidants. “On Authority” is frequently recommended as one of the very first essays new Marxists should read.

“On Authority” also enjoys a somewhat prestigious place in Marxist history. Vladimir Lenin used it as one of his main theoretical sources for rebuking anarchism in *State and Revolution*, another work new Marxists will frequently start with. In many ways, it set the basic framework for how Marxists are meant to respond to anarchist theory.

“On Authority” can also be useful for some groups for more duplicitous reasons. Engels refers to the non-anarchist position as “authoritarianism,” and can be read as a defense of authority, it did not endorse authority in any form it happens to take. Indeed, there are many forms the Marxists would oppose, such as the authority of the capitalists. In Engels’ framework, even the most democratic government would be considered authoritarian. Contrast this with the more narrow meaning given to “authoritarianism” today, which is typically used to identify especially anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic forms of government like autocracies or military juntas. Given that many self-described Marxist states have been accused of being authoritarian in this more modern sense, “On Authority” provides a useful rhetorical defense of the word authority that can be spun for propagandistic purposes, even if it’s not really the argument Engels is making.

“On Authority” therefore tends to attract both good faith actors looking to learn more about Marxism or critiques of anarchism as well as bad faith actors who do not particularly care to critically examine what Engels said.

However, “On Authority” tends to remain a fairly “beginner” text. For those more familiar with Marxist theory, it might be dusted off every once in a while when an anarchist is encountered in the wild, but it is rarely engaged at anything close to a deep or meaningful level. Among those who do, opinions of it tend to be much more negative, seeing it not only as a misrepresentation

of anarchist thought, but also generally out of place within Marxism itself. For example, Robert C. Tucker, the Marxist historian and editor for *The Marx-Engels Reader*, wrote this in his introduction to “On Authority”:

In this article written in October, 1872, and originally published in Italian in the collection *Almanacco Repubblicano* for 1874, Engels continued the debate against the Anarchists. Of special note is his argument that revolution itself is “certainly the most authoritarian thing there is,” and his further contention, which seems inconsistent with some of what we know of the thinking of Marx, that machine industry is inherently “despotic” in relation to the workers.¹

Tucker is right to call out this inconsistency. Typically whenever Marx or even Engels himself describes machine industry as despotic, it is in connection to capitalism, as the worker is turned into a “mere appendage” of the machine. Socialism, the emancipation of the proletariat, was meant to fix this type of relation. Against this, Engels’ comments about its inherent and eternal despotism within “On Authority” stick out. This is the type of issue a more critical Marxist scholar might be able to identify, but one which is likely to go unnoticed by people just learning about Marxist thought, which is precisely the typical audience for the essay.

For those more familiar with anarchist theory, Engels’ objections stand out as particularly unimpressive, even to anarchist theory of the time, and much less to what developed after it. Anarchism has had more than 150 years to formulate a response to these basic objections, which tend to be ignored when “On Authority” is considered as the “definitive” rebuke. This can be seen in Simoun Magsalin’s [“The Question of a Stagnant Marxism: Is Marxism Exegetical or Scientific?”](#):

“On Authority” is clearly one of Engels’ weakest texts where the clarity and sharpness of his other texts like *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* are markedly absent. Yet terminally online “Marxists” constantly cite it again and again and appeal to its authority as if it is *a priori* correct simply because Engels wrote it. Any anarchist worth their black banners can demolish the weak foundations on which Engels built “On Authority” and no Marxist who has done the work of engaging with both the Marxist and anarchist canons would cite this weakest of Engels’ texts in critiquing anarchism.

Renato Flores concurs writes in [“Anarchism and the Necessity of a Modern Critique,”](#) recognizing the need for critiques of anarchism to be updated over a century later:

On the year of the 100th anniversary of Kronstadt, and a year where anarchists just love to critique Lenin as a bloody counterrevolutionary, we have to recognize that an up-to-date and thorough piece on the failures of anarchism still has to be written. The two texts which we usually use to counteract anarchist tendencies are “On Authority” and “State and Revolution”, but I think they are ultimately unconvincing,

¹ Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 730

especially compared to something like “the tyranny of structurelessness” which points much better at anarchism’s weaknesses.

I intend to critique “On Authority” on both fronts, not only showing how it misrepresents or fails to engage with anarchist theory, but also how it fails as a Marxist text. I maintain that Engels’ argument in “On Authority” is wildly out of line with the rest of Marxist theory if taken at face value, and can only be salvaged if his critique of anarchism is given up.

To do this properly, I will need to explain much of Marxist and anarchist theory in process. My hope is to utilize sources prior to the publication of “On Authority” to see what Engels is responding to. However, the birth of the anarchist movement is often marked by the split within the First International at the Hague Congress of September 1872. “On Authority” was likely written in October of that same year, a mere month later. Most major anarchist texts were written after Engels’ essay then, especially ones that were translated and which I have access to. Anarchist works written prior to the Hague Congress also, naturally, represent only the first attempts at expressing an idea which would be refined and clarified with time.

My strategy will be to point to several anarchist works written prior to “On Authority,” laying the groundwork of anarchist thought, and then connecting this to essays written after it, especially essays close to its publication within the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Establishing this continuity and the clarity that comes with it, I will be able to demonstrate that not only does Engels’ argument fail to address modern anarchist theory, but was even a misrepresentation of anarchism at the time it was written. Engels did not engage with anarchist theory as it actually existed, but as he imagined it should exist based on his own prejudices, and then critiqued it as contradicting itself for not matching his imagination.

I also hope that, by citing, quoting, and analyzing many different works of anarchist theory, readers who might otherwise be unfamiliar with anarchism can learn more about it and find interesting texts where they can look into it more.

Briefer refutations of “On Authority” have been published plenty of times in the 150 years since its publication, exposing these central issues. Readers looking for that might do better looking at a source like [Section H.4 of the Anarchist FAQ](#), Piper Tompkin’s “[‘On Authority’ Revisited](#),” or the London Anarchist Federation’s “[The Problems With On Authority](#).” My hope is to go beyond these by not only debunking Engels’ essay, but also provide a better grasp of anarchism and Marxism in the process. If these refutations have killed it, I am aiming for overkill.

Analysis of “On Authority”

Before we can properly critique Engels’ argument, we need to establish what that argument is. Despite its short length, “On Authority” has been interpreted in wildly different ways. This is due not only to attempts at reconciling some of his odd claims with the rest of Marxism, but because several areas remain vague or underexplained. These are major issues considering Engels’

hope of establishing a “scientific socialism.” Given the essays status as frequent recommended reading for new Marxists and its perceived status as the definitive rebuke of anarchism, it is something of a meme among online Marxists to demand that anarchist “Read On Authority.”

To demonstrate my own familiarity and good faith reading of the text, and to correct mistaken interpretations or defenses of “On Authority,” I will present a line-by-line analysis of “On Authority.” Through this process, I hope to clarify certain parts of his argument which are frequently misunderstood, while also calling attention to other portions that I intend to more fully critique later on. I also hope that, should anyone present genuine issues with my own interpretation of Engels, I will at least have been able to show my work. Perhaps someone with greater knowledge of the total works of Marx and Engels could provide better explanations for these ambiguities than I am able to, and welcome challenges on these points. For the time being, I will instead respond to the interpretations of Engels I have been able to discover, and explain why my reading should be seen as more plausible.

Before proceeding, I of course encourage any reader to read “On Authority” themselves, or to even reread it so the argument will be fresh in their minds, and because I intend to reference later parts of the essay as I go through my line-by-line analysis.

It is also useful to understand some of the history and context that led to “On Authority” being written. A more detailed history of the conflict between anarchists and the Marxists within the First International, especially between Engels and the International in Italy. For this, I refer any interested readers to Wolfgang Eckhardt’s [The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs Marx in the International Working Men’s Association](#) (2016). It has been an especially useful work for finding many primary sources, and demonstrating patterns of behavior in Marx and Engels that are repeated within “On Authority.” For a somewhat briefer presentation of this history, I would recommend Robert Graham’s [We Do Not Fear Anarchy. We Invoke It: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement](#) (2015).

The most important point to know is that the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA), also known as the First International, was a pluralist organization made up of various worker and socialist movements in the 19th century. Marx and Engels held rather powerful positions within the IWA’s General Council. However, Marx came into conflict with the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who he believed was conspiring to take over the IWA and had an especially strong influence in Switzerland, Spain, and Italy. This conflict culminated in the Hague Congress of 1872 where, through questionable methods, Marx and Engels manufactured a vote to expel Bakunin from the International.²

The actual publication history of “On Authority” appears to be relatively straightforward. An Italian newspaper editor named Enrico Bignami planned on beginning a yearbook called the *Almanacco Repubblicano*. For this, he requested an article from Engels and Marx on July 31, 1872, and October 10, 1872 respectively. Both used the opportunity to write an attack on

² Zoe Baker, *Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States*, p. 24-26; Robert Graham’s [We Do Not Fear Anarchy. We Invoke It: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement](#), p. 166-174.

anarchism, Marx writing his essay "[Political Indifferentism](#)" while Engels wrote "On Authority." On November 3, 1872, Bignami wrote to Engels that he had received the articles in October. However, due to police persecution, Bignami was arrested, and the manuscript was lost. Bignami informed Engels about this on March 2, 1873, requesting another copy or an alternative essay to publish, which Engels then provided. This would become the version of "On Authority" known today, and was published for the almanac for 1874 in December 1873. It would be printed for the first time in English in *The New Review*, No. 4, New York, 1914.³

Engels' Idea of Authority

A number of Socialists have latterly launched a regular crusade against what they call the principle of authority. It suffices to tell them that this or that act is authoritarian for it to be condemned. This summary mode of procedure is being abused to such an extent that it has become necessary to look into the matter somewhat more closely.

Engels begins by establishing why this essay is necessary: to combat the rise of anti-authoritarian socialism.

Because the word "anarchist" is not used anywhere in "On Authority," the occasional reader tends to ask whether this essay is really meant to be about anarchism at all. Engels only refers to anti-authoritarians or "autonomists." However, having seen the broader context of when "On Authority" was written, it is clear that Engels really did have the anarchists in mind. Engels had simply written his essay so early in anarchism's development that even the name "anarchist" was not yet standardized. Members of this movement would sometimes call themselves anarchists, but they would also refer to themselves as collectivists, federalists, revolutionary socialists, libertarians, or a number of other terms.⁴ The name "anarchism" stuck in part, ironically enough, because of Marx and Engels' frequent habit of labeling them this way, despite not doing so in "On Authority."⁵

Given all this, I will treat the word "anarchist" as interchangeable anytime Engels discusses the people he is critiquing.

While Marx and Engels disagreed with the anarchists on a number of different issues, Engels believes he is striking at the heart of anarchism itself by challenging their notion of authority. He believes that, if anarchism is correct, then socialists must reject *all* authority. Against this, he wants to defend some forms of authority as necessary, showing the central principle of anarchism is mistaken.

³ [Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol 23](#), p. 697, 703

⁴ *Means and End*, p. 24

⁵ *Means and Ends*, p. 29-40

Authority, in the sense in which the word is used here, means: the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination.

Engels defines authority as “the imposition of the will of another upon ours.”

On its own, this is clearly inadequate as a scientific definition. Who is “ours” referring to? Engels and the reader? The working classes? I assume Engels intended this as a more universal form, so restating it, his intended definition is something like “the imposition of the will of one party upon another.” This is more consistent with how “authority” is used elsewhere in the essay, since he discusses authority being imposed not only on us, but also the enemies of the proletariat.

Even this improved form is still imprecise though, since we have no clear meaning for “imposing” something. It seems like it could be interpreted in at least three ways.

Firstly, at the most broad, something might be imposed simply by being the case independently of our will, and therefore requiring us to adapt to it. This could include personal forms of authority, like someone ordering you around at gunpoint, but also impersonal ones. Rain may impose a need to find shelter, hunger to eat, danger to flee, sickness to rest, etc. In this sense, it is not only the laws of the State which are imposed on us, but the laws of physics.

This idea of authority is inseparable from existence itself. Reality defines the limits of possibility. Human ingenuity may surprise us, turning what was thought impossible into the possible, but this is a change in human scientific knowledge or our material circumstances. Any freedom we enjoy is built upon these laws of nature, not their violation. Omnipotence is forever beyond us. With any innovation, new limits are always discovered. Abolishing authority of this kind would be as ridiculous as calling to abolish existence itself.

It seems like Engels’ definition of authority prevents us from interpreting things *quite* this broadly. He has not defined authority merely as “imposing,” but imposing a *will*. Who imposes the laws of nature? Unless the atheist Engels believed they were established by God, or perhaps has converted to some form of animism, it seems like this sort of meaning is ruled out or at least limited.

This brings us to the second option, which seems closely related to the first. Someone could be seen as “imposing” their will any time they act to achieve an end that conflicts with the will of another. For example, suppose there are two roommates, one of which wants to listen to music while the other wants things to be quiet. If the latter decides to play music, they can be said to be imposing this on the former. Likewise, if the former then turns off the music, they would be imposing their will on the latter. This sense of imposition is especially seen in matters of etiquette, like when someone knocking at your door uninvited might say “sorry to impose.”

This meaning of impose is still incredibly broad, but seems consistent with Engels’ definition. Abolishing authority in this sense is similarly absurd. While it would not require ending existence

itself, it would require the end of the human race or its conversion into some unrecognizable hive mind. It would require no two people ever having conflicting goals, no matter how small, or else the person achieving their end would be imposing this state of affairs on the other.

Importantly, this interpretation is neutral on the *way* something is imposed or the kind of social relation it implies. All that matters is *that* the will of one party is implemented which conflicts with another. If you ask someone out and they decline, then this is an act of authority being imposed upon you. Likewise, if Person A physically assaults Person B, then that is an act of authority, but *so would* Person B defending themselves against Person A. Even running from this fight would be an act of authority. This view of imposition and authority is unable to distinguish between something being imposed and resistance to that imposition. All it sees are two conflicting wills.

This brings us to a third option, where we *do* make this kind of distinction, considering not only the conflict in wills, but the methods used and their function. There are several different ways this distinction could be made, such as by appealing to some moral standard or sense of “legitimacy.” In this context though, the most obvious way to distinguish imposition would be with the establishment and exercise of relations of domination and servitude, of exploiter and exploited, considered in contrast to free association or resistance. This is especially relevant when we consider materialist class analysis, as is endorsed by Marxism, distinguishing between the classes of the oppressors and the oppressed. Slavery, for example, is clearly recognizable as the domination and exploitation of the slaves by the masters. This privileged position is backed by coercive force, and may even be reaffirmed by law as an explicit right.

By contrast, the slaves may similarly use violence in a slave revolt against the masters. However, this violence would be clearly distinct in terms of purpose and function, reacting to the violent imposition of the masters and moving toward a system of freedom and equality. It is not simply reversing the previous relation, with the former slaves enslaving their former masters. The resistance to an imposition would not itself be considered an imposition, as if the slaves were “imposing” their own freedom upon the masters. We could also contrast this to the voluntary association of free and equal individuals, which looks even less like “imposing” anything when there is no coercion involved.

For an essay called “On Authority,” there is surprisingly little telling us what authority actually *is*. Engels does not clarify between any of these meanings. He does not compare and contrast different definitions or explore any of these nuances. He presents this definition as if its meaning is self-evident and uncontroversial. Without a clear definition or elaboration on Engels’ intended meaning, we need to infer this from his examples. When multiple interpretations are possible even there, confusion is spread even among good faith readers.

The one thing that Engels does clarify here is that he is defining authority “in the sense in which the word is used here.” In other words, he is defining authority in the same way he understood the anarchists are using it in their “regular crusade against what they call the principle of authority.” Engels is not challenging an inferior anarchist definition of authority so that it can be replaced by a superior Marxist one. Rather, he appears to believe there is no inconsistency with how he uses the term and how the anarchists use it.

If our analysis shows that Engels *really is* using a different definition of authority than the anarchists, then this would be the first major indication that Engels is misrepresenting his opponents. If he is trying to challenge the anarchists because they denounce all authority, then it is important that we understand properly what they mean by that term.

Finally, Engels also states that the word “authority” is inherently connected to the word “subordination,” with one presupposing the other. Engels definition of authority implies the existence of at least two parties, the ones imposing their will and the ones being imposed upon. The former is the authority, while the latter has been subordinated. We can see Engels connect other ideas with authority throughout the essay as well. For example, “autonomy” is treated as the opposite of authority, marking the absence of this kind of imposition. Likewise, “authority” is also identified with “despotic” relationships or being “dominant,” and “subordination” is identified with being “subjected” or being made “obedient.”

Now, since these two words sound bad, and the relationship which they represent is disagreeable to the subordinated party, the question is to ascertain whether there is any way of dispensing with it, whether — given the conditions of present-day society — we could not create another social system, in which this authority would be given no scope any longer, and would consequently have to disappear.

According to Engels, the main objection anarchists have to authority and subordination is that both words “sound bad” and that this authority is unpleasant for the subordinated party. This objection is clearly simplistic and shallow. Avoiding words that “sound bad” can certainly be rhetorically useful, and something being unpleasant is a good reason to avoid it if possible. But appearances can be deceiving, and dealing with some unpleasantness is simply part of life, if it can be shown to be necessary. Engels clearly wants to present the anarchist critique of authority as fundamentally naïve.

Since it is sufficient to tell the anarchist that “this or that act is *authoritarian* for it to be condemned,” the anarchist aims at creating a new social system which gets rid of authority entirely. Not only that, although it is unstated here, the anarchists also intended on achieving this authority-free society *without the use of authority*. The anarchist does not only want to achieve a non-authoritarian society, but wants to use non-authoritarian methods to get there.

“On Authority” is primarily a critique of these two positions, which he argues against with two main arguments.

Firstly, he attempts to show authority cannot be abolished even in a socialist future, or at least cannot be abolished without consequences even more disagreeable than authority itself. He does this by examining the type of society the anarchists advocate for, and then demonstrating ways in which it actually does imply authoritarian relations, even if the anarchists themselves do not admit it. This is especially found in the need for administrative tasks to allow for groups to coordinate their actions with one another.

Second, he argues that achieving a socialist society will require utilizing authoritarian methods in our capitalist present. In particular, the workers will need, at least in some cases, to violently revolt against capitalism. This need for violence therefore also implies a need for authority, as does the conquest of state power and utilizing it to bring the means of production under the control of the proletariat.

The first argument here is clearly Engels' main one, and takes up the vast majority of the essay. Engels' second argument takes up only a single paragraph near the end. Engels seems to view the first argument as the more important one since it implies a more fundamental error on the part of the anarchists, striving for an impossible goal. However, the second argument is the one that tends to receive far more attention from Marxists, and is much more frequently cited and quoted.

Socialist Future: The Authority of the Machines

On examining the economic, industrial and agricultural conditions which form the basis of present-day bourgeois society, we find that they tend more and more to replace isolated action by combined action of individuals. Modern industry, with its big factories and mills, where hundreds of workers supervise complicated machines driven by steam, has superseded the small workshops of the separate producers; the carriages and wagons of the highways have become substituted by railway trains, just as the small schooners and sailing feluccas have been by steam-boats. Even agriculture falls increasingly under the dominion of the machine and of steam, which slowly but relentlessly put in the place of the small proprietors big capitalists, who with the aid of hired workers cultivate vast stretches of land.

Engels begins by examining the current tendencies of production in "present-day bourgeois society" of capitalism out of which the future socialist society will grow.

The main tendency he focuses on is capitalism replacing systems where workers are relatively isolated with ones where they are brought together for large-scale industry, utilizing the "combined action" of individuals. Thus the "small workshops" are replaced with "big factories."

This tendency goes hand-in-hand with technological changes. The isolated production of artisans, carriages, and small proprietors are replaced by complex machines attended by hundreds of workers. This is true not only of industrial production, but also for transportation and agriculture.

By utilizing combined action, workers are able to achieve far more than they could in isolation. This is a point consistently emphasized by Marx and Engels, and can be especially seen in chapters thirteen to fifteen of Marx's [Capital](#) (1867). For example:

Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of a regiment of infantry is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual cavalry or infantry soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workmen differs from the social force that is developed, when many hands take part simultaneously in one and the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch, or removing an obstacle. In such cases the effect of the combined labour could either not be produced at all by isolated individual labour, or it could only be produced by a great expenditure of time, or on a very dwarfed scale. Not only have we here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operation, but the creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses.⁶

Earlier socialists had made similar points, helping to develop Marx and Engels' understanding of this. There are some striking similarities, for example, between this idea of "combined action" or "collective power" and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's concept of "collective force." This can be seen in Proudhon's [What is Property](#) (1840):

A force of one thousand men working twenty days has been paid the same wages that one would be paid for working fifty-five years; but this force of one thousand has done in twenty days what a single man could not have accomplished, though he had labored for a million centuries. Is the exchange an equitable one? Once more, no; when you have paid all the individual forces, the collective force still remains to be paid. Consequently, there remains always a right of collective property which you have not acquired, and which you enjoy unjustly.

Even apart from machinery, this advantage of combined action exists. Engels is not merely pointing to the existence of combined action then. Rather, he is pointing to the development of tools which *presuppose* combined action. A field may be worked by one person for many days, or for a few days by many people. But a factory can *only* be worked with combined action as many different tasks need to be done simultaneously.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch. 13

Everywhere combined action, the complication of processes dependent upon each other, displaces independent action by individuals. But whoever mentions combined action speaks of organisation; now, is it possible to have organisation without authority?

Supposing a social revolution dethroned the capitalists, who now exercise their authority over the production and circulation of wealth. Supposing, to adopt entirely the point of view of the anti-authoritarians, that the land and the instruments of labour had become the collective property of the workers who use them. Will authority have disappeared, or will it only have changed its form? Let us see.

Engels maps out his first and primary argument. Society is moving towards greater combined action in production, which requires organization. But organization requires authority. Therefore, even in a future socialist society where the capitalists have been “dethroned,” authority will still be needed to make combined action possible.

Anarchism then is fundamentally mistaken. It believes that, by abolishing the authority of the capitalists, it will have abolished authority all together. But since it will retain these machines which presuppose combined action, this new society will need to establish an authority of its own in some new form. By directing their criticism against the principle of authority, the anarchists have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of socialism.

It is a built-in assumption of this argument though that the same tendencies Engels was witnessing in the 1800s would continue indefinitely, always towards greater combined action. No argument is given for this however, and seems like it could be challenged in at least two ways.

Firstly, we might tend towards decreased combined action as we move towards greater automation. This is already a notable tendency within capitalism, throwing workers into unemployment.

Secondly, it seems likely we will also need to reduce production in many areas due to the unsustainable and harmful practices of capitalist industry. Something that is unsustainable cannot last forever by definition. Finite resources do not allow for infinite growth. This point is especially made by the “degrowth” movement, highlighting the massive levels of ecological damage being forced upon us.

However, these objections do not strike at the heart of Engels’ argument, even if they undermine its strength. Engels wants to give a sense of inevitability here, where society *must* have factories because that is what he sees in capitalism. That is a very suspect claim. But

even if it is not inevitable, the fact remains that anarchists generally *don't* reject combined action or collective force. Even anarcho-primitivists, who explicitly advocate for deindustrialization and abolishing factories, do not call for an end to combined action. Even if we reject Engels' technological determinism then, anarchists still need to address his argument about combined action.

Let us take by way of example a cotton spinning mill. The cotton must pass through at least six successive operations before it is reduced to the state of thread, and these operations take place for the most part in different rooms. Furthermore, keeping the machines going requires an engineer to look after the steam engine, mechanics to make the current repairs, and many other labourers whose business it is to transfer the products from one room to another, and so forth. All these workers, men, women and children, are obliged to begin and finish their work at the hours fixed by the authority of the steam, which cares nothing for individual autonomy. The workers must, therefore, first come to an understanding on the hours of work; and these hours, once they are fixed, must be observed by all, without any exception.

Engels illustrates his previous point about the need for combined action by describing the technical requirements for operating a cotton spinning mill. For the mill to run, workers need to perform different tasks simultaneously, which requires them to coordinate when they work. By aligning their schedules, they are completing jobs at "fixed" times relative to each other. If they are not "observed by all, without any exception," the factory cannot run. Because the factory cannot run without this coordination, the individual worker does not have the power to begin or end production whenever they please. Engels' family were industrial capitalists that actually owned large cotton-textile mills, so there is a good chance that he is speaking from personal experience in this regard.

Engels describes this situation as the hours of work being fixed "by the authority of the steam, which cares nothing for individual autonomy." Engels' first and primary example of an authority that will continue to exist in socialism then is the factory itself. This seems inconsistent with Engels' own definition of authority. Previously, he defined authority as "the imposition of the will of another upon ours." But a cotton mill doesn't have any will of its own to impose. How can it be an authority?

At first, it seems like Engels is using the first interpretation of "imposed" that was ruled out. The factory acts as an "authority" here because we need to adapt our actions to the requirements of running it. This interpretation is occasionally defended by online Marxists. Abolishing authority in

this case would be absurd as abolishing reality itself, since our options are always limited by our material conditions in some way.

But if Engels really meant to be interpreted this way, it seems like he could have made a much simpler argument. There are technical requirements for spinning cotton regardless of whether it is done by hundreds of workers in a mill or by a single worker with a spinning wheel. All of the discussion about combined action could have been dropped.

It seems like a more plausible interpretation of “authority” here needs to integrate combined action with the way in which “steam” can be an authority. I will analyze this more in the next section.

Also notable in this section is the inclusion of child factory workers in this future idealized socialist economy. This seems to line up with Marx and Engels’ demand in the [Manifesto of the Communist Party](#) (1848), which calls for the “Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children’s factory labor in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c, &c.”

Marx seemed to believe child labor really was necessary for factories to function, and even viewed it as a positive good if it were paired with strictly regulated working time and proper safety measures. This can be seen in his [Critique of the Gotha Programme](#) (1875):

A general prohibition of child labor is incompatible with the existence of large-scale industry and hence an empty, pious wish. Its realization -- if it were possible -- would be reactionary, since, with a strict regulation of the working time according to the different age groups and other safety measures for the protection of children, an early combination of productive labor with education is one of the most potent means for the transformation of present-day society.

I am unaware of any time anarchists have described child labor as necessary for large-scale industry, but the idea of children gaining work experience and combining “education with industrial production” was one some anarchists have shared.

For example, the Swiss anarchist James Guillaume speculated in his [Ideas of Social Organization](#) (1876) what education might look like in anarchy:

We must distinguish two stages in the education of children: the first stage, where the child of five or six is not yet old enough to study science, and where the emphasis is on the development of the physical faculties; and a second stage, where children twelve to sixteen years of age would be introduced to the various divisions of human knowledge while at the same time learning one or more crafts or trades through practice.

Effectively the idea here is that, after abolishing the rigid capitalist division of labor, people would engage in both mental and physical labor to become more well-rounded. The education system would reflect this with a mixture of theoretical and practical lessons received directly from the

workers who engage in both. This would include learning some basic tool use to repair their toys, as well as visiting various factories, or even being taken on as an apprentice by factory workers.

A frequent anarchist objection to “On Authority” is that Engels appears to ignore the way factories have been intentionally designed to require certain capitalist abuses. The insistence on the necessity of child labor certainly seems like an instance of this. However, this does not actually strike to the core of Engels’ argument, which is far more focused on the need for combined action itself rather than the technical needs of factories as they were designed in the late 19th century.

Thereafter particular questions arise in each room and at every moment concerning the mode of production, distribution of material, etc., which must be settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a majority vote, the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way.

Because the workers must coordinate their schedules together for when they work and what task they will do, operating the factory also requires some degree of administration. Their job is maintaining this level of coordination, answering “particular questions” as they come up.

Engels believes this type of administration can take two forms in socialism. It can either be tasked to a delegate or it can be determined by the workers themselves through majority vote. He also later mentions the possibility of a committee of delegates, which presumably combines these options.

Engels seems to leave out the possibility of unanimous agreement among the workers, only leaving room for majority vote. Presumably he does this because, given the large number of workers in the factory, some level of disagreement would be inevitable and require a degree of compromise. Engels appears to believe this very act of compromise, even when voluntarily agreed to, constitutes a form of authority, with the will of another being imposed upon our own.

Administration is needed in capitalist production too, of course, but there it is handled by the capitalist themselves or the overseers they hire, rather than by the workers or through their delegate. This is why Engels described authority as having merely “changed its form” in the transition to socialism.

The idea of administrative tasks being handled by delegates chosen by the workers was something recognized by previous socialist authors writing about collective force as well. For example, Proudhon wrote in [*What is Property*](#) (1840):

But every industry needs — they will add — leaders, instructors, superintendents, &c. Will these be engaged in the general task? No; since their task is to lead,

instruct, and superintend. But they must be chosen from the laborers by the laborers themselves, and must fulfil the conditions of eligibility. It is the same with all public functions, whether of administration or instruction.

In Engels view, regardless of whether the workers use a delegate or majority vote, things are being settled “in an authoritarian way.” This is because, in either case, the will of the individual worker has been subordinated to the plan and instructions determined by the delegates or the majority of workers. This will has therefore been imposed upon the non-delegate workers or the minority.

This seems to be the connective link between Engels’ definition of authority and the authority of the machine. I see at least two possible interpretations here.

Firstly, we could interpret the authority of the machine as a purely poetic description of the administrator’s authority in whatever form that happens to take. By this reading, no actual authority is assigned to the machine at all. This interpretation avoids the oddity of assigning authority to a machine, which of course lacks any will to impose. However, Engels seems rather emphatic that it really is the machinery itself which holds authority over the worker, as we see in the next section.

Secondly, by describing the factory as an authority, Engels might simply mean that, by its very nature, it generates authoritarian social relations. In some sense, the workers really do relate to the factory as an authority, not just metaphorically but in fact. The authority of the delegate or majority is a direct consequence and extension of the authority of their own means of production, ruling over them. This interpretation fits more with the plain reading of the text, but it does make it seem like Engels is altering his definition of authority to something like “the imposition of the will of another upon ours, *or the material conditions which necessarily give rise to this imposition.*”

One of the reasons this reading strikes me as more plausible is that Marx and Engels do have a history of attributing authority to machines in a distinct way from particular administrators. For example, in the [Manifesto of the Communist Party](#) (1848), the machine is described as enslaved by the machine, which they have become a mere appendage of:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.

...

Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, are organised like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are

daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.

We can see clearly here a distinction between the worker being enslaved both by the machine *and* by the overlooker, as they are considered separately.

The idea of “impersonal domination” is actually something of a running theme in Marxist literature, and is usually tied in with ideas of drudgery, alienation, fetishism, and a lack of a social plan leading to people being dominated by “background” processes.⁷ For example, in [Capital](#) (1867) Marx describes how the value of commodities “vary continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producers. To them, their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.” Michael Heinrich elaborates on this passage in his [An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital](#) (2004), adding:

The value of commodities is an expression of an overwhelming social interaction that cannot be controlled by individuals. In a commodity-producing society, people (all of them!) are under the control of things, and the decisive relations of domination are not personal but “objective” (sachlich). This impersonal, objective domination, submission to “inherent necessities,” does not exist because things themselves possess characteristics that generate such domination, or because social activity necessitates this mediation through things, but only because people relate to things in a particular way—as commodities.

Engels attributing authority directly to the factory then should not be seen as too out of place with the rest of Marxist thought. This also seems to show that Engels really does seem to be using “authority” (or related terms like enslavement, domination, rule, etc.) in a way much broader than his definition seems to provide for.

There is also another important difference. In these other examples, these types of impersonal authority exist because of our social structure and mode of production. Money has real social power, not because of any inherent feature of gold or paper, but because we live in a market-based society which attributes this power to it. By contrast, the factory is presented as having this power “independent of all social organisation.” It *does* seem to be an inherent characteristic of the factory that combined action is needed to operate it, and therefore authority. If this is what Engels means, it seems to be an odd form of this argument.

Regardless of which interpretation we adopt, or perhaps even an entirely different one if scholars on Marx can find more direct connections, Engels’ argument appears to be something along these lines: *The anti-authoritarian claims that socialists are striving for a world without authority. They concede that a socialist society will have factories. But factories require many workers to be organized and coordinated. This means it also requires the will of the individual*

⁷ See [“Marx on the Impersonal Domination of Capitalism”](#) by Red Plateaus

worker to be subordinated to the direction of a common plan of action, determined either by a system of delegates or by majority vote. Since the worker has been subordinated, there is therefore still an authority ruling over the worker. Therefore, the so-called “anti-authoritarian socialism” will have authority after all.

This example also seems to indicate that Engels really has one of the broader interpretations of “imposition” in mind too. Presumably the delegate is not breaking out “the people’s stick” to beat the workers into following the schedule they write up. What makes it authoritarian is the mere fact that people need to act in concert with one another, following a common plan, and therefore the “authority” of whoever made that plan.

This argument may extend to any other area that requires combined action, any activity that requires the complication of mutually dependent processes, and not just the factory. Whether it’s performing in a band, going on a road trip, playing a game of football, or a romantic couple planning a dinner date, multiple people must coordinate their schedules and actions together to a common plan, making these inherently authoritarian ways of relating.

Or so the logic goes.

Just as some anarchists have objected to how Engels assumes factory production must use child labor because that is how it is done under capitalism, he also seems to overestimate the need for this common plan and downplaying the existence of autonomy within the factory. This is easily demonstrated by the existence of “work-to-rule” labor protests, with workers following only the exact instructions of their contract or refusing to work except exactly as directed.⁸

This does appear to be a real oversight on Engels’ part, given how strongly he asserts that autonomy does not exist in the factory. But a proper anarchist reply to Engels’ argument does not only need to demonstrate the existence of autonomy in the factory, but address Engels’ argument about the need for administration. Even if administration is not needed for every action, it does appear to be necessary for some.

⁸ This example was used in [An Anarchist FAQ H.4.4.](#)

The automatic machinery of the big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been. At least with regard to the hours of work one may write upon the portals of these factories: *Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate!* [Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind!]

If man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him by subjecting him, in so far as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation. Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself, to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel.

In this section, we can see just how emphatically Engels believes it really is the machinery itself that acts as an authority over the worker, with rather intense and shocking language.

He claims that the factory is even more despotic over the workers than small capitalists. This might be him contrasting handicraft labor under the petit bourgeois to factory labor, but workers have hardly had control over their schedules in that situation either. Alternatively, the “small capitalist” here could be meant for contrast to the “big factory,” and he is pointing to how the capitalist’s authority over scheduling is subordinate to the requirements of the factory.

The authority of the factory is meant to be so complete over the hours of work, the workers are told to leave all autonomy behind. Engels even invokes Dante’s *Inferno* and the infamous words above the door to Hell: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” It is shocking that Engels, apparently intended to defend authority, goes out of his way to compare his ideal system to the workers being damned.

He describes the factory as nature “avenging” itself against mankind. Engels doubles down on his comparison to hell, and presents this authority as not even neutral, but actively hostile to the well-being of the workers. He also directly identifies the forces of nature being employed here in large-scale industry as a “veritable despotism” which exists “independent of all social organisation.” Authority here really is being attributed to the physical machine.

Since this tyranny exists independent of social organization, being generated by the very physical form and function of the factory, it could only be ended with the destruction of large-scale industry itself. One could easily read everything here as part of a Luddite or primitivist text, telling the workers that their only escape is to burn the factory to the ground. Engels seems to intend the opposite effect, and presents the idea of destroying the power loom as an absurdity.

Let us take another example — the railway. Here too the co-operation of an infinite number of individuals is absolutely necessary, and this co-operation must be practised during precisely fixed hours so that no accidents may happen. Here, too, the first condition of the job is 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 a very pronounced authority. Moreover, what would happen to the first train dispatched if the authority of the railway employees over the Hon. passengers were abolished?

But the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that, will nowhere be found more evident than on board a ship on the high seas. There, in time of danger, the lives of all depend on the instantaneous and absolute obedience of all to the will of one.

As was noted before, Engels' argument applies to any sort of activity that requires combined action. The social dynamic seems like an essential part of his understanding of authority. This is confirmed here where he considers two cases of authority outside of the factory which still require combined action: A railway and a ship at sea.

Engels indicates that railways need authority in two ways: (1) Administrative needs, such as scheduling, similar to the cotton mill, and (2) the authority of railway employees (employed by who?) over passengers.

The first point is essentially the same as what we saw with the cotton mill. The only notable difference, which was indicated previously, is that Engels dropped the possibility of schedules being determined by majority vote and introduced the idea of things being determined by a committee of delegates instead of a single delegate.

The authority of workers over passengers is less clear, as Engels only gestures toward the idea in a single sentence. Engels seems to take his meaning as self-evident when it is not. The passengers do not seem to be engaged in any kind of "combined action" with the workers. Perhaps Engels is thinking of the ways passengers need to behave to avoid interfering with the workers (e.g. boarding and departing on schedule, respecting worker-only areas, etc.)? We are forced to guess.

Engels then considers a ship at high seas. While here he emphasizes a clear need for "imperious authority" in times of danger. But really, this is just the same kind of need seen in the cotton mill or railway, except with the added context of a life-threatening emergency to increase

its import. Administrators need to direct workers to do different jobs to address a moment of crisis.

Engels might be said to have identified three forms of authority he believes are necessary within socialism: (1) the authority of necessary administrative tasks, (2) the authority of workers over non-workers within the workplace, and (3) imperious authority needed in times of danger.

However, the third form seems to reduce to the first, and the second isn't elaborated on to see if it's really different at all or not. The vast majority of our attention will be focused on this first form then.

The mechanism for how exactly authority is imposed is not considered in any of these examples. The mere fact that people need to coordinate is proof enough that there is authority here, since they are acting in concert.

These same combination of examples (factory, railway, ship) can be seen in Engels letter to Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue on December 30, 1871, months before "On Authority" was written:⁹

Our friends in Spain will now realise the way in which these gentry misuse the word 'authoritarian'. Whenever the Bakuninists take a dislike to something, they say: 'It's authoritarian' and believe that by so doing they damn it for ever and aye. If, instead of being bourgeois, journalists and so forth, they were working men, or if they had only devoted some study to economic questions and modern industrial conditions, they would know that no communal action is possible without submission on the part of some to an external will, that is to say an authority. Whether it be the will of a majority of voters, of a managing committee or of one man alone, it is invariably a will imposed on dissidents; but without that single, controlling will, no co-operation is possible. Just try and get one of Barcelona's big factories to function without control, that is to say, without an authority! Or to run a railway without knowing for certain that every engineer, stoker, etc., is at his post exactly when he ought to be! I should very much like to know whether the good Bakunin would entrust his portly frame to a railway carriage if that railway were administered on the principle that no one need be at his post unless he chose to submit to the authority of the regulations, regulations far more authoritarian in any conceivable state of society than those of the Congress of Basle! All these grandiloquent ultra-radical and revolutionary catchphrases serve only to conceal an abysmal paucity of ideas and an abysmal ignorance of the conditions under which the daily life of society takes place. Just try abolishing 'all authority, even by consent', among sailors on board a ship!¹⁰

Similar points can be found in [Engels' letter to Theodore Cuno](#) from January 24, 1872:

⁹ [Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol 44](#), p. 285-286

¹⁰ Also see Wolfgang Eckhardt's [The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs Marx in the International Working Men's Association](#), p. 143

Now as, according to Bakunin, the International is not to be formed for political struggle but in order that it may at once replace the old state organisation as soon as social liquidation takes place, it follows that it must come as near as possible to the Bakunist ideal of the society of the future. In this society there will above all be no *authority*, for authority = state = an absolute evil. (How these people propose to run a factory, work a railway or steer a ship without having in the last resort one deciding will, without a unified direction, they do not indeed tell us.) The authority of the majority over the minority also ceases. Every individual and every community is autonomous, but as to how a society, even of only two people, is possible unless each gives up some of his autonomy, Bakunin again remains silent.¹¹

This section demonstrates a few things.

Firstly, it shows that Engels had these examples in mind several months before “On Authority” was ever written, and meant for it to be a critique of Bakunin specifically as representative of the anti-authoritarian socialists in general. This is even mixed in with some personal attacks, such as denouncing the Spanish workers as being bourgeois or journalists instead of being workers (keep in mind, Engels was the son of a textile factory owner and Marx was a journalist), or insults about Bakunin’s weight.

It also demonstrates that Engels thinks authority is necessary *even in a society of two people*. One interpretation I had considered while writing this is that Engels believed authority was only necessary for organizing large groups or requires some formal kind of organization. These readings appear to be ruled out here. In Engels’ mind, any two people doing any activity that requires their cooperation, like a couple enjoying a romantic night together, requires one of them to impose themselves and subordinate the other.

When I submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians, the only answer they were able to give me was the following: Yes, that’s true, but there it is not the case of authority which we confer on our delegates, *but of a commission entrusted!* These gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves. This is how these profound thinkers mock at the whole world.

This is one of the most frequently cited portions of “On Authority,” but as an argument it is rather lacking.

Engels spares a single sentence to present what an anarchist counter-argument might look like. This unnamed anarchist concedes that Engels is right that combined action may require certain delegates deciding administrative tasks, such as creating a schedule. However, they do not

¹¹ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 143

concede that the delegate has any authority, and instead have been commissioned by the workers with this task as one of the duties they needed to divide up among themselves.

Engels does not provide enough detail to know exactly how the anarchist is distinguishing these things. In fact, this lack of detail becomes the basis of his critique against the anarchist. Engels replies that the anarchist is merely changing the names of things, rather than pointing to any real material difference. If the anarchist has agreed to a strict definition of authority, and agrees that everything here fits that definition, then arbitrarily calling it a different thing is not a real objection.

This reply only works if anarchists *really do* define authority in the same way as Engels, and *really cannot* point to any distinguishing features. If they are able to provide a materially distinct definition, or if they are able to describe how socialist administration is not “imposed,” then Engels’ reply does not work. The anarchist would *not* think that they are changing the thing itself by changing its name. Rather, they would be pointing to differences in the things itself as the basis of giving it a different name.

Since Engels provides so little detail here, it is hard to see this objection and response as little more than a “nuh-uh/yeah-huh” argument. The anarchist accuses Engels of applying the same name to two different things, and Engels replies that the anarchist is applying two names to the same thing. Engels does not present the anarchist side as having any more substance than this, and he responds with equally little substance.

We have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and, on the other hand, a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate.

We have seen, besides, that the material conditions of production and circulation inevitably develop with large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture, and increasingly tend to enlarge the scope of this authority. Hence it is absurd to speak of the principle of authority as being absolutely evil, and of the principle of autonomy as being absolutely good. Authority and autonomy are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of the development of society. If the autonomists confined themselves to saying that the social organisation of the future would restrict authority solely to the limits within which the conditions of production render it inevitable, we could understand each other; but they are blind to all facts that make the thing necessary and they passionately fight the world.

Engels concludes this section with a summary, reaffirming his own position.

He reemphasizes two main points:

1. The material conditions of production found in modern large-scale production impose with it some form of personal authority upon the workers.
2. The further development of large-scale industry develops the scope of this authority along with it.

Because of this, Engels believes the anarchists rejecting authority as an absolute evil, and therefore endorsing its opposite of autonomy as an absolute good, is absurd. Because they accept combined action, and especially because they embrace large-scale industry, they must therefore also accept the authority that comes with it.

This is not to say that Engels believes the opposite either, treating authority as an absolute good and autonomy as an absolute evil. We saw this same framing of anarchism in Engels' letter to Cuno. Against this, Engels adopts the view that both can be good in their appropriate "spheres." These spheres can also change over time along with certain developments, such as the sphere of authority growing as large-scale industry grows.

It is worth highlighting this portion, as it is the closest thing to any discussion of morality within "On Authority." As we will see later, some have interpreted this essay as a critique of the anarchist stance as "moralizing," in contrast to Engels' superior method for "scientific socialism."

But to the extent Engels has an issue with this framework, it does *not* seem to be with calling something good or evil. Rather, his issue is with them being treated as *absolute* goods or evils, to which he gives an alternative of viewing them as *relative* goods or evils according to these changing “spheres” that depend on the development of society.

Against the anarchist condemnation of authority, Engels offers what he believes is a more accurate stance: Socialism does not abolish authority, but instead restricts it to the limits set by the conditions of production. This is presented almost as a compromise. Engels wants to emphasize here that, if these socialists are so opposed to authority, they can get most of what they want. Socialism will get rid of authority as far as possible, reducing it down to the minimum level that makes it necessary. But alas! They are “blind to all facts,” unable to compromise or be brought to reason, and refuse to recognize this minimal level of authority (which is admittedly expanding as production develops more toward combined action).

It is interesting that Engels presents authority as *only* existing in production, apparently disappearing in all other areas of life. He appears to do this because, in the next section, he gives a major example of how society has changed in this regard: the disappearance of the political authority of the state. But why only consider these two areas? Engels has presented an argument so that any time there is combined action, even in a society of only two people according to his letter to Cuno, there will need to be authority. There must be a ruling will. Combined action can be used in non-productive areas though, and is often needed in areas of play.

Suppose, for example, that a group of friends wants to play a tabletop roleplaying game which requires two or more players. Anyone who has tried to organize this knows how difficult scheduling a session can be, so all Engels’ arguments about combined action in the factory seem to be equally applicable here. Why does Engels not say that they must “play at the hours fixed by the authority of the *D&D Player’s Handbook*, which cares nothing for individual autonomy”? The same point could be made about a birthday party, a game of baseball, a romantic evening between lovers, and so on. It seems like the same logic would hold, but Engels has not made any room for authority in socialism outside of production.

It is ironic that Engels, in a defense of authority, seems to *underestimate* how necessary it would be in socialism, supposing we really accept his conception of authority.

Or perhaps it doesn’t, and we are just unable to tell why because Engels has insufficiently described what “authority” or “impose” mean. If Engels really meant something like the second interpretation of “impose” I suggested, where any disagreement between wills where one gets their way counts, there is no reason such disagreements should not appear in all areas of social life. Engels’ argument about the material conditions of production needing combined action was entirely unnecessary. If he doesn’t mean this sense of impose though, it’s unclear why authority is required in a society of two people.

Capitalist Present: The Authority of the Revolution

Why do the anti-authoritarians not confine themselves to crying out against political authority, the state? All Socialists are agreed that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution, that is, that public functions will lose their political character and will be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society.

In the final two paragraphs, Engels discusses the idea of political authority. While Engels believed that socialism will retain authority in *some* forms, it does not need to retain it in *all* forms. In particular, political authority, and therefore the state, will disappear in socialism.

According to Engels, “all Socialists” agree on this point. It is questionable whether this was really true even when Engels wrote it. Was this true of Lassalle? Of Bernstein? Even among Engels’ followers, this does not seem to be as well understood as Engels would have liked. Only a few decades later, key Bolshevik leaders would lament how commonly the Marxists of the Second International would present themselves as “statists” in contrast to the anarchists.

Nikolai Bukharin notes this near the start of his anti-anarchist paper [Anarchy and Scientific Communism](#) (1918):

Let’s begin with our own “final objective” and that of the anarchists. According to the way the problem is posed at present, communism and socialism presuppose the conservation of the state, whereas “anarchy,” eliminates the state. “Advocates,” of the state, as against “adversaries” of the state: that is how the “contrast,” between marxists and anarchists is usually depicted.

One must recognise that such an impression of the “contrast” is not the work of the anarchists alone. The social democrats are also very much to blame for it. Talk about “the state of the future” and “the people’s state” has had widespread currency in the realm of ideas and the phraseology of democracy. Furthermore, some social democrat parties always strive to lay special emphasis on their “statist” nature. The catchphrase of Austrian social democracy used to be “We are the true representatives of the state.” That sort of thinking was spread by others, too, apart from the Austrian party. In a way, it was a commonplace at an international level, and still is to this day, insofar as the old parties have not yet been thoroughly liquidated. And of course this “state learning,” has nothing to do with the revolutionary communist teachings of Marx.

Bukharin helped influence the views of Vladimir Lenin on the state, who argued a similar point within [State and Revolution](#) (1917),

The proletariat needs the state — this is repeated by all the opportunists, social-chauvinists and Kautskyites, who assure us that this is what Marx taught. But they “forget” to add that, in the first place, according to Marx, the proletariat needs

only a state which is withering away, i.e., a state so constituted that it begins to wither away immediately, and cannot but wither away.

We even see anarchists from this period lamenting how frequently they need to remind the Marxists that they were supposed to be opposed to the state too. The Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri writes in his response to Bukharin [*Anarchy and "Scientific" Communism*](#) (1922),

For some time now, communist writers — and Bukharin especially among them — have been wont to accuse anarchists of a certain error, which anarchists on the other hand have always denied, and which, until recent times, could be laid exclusively at the door of the social democrats of the Second International, to wit that of reducing the whole point of issue between marxism and anarchism into the question of the FINAL OBJECTIVE of the abolition or non-abolition of the state in the socialist society of the future.

At one time, democratic socialists who then, as the communists of today do, styled themselves “scientific,” affirmed the need for the state in the socialist regime and in so doing claimed to be marxists. Until very recently, anarchist writers were more or less the only ones who exposed this as a misrepresentation of marxism. Now, on the other hand, an effort is under way to make them jointly responsible for that misrepresentation.

It seems that Engels’ theory of the state is not nearly as well understood as he believed. Given this, it is worth elaborating on a point that Engels left implicit because he believed it was already common knowledge.

Engels believed that the state is a product of the class conflict. In capitalism, this primarily takes the form of conflict between the capitalists and landlords against the proletariat (i.e. wage-workers). The capitalists and landlords have claimed ownership of the land and means of social production as their private property, which can only be worked with their permission. The proletariat are only extended this permission on condition that, in addition to reproducing the value they consume, produce surplus value for the capitalists and other exploiting classes. They are therefore forced to work longer and more intensely than they need, working for free for a large portion of the day. There is therefore an irreconcilable antagonism between these classes in terms of their economic interest, with the rulers trying to extend this exploitation as far as possible, and the proletariat trying to eliminate it entirely.

Because of these opposed interests, the subservient classes tend to rebel against this, seizing the means of production for themselves or taking other actions to reduce their exploitation and sabotage the interests of their rulers. To maintain this system of exploitation, the ruling classes need to resort to violence. The state is their organization for this purpose, violently enforcing their property claims, breaking strikes, or even claiming new property through conquest or opening up new markets. This is the role of the state, with its police, military, prisons, and so on.

The state is therefore not a neutral institution, separate from the rest of society to enact blind and fair justice. It is an exercise of power over the masses that maintains the mode of production of that society. For the modern state, this is capitalism.

This position can be clearly seen in Engels' [Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State](#) (1884):

As the state arose from the need to keep class antagonisms in check, but also arose in the thick of the fight between the classes, it is normally the state of the most powerful, economically ruling class, which by its means becomes also the politically ruling class, and so acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class.

Because this is the true role of the state, it is also clear why Engels believed the state would disappear in socialism. The goal of socialism is the emancipation of the working classes and the abolition of all class rule. In a classless society, there would be no purpose for a tool of class rule. Having lost its central function, the state will disappear, with whatever necessary functions it provided losing their "political character."

At first glance it seems like Engels is in agreement with the Anarchists, at least as far as the state is concerned. However, Engels believes their theories differ in at least one important aspect covered in the next section.

But the anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority.

According to Engels' theory, if socialists wish to abolish the state, they need to focus on abolishing class distinctions. The state will disappear as a direct consequence of this, and will "die out" or "withers away." There is no need to abolish the state since it goes away on its own.¹²

The anarchists supposedly believe the reverse. They want to *begin* with the destruction of the state before class differences (i.e. "the social conditions that gave birth to it"). Engels describes this position as wanting to abolish the state "at one stroke." Engels has made similar claims in other places, like in [Anti-Dühring](#) (1878) where he claims the anarchists believe the state can be abolished "out of hand" or "overnight."¹³

¹² Friedrich Engels, [Anti-Dühring, Part 3, Ch. 2](#)

¹³ *Anti-Dühring*, Part 3, Ch. 2. It is worth noting that anarchists explicitly denied that they believed the revolution could be achieved overnight. For example, Bakunin wrote in the *Principles and Organization of the International Brotherhood* (1866): "The aim of this society is the triumph of the principle of Revolution in the world, and consequently the radical overthrow of all presently existing religious, political, economic and social organizations and institutions and the reconstitution first of European and subsequently of world society on the basis of liberty, reason, justice and work. This kind of task cannot be achieved overnight. The association is therefore constituted for an indefinite period, and will cease to exist only on

Engels thinks the anarchists have things fundamentally backwards. We can see this explicitly in the [letter to Theodore Cuno](#) regarding Bakunin that we analyzed earlier:

While the great mass of the Social-Democratic workers hold our view that state power is nothing more than the organisation with which the ruling classes, landlords and capitalists have provided themselves in order to protect their social prerogatives, Bakunin maintains that it is the *state* which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital *only by favour of the state*. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to hell of itself. We, on the contrary say: do away with capital, the appropriation of the whole means of production in the hands of the few, and the state will fall away of itself. The difference is an essential one. Without a previous social revolution the abolition of the state is nonsense; the abolition of capital is in itself the social revolution and involves a change in the whole method of production.¹⁴

Once again, months before “On Authority” was written, we can see Engels going through the same line of thinking. We even see a parallel to his assertion that “all Socialists” agree with his theory of the state, emphasizing that “great mass of Social-Democratic workers hold our view.”

More importantly, we see Engels not only thinks anarchists disagree with his theory, but essentially have the *reverse* of his theory. The anarchists not only intend on abolishing the state, but do *not* intend on abolishing capitalism. Instead of saying that class antagonisms are the cause of the state, they say the state is the cause of class distinctions. Therefore, they have the opposite plan of achieving socialism: abolishing the state, and then allowing capitalism to “wither away” or “go to hell of itself.” After we have completed our analysis of “On Authority,” we will take a closer look at Bakunin’s ideas to see if this is an accurate representation.

An obvious alternative that Engels does not consider here is that the state and capitalism are mutually reinforcing, and therefore needing to be abolished *together*. It seems natural to assume that any fight against capitalism would also necessarily involve fighting against its enforcers. Engels’ reason for excluding this though might be found in the next section though.

the day when the triumph of its principle throughout the world removes its raison d’etre.” ([Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings](#), p. 64). We have here not only an explicit rejection of the revolution being achieved overnight, but a recognition of the revolutionary organization being established here “withering away” once its task is complete. Also see *Means and Ends*, p. 104-106, and see [An Anarchist FAQ H.2.5](#).

¹⁴ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 141

Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?

Engels here tries to call the anarchists out on a contradiction. On the one hand, the anarchists advocate for a social revolution, with abolishing the state as its first act. On the other, the anarchists have denounced all forms of authority. The problem is that a revolution is “the most authoritarian thing there is.” It is an inherently violent affair, where “one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part.” This is necessarily an act of political authority, exercised by the proletariat’s own state. We therefore cannot consistently call for a revolution *and* denounce all authority.

It is clear then that, in Engels view, all violence is authoritarian, no matter what function it plays or what end it serves. The means alone (e.g. rifles, bayonets, and cannons) are what give it its authoritarian character, no matter the context. To assault someone is authoritarian, and to fight back against this is *equally* authoritarian. They are imposing their desire to hurt you, and by resisting, you are hurting them back and imposing your desire to not be hurt.

Engels is clearly using a broader definition of authority than the third interpretation of “impose” presented around the start of the essay. However, we should keep in mind that he is not equating authority with violence either. As the majority of the essay demonstrated, he believes there are non-violent forms of authority, as in a factory.

This seems to bring up another interesting point that is rarely discussed. Engels appears to believe that the anarchists are pacifists, or at least that they would need to be pacifists to be consistent. This is actually a rather frequent way that Marx and Engels depict anarchism, especially when discussing their calls for “abstentionism” and their opposition to political parties.

We can even see this in the essay Marx published alongside “On Authority” called “[Political Indifferentism](#).” Marx, pretending to be an anarchist, presents their position like this:

“If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form.”

...

It cannot be denied that if the apostles of political indifferentism were to express themselves with such clarity, the working class would make short shrift of them and would resent being insulted by these doctrinaire bourgeois and displaced gentlemen, who are so stupid or so naïve as to attempt to deny to the working class any real means of struggle. For all arms with which to fight must be drawn from society as it is and the fatal conditions of this struggle have the misfortune of not being easily adapted to the idealistic fantasies which these doctors in *social science* have exalted as divinities, under the names of *Freedom, Autonomy, Anarchy*.

Marx clearly is following a similar line of critique as Engels, with a similar style of mockery. The anarchist is a complete pacifist, stupid or naïve, rejecting all violence, apparently expecting the state to be abolished by simply laying down their weapons. The rejection of a “revolutionary dictatorship” is equated with the rejection of any violent resistance by the working class against their exploiters.

A similar point is made by Marx in a speech regarding the Hauge Congress of the First International:

A group has been formed in our midst which advocates that the workers should abstain from political activity.

We regard it as our duty to stress how dangerous and fatal we considered those principles to be for our cause.

One day the worker will have to seize political supremacy to establish the new organisation of labour; he will have to overthrow the old policy which supports the old institutions if he wants to escape the fate of the early Christians who, neglecting and despising politics, never saw their kingdom on earth.

But we by no means claimed that the means for achieving this goal were identical everywhere.

We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means. That being true we must also admit that in most countries on the Continent it is force which must be the lever of our revolution; it is force which will have to be resorted to for a time in order to establish the rule of the workers.¹⁵

Marx here is addressing the call from anarchists like Bakunin for “abstaining” from politics. Marx believes this is a direct rejection of a revolution. While he admits that socialism might be

¹⁵ Marx/Engels Vol 23, p. 254-255, partially quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 16

achievable in some places without violence, like in the United States or England, he believed most European countries would require force found in a revolution, which is equated to establishing “the rule of the workers.” We once again then have anarchist abstentionism equated with pacifism, which is countered by pointing to the need for violence to achieve socialism.

When many modern readers see this passage, they assume that Engels is accusing the anarchists of contradicting themselves by calling for violence while claiming to reject authority. But from the evidence, it seems like the actual contradiction Engels has in mind is the anarchists calling for a *revolution* while *rejecting* violence. This is a subtle distinction, but an important one for understanding how Engels view anarchism. This also explains why he incredulously asks “have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution” only to then explain in detail the need for violence.

This also helps to explain why Engels believes the anarchist view of the state is so backwards, or why they cannot support simultaneously opposing the state and capital. For Engels, the state is *any* organized violent force fighting on behalf of *any* class. Because they share the common feature of “violence,” and therefore “authority,” Engels groups together the exploiters’ organizations dedicated to enforcing class rule and the worker’s organization dedicated to abolishing class rule under the name “state” or “dictatorship.”

If the anarchists tried to actually organize a violent revolution, then Engels would consider this organization to just be a state by another name.

Or so it seems from reading “On Authority.” It is not clear that Engels maintained this position over time. Partly as a consequence of anarchist pressure, Engels later began to shift his terminology denying that the “worker’s state” really is a state in the proper sense of the term, having features that make it unique compared to all other states, like its tendency to wither away. This can be seen a few years later in his [March 18-28, 1875 letter to August Bebel](#) regarding the draft of the Gotha Programme:

All the palaver about the state ought to be dropped, especially after the [Paris] Commune, which had ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term. The *people’s state* has been flung in our teeth *ad nauseam* by the anarchists, although Marx’s anti-Proudhon piece and after it the *Communist Manifesto* declare outright that, with the introduction of the socialist order of society, the state will dissolve of itself and disappear. Now, since the state is merely a transitional institution of which use is made in the struggle, in the revolution, to keep down one’s enemies by force, it is utter nonsense to speak of a free people’s state; so long as the proletariat still *makes use* of the state, it makes use of it, not for the purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies and, as soon as there can be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist. We would therefore suggest that *Gemeinwesen* [“commonalty”] be universally substituted for *state*; it is a good old German word that can very well do service for the French “Commune.”

We can see here then that Engels has basically the same theory of the state in mind. The state is presented as any institution used for “keeping down one’s enemies by force.” Because the state has this role, Engels believes it is “not used for the purpose of freedom.” By this reasoning, a slave uprising, since they use of violence against the masters in order to free themselves, could not be characterized as being used “for the purpose of freedom.”

Even if Engels’ theory is unchanged though, he is refining his terminology here. He believes this “worker’s state” should no longer be called a state, not only because he considers it to be a rhetorically losing battle against the anarchists, but because there is a real material distinction between this “people’s state” which will “dissolve of itself and disappear” against a state “in the true sense of the term.” Lenin would later mark a similar argument, denying that it is proper speaking to refer to the worker’s revolutionary organization as a state.¹⁶

Therefore, either one of two things: either the anti-authoritarians don't know what they're talking about, in which case they are creating nothing but confusion; or they do know, and in that case they are betraying the movement of the proletariat. In either case they serve the reaction.

Believing he has caught the anarchists in a contradiction and advocating for a position actively harmful to worker’s emancipation, Engels says we have two alternatives: either the anarchists do not know what they are doing or they do.

If they do not, their confused ideas undermine the workers’ movement. Not only are they incorrect about what sort of society the workers are fighting for in socialism, but they are also advocating against the workers using the best means at their disposal for doing so.

If they do, then we are in the same situation, except now the anarchists could be seen as traitors instead of fools. Either way, they harm the movement and help the bourgeoisie.

This concludes “On Authority.”

The Argument Restated

Our meticulous analysis of “On Authority” has revealed many points of ambiguity within the essay. We have been able to clarify some of these points by reading them in context of other parts of the essay, understanding the historical context it was written in, and comparing it to similar writings from Engels and Marx. Other points however still remain ambiguous despite these efforts.

Where ambiguities remain, I have attempted to provide several interpretations and argue for the reading I consider the most plausible. It is possible that someone more familiar with Marx and

¹⁶ Vladimir Lenin, [State and Revolution, ch. 5](#)

Engels' thought could clear these points up more than I have been able to do, or could even demonstrate flaws in my own interpretation.

I believe any errors on my part should be relatively minor or peripheral. The core of Engels' argument appears relatively clear. It can generally be summarized like this:

- The anti-authoritarians socialists (aka autonomists or anarchists) condemn all authority.
- Engels defines authority as “the imposition of the will of another upon ours,” subordinating the latter to the former. This definition is meant to be in the same sense of what anarchists mean when they oppose all authority.
- Engels believes the anti-authoritarians are wrong for two reasons:
 - People will need authority even within a future socialist society.
 - The workers need to utilize authority within our present capitalist society to achieve socialism.
- Production tends more and more towards the use of complex machinery which requires many people to coordinate their actions together (i.e. combined action) to operate.
- With this greater need for combined action comes a greater need for organization and administration.
- This system of administration, no matter what form it takes, exercises authority by imposing certain decisions, such as scheduling.
- Because this complex automatic machinery requires these administrative needs by its very nature, the automatic machinery holds a veritable despotism over the workers independent of all social organization.
- Some anarchists have denied that these delegates are authorities, and instead represent a very different kind of social relation (e.g. having a commission entrusted). Engels asserts that they are authorities, and accuses the anarchist of trying to pretend like they're not the same by simply applying a new label, being unable to point to any material distinction.
- Engels concludes that socialism will not abolish all authority, but will instead confine it to the limits made inevitable by the conditions of production.
- The anarchists are correct that socialism will not have the political authority of the state, but are entirely wrong about how this comes about, thinking the revolution can *start* with abolishing the state before destroying the conditions that gave rise to it.
- The anarchists contradict themselves in calling for a revolution, which must necessarily be violent and therefore authoritarian.
- The errors and confusion spread by anarchism hinder the worker's movement, either intentionally or unintentionally, and therefore serve its enemies.

Within this, he makes several important claims against anarchism are these:

Firstly, anarchists oppose all authority, with authority being understood to mean something being “imposed.” Engels does not elaborate on what something being “imposed” means though. From his examples, it seems to be narrower than the broadest interpretation given, where something is imposed simply by being the case independently from our will, but it is also broader than coercion used to maintain class privilege, including *all* acts of violence.

Engels' interpretation seems closer to the "middle" interpretation we examined, where authority exists whenever someone acts to achieve an end which conflicts with what someone else desires. However, it also seems simultaneously broader and narrower. It is broader because he also attributes authority to forces of nature and machinery, but it must also be narrower since, if he really did mean that, he could have found less convoluted examples of combined action. A couple deciding what to have for dinner is a form of combined action far more "independent of all social organization" than a factory.

Secondly, anarchists must oppose administration or coordination in production as a form of authority. It is unclear how far Engels thinks this line of argument could be taken. Does mere advice or recommendations count as authority? Or does it need a more formal structure? At the very least, anarchists should not be able to consistently accept the examples Engels cites, such as a group of people voting on an agreed upon schedule or assigning a delegate to create one.

The "consistent" point is important, since Engels indicates that the anarchists he spoke to did not oppose this in practice. The force of Engels' argument here depends on the clarity of his definition of authority, its consistency with the anarchist usage of the term, and the schedule-making delegates as a clear example of the sense of authority anarchists claim to oppose.

Thirdly, anarchists must oppose all forms of violence, including that used by oppressed people to resist their oppression, since all violence is authoritarian. Engels seems to really believe that the anarchists would need to be pacifists to remain consistent. But even if they do not, they would still need to explain how the definition of authority does not imply that all violence is authoritarian.

The Critique of "On Authority"

Engels' Syllogism

To better focus our critique, and to further clarify this interpretation of Engels' argument, it is useful to present it in the simplest form possible. This can be done by presenting his argument as a simple *modus tollens* syllogism.

- Premise 1: If the anarchists are correct, then socialists must reject all authority. (If P then Q.)
- Premise 2: Socialists must not reject all authority. (Not Q.)
 - Certain forms of authority are inevitable given the conditions of production, and will therefore be necessary in a future socialist society.
 - Workers must exercise authority in the present to abolish capitalism.
- Conclusion: Therefore the anarchists are not correct. (Not P.)

I will call this “Engels’ Syllogism” from here on. Any reference to Premise 1 and Premise 2 without further context are implicitly about this syllogism.

Syllogisms can be shown to be unsound either by demonstrating at least one of the premises are false, or by showing that the argument is invalid. This gives us three basic methods of criticizing “On Authority.”

Premise 1 can be false if anarchists do not believe socialism must reject all authority *in the sense Engels is using the term*. It is definitely not hard to find examples of anarchists denouncing “all authority,” but to interpret this properly, we need to understand the sense in which authority is being denounced.

Engels believes he defined authority “in the sense in which the word is used here” by the anarchists. However, if this is wrong and his definition is broader than the anarchist meaning, including things which anarchists do not condemn, then Premise 1 would be false. Engels would be presenting a clear strawman of anarchism.

Premise 2 can be challenged if socialists do not require authority. Determining whether this is true or false also depends on how the word “authority” is understood for similar reasons to Premise 1. A more narrow definition of authority would exclude some things that could be embraced by a broader definition. Once this is established, we can challenge Engels’ two primary examples of necessary authority: combined action in production and a revolution.

The validity of Engels’ Syllogism can be challenged if Engels is not actually making a *modus tollens* argument. For example, if the meaning of the word “authority” is changing between premises 1 and 2, then Engels would be subtly making a false equivocation fallacy.

For comparison, imagine suppose someone made this argument against Engels:

- If Engels is correct, then socialism will be a classless society. (If P then Q.)
- Socialism will not be a classless society. (Not Q.) Students will still need classes to learn things like math, history, art, music, etc.
- Therefore, Engels is not correct. (Not P.)

This argument obviously does not challenge Engels’ position in any meaningful way, and certainly would not convince any Marxist, because it is equivocating the “social class” and “classroom.”

To examine whether Engels’ Syllogism works, we must analyze a several questions:

1. How did anarchists understand and critique authority?
2. Does the anarchist critique of authority apply to combined action or machinery?
3. Does the anarchist critique of authority apply to violent revolutions?

In the process, we will need to address other issues brought up in our analysis, such as the anarchist view of the relation between the state and class conflict, whether anarchists believe the state can be abolished “at one stroke,” whether anarchists are pacifists, and so on.

How Anarchists Talk About Authority

Engels defines authority as “the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination.” I have also suggested we could give this a more universal form as “the imposition of the will of one party upon another.” As we’ve seen, Engels expected this definition to be consistent with the anarchist usage. According to Engels, when the anarchists are rejecting authority, they are rejecting it in this sense.

To see whether Engels is accurately describing the anarchist position, we need to examine the anarchists themselves and how they described and critiqued authority. In the process of examining this, we will naturally also see them address a number of other related issues regarding administration, production, and the state.

We have also seen that Engels appears to have one particular anarchist in mind: Mikhail Bakunin. This is not said directly in “On Authority,” but has been made clear from the timing of the essay’s writing, coinciding with the split in the First International following the Hague Congress, and was stated explicitly in Engels’ letters to Lafargue and Cuno in an early version of Engels’ argument. Special attention should be given then to Bakunin’s analysis of authority. Still, the fact remains that “On Authority” is presented as a critique of anarchists *in general*, so we should not look at Bakunin exclusively.

By analyzing the thoughts of various anarchists on authority, our hope is to also move toward what might be considered a “standard” anarchist definition of authority to compare against Engels’ definition. If there are major disagreements between the anarchists about authority, this might not be possible or could be misleading. But if enough and consistent points of commonality can be found, then we can make a working definition.

To make a proper assessment of Engels, we should preferably use anarchist sources prior to “On Authority” being written. However, “On Authority” was written so early into the history of anarchism that this can be difficult. Many early anarchists marked the birth of the anarchist movement with the Saint-Imier Congress of September 1872. If we follow them in this dating, then anarchism was a mere month old when Engels wrote “On Authority.”¹⁷ The ideas that would become “anarchist” were developing well prior to this point, of course, but this nevertheless is a major limitation on what material can be used. Few works exist, and even less have been translated.

Given these limitations, my analysis here will include not only anarchist works prior to the authorship of “On Authority,” but also other anarchists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I will begin with texts written prior to October 1872, giving special focus to the writings of Bakunin

¹⁷ *Means and Ends*, p. 26-27

as the primary author Engels had in mind. Once that is established, I intend to examine the thoughts of later anarchist writings, demonstrating a continuity of thought if possible.

As a consequence of this approach, this section will be fairly lengthy, quote-heavy, and somewhat repetitive since we are trying to demonstrate the large degree of overlap between thinkers. I also hope that readers who might be unfamiliar with anarchist theory can be exposed to several works in the process.

Bakunin's Writings on Authority

Mikhail Bakunin was a Russian anarchist who played an instrumental role in developing, spreading, and organizing anarchist theory within the First International, and is remembered as one of Karl Marx's chief opponents. Bakunin's ideas only became distinctly anarchist in the last decade of his life, taking shape during his time in Italy between 1864 to 1867.¹⁸ I will be focusing on selected writings from here on then to elaborate on how he discussed authority. Since authority here is also discussed in contrast to freedom, autonomy, and anarchy, we will also need to build our understanding of these concepts as well in the process.

Revolutionary Catechism (1866)

In 1864, Bakunin helped to found a secret revolutionary group called the International Brotherhood, which would subsequently publish its programs and statutes in three documents: *The International Family*, the *Revolutionary Catechism*, and the *National Catechism*. Within these we can see these first formulations of anarchist thought.¹⁹

I will begin our analysis here, pulling from his "[Revolutionary Catechism](#)" (1866) where he lays out key thoughts on freedom and equality, which is contrasted with authority. Focusing first on the former, we can see how Bakunin believes these concepts are inherently linked together.

III. Freedom is the absolute right of every adult man and woman to seek no other sanction for their acts than their own conscience and their own reason, being responsible first to themselves and then to the society which they have *voluntarily* accepted.

IV. It is not true that the freedom of one man is limited by that of other men. Man is really free to the extent that his freedom, fully acknowledged and mirrored by the free consent of his fellowmen, finds confirmation and expansion in their liberty. Man is truly free only among equally free men; the slavery of even one human being violates humanity and negates the freedom of all.

V. The *freedom* of each is therefore realizable only in the equality of all. The realization of freedom through equality, in principle and in fact, is *justice*.

¹⁸ Sam Dolgoff (ed.), [Bakunin On Anarchy](#), p. 58

¹⁹ [Bakunin On Anarchy](#), p. 58

VI. If there is one fundamental principle of human morality, *it is freedom*. To respect the freedom of your fellowman *is duty*; to love, help, and serve him *is virtue*.

Bakunin here presents an extremely holistic view of freedom at the center of his analysis. Individual and collective freedom are seen as inherently intertwined, so that you cannot have one without the other. No individual adult man or woman must seek sanction from others for their actions. But at the same time, *no* individual must do this, extending this rule out to all. We have here not only a sense of *absolute* freedom, but also of *equal* freedom.

A natural assumption here would be that these notions contradict one another. If an individual is absolutely, then one might think this would include actions that violate the freedom of others, like the freedom to murder, enslave, exploit, and so on. Bakunin certainly agrees that we are not free to do these things. We have a duty to “respect the freedom of your fellowman.” But he disagrees with this individualistic view of individual freedom that is in conflict with the freedom of others. Rather, he wants to argue that our freedom finds “confirmation and expansion” in the liberty of others. Likewise, the violation of the freedom of others also hinders your own freedom.

Liberty is therefore not only a negative thing, an absence of this need for sanction or slavery, but is also something positive found in other people. For this reason, Bakunin believes freedom is found only among “equally free men.” Freedom and equality then necessarily come together hand-in-hand. The freedom of each requires the freedom of all.

Bakunin advocates for this freedom as the basis of human society. Virtue is found in loving, helping, and serving our fellows. This naturally follows when we see our interests as inherently connected with them, finding our own freedom in their own. This anarchist approach to society then is not only fundamentally voluntary, but built upon relationships of solidarity with one another.

Bakunin also does not shy away from presenting his position as a moral one. He presents the realization of freedom as justice, presents it as the foundation of morality, and argues that it implies certain duties and virtues. This aspect of Bakunin’s thought tends to especially contrast to Marxist ones, which often eschew moral pronouncements. While Bakunin does not take the same effort to avoid moral claims in his programs and propaganda, this does not necessarily affect his analysis.

On the contrary, this notion found here about the social nature of freedom is also found in Marx and Engels. For example, in the [Manifesto of the Communist Party](#), they proclaim that “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” Likewise in [Capital](#), Marx argues that socialism will be “a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.” This idea of achieving in some sense “full” freedom, and the inherent compatibility of individual and collective freedom, is found in their own works as their explicit goal.

Bakunin's emphasis on equality might also be disagreeable to some Marxists. For example, Engels, in his [letter to Bebel](#), believed that we needed to move away from the French concept of "liberty, equality, fraternity." In particular, the idea of abolishing social and political equality should be replaced by "the abolition of all class distinctions." He argued that, because complete equality cannot be achieved due to natural differences in individuals and locations, appeals to equality were too inexact. But as Bakunin has his concept of "equality of freedom," there is a more workable concept here. Bakunin on occasion even used the phrase "equality of classes" as synonymous with abolishing classes. This would become a contentious point in his dispute with Marx, who used this expression to accuse Bakunin of advocating the bourgeois notion of "harmony of capital and labor."²⁰

Having identified Bakunin's notion of freedom and its related concepts, we are in a better position to understand his notion of authority in contrast.

VII. *Absolute rejection of every authority including that which sacrifices freedom for the convenience of the state.* Primitive society had no conception of freedom; and as society evolved, *before* the full awakening of human rationality and freedom, it passed through a stage controlled by human and divine authority. The political and economic structure of society must now be reorganized on the basis of freedom. Henceforth, *order in society must result from the greatest possible realization of individual liberty, as well as of liberty on all levels of social organization.*

VIII. The political and economic organization of social life must not, as at present, be directed from the summit to the base — the center to the circumference — imposing unity through forced centralization. On the contrary, it must be reorganized to issue *from the base to the summit — from the circumference to the center — according to the principles* of free association and federation.

Bakunin presents authority here primarily as a negation of freedom. Given his social view of freedom which requires equality and solidarity, authority therefore implies not only unfreedom, but also inequality and privilege. Human progress is characterized precisely by this rejection of authority, becoming more advanced as it is based more on freedom. Again, since Bakunin recognizes the inherently social nature of freedom, this free society would recognize individual liberty *and* liberty at all levels of social organization.

Bakunin elaborates on this in the next point, contrasting a society marked by hierarchy and forced centralization to one of free association and federation. He frequently used geometric analogies to illustrate this contrast. An authoritarian society concentrates power for the people

²⁰ When Marx originally saw this expression, he wrote to Engels that he recognized it as a "slip of the pen." Bakunin also clarified his meaning in a [letter to Marx](#) on December 22, 1868 and was happy to alter his wording as it appeared in his program to accommodate Marx's critique. Despite being aware of this clarification and downplaying its importance early on, as their conflict within the International heated up, Marx regularly used this phrase as one of his main methods of denouncing Bakunin. Bakunin would continue to defend the phrase, as in [Statism and Anarchy](#) (p. 160). For more on this point of conflict, see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 4-6, 41-42, 56, 203. For more on the anarchist notions of equality, see *Means and Ends*, p. 66-68.

“on top” (from the summit to the base) and concentrates this power into their group against others (from the center to the circumference). Anarchy, a free society, is marked by the exact opposite, being controlled from the base to the summit and the circumference to the center. Interestingly, this analogy does not *deny* the existence of a center, but would imply that there is no *forced* centralization. Bakunin’s emphasis on federation seems to work well with this and voluntary communities seem to work well with this.

As the catechism goes on, Bakunin describes what he believes this free society would look like, such as liberty for all religions while giving privilege to none of them, abolition of monarchies, classes, and the state, for the new anarchist institutions to be based on universal suffrage of both sexes, and a series of individual rights that should be guaranteed in the new society like the material support and education of children, freedom of speech, and so on. His vision is pluralistic, denying that any single blueprint will be appropriate for free people dealing with different regional history, geographic, and economic considerations. Still, he does try to identify certain essential and shared features of these societies, such as the abolition of the state, clerical rule, monarchies, and economic classes, and the recognition of individual liberty and the free federation as these individuals work together.

Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism (1867)

During this period, Bakunin had also become active within the League for Peace and Freedom, an anti-war organization created in response to the Luxembourg crisis and the war between Austria and Prussia. This was primarily a bourgeois democratic organization, so had very little revolutionary potential. Still, Bakunin hoped to push people within the organization to adopt a much more revolutionary approach. While he was unable to turn the organization itself to these ends, he was able to pull its membership away and bring them into the First International.²¹

One of these attempts was Bakunin’s “[Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism](#)” (1867) presented at their first congress in Geneva. In this, Bakunin reframes the League’s goal for a “United States of Europe” along an anarchist conception of federalism, which is of course “anti-state” more properly speaking. Bakunin recognizes this explicitly saying that “the United States of Europe can never be formed from the states as they are now constituted,” by which he especially means the “centralized state, being of necessity bureaucratic and militarist, even if it were to call itself republican.”

Instead, Bakunin argued the Congress of Geneva should proclaim:

5. That all members of the League should therefore bend all their efforts toward reconstituting their respective countries, in order to replace their old constitution – founded from top to bottom on violence and the principle of authority – with a new organization based solely upon the interests, the needs, and the natural preferences of their populations – having no other principle but the free federation of individuals into communes, of communes

²¹ *Bakunin On Anarchy*, p. 35

into provinces, of the provinces into nations, and, finally, of the nations into the United States of Europe first, and of the entire world eventually.

We can clearly see here that, while Bakunin is adapting his language for his audience, he is still expressing this same idea of freedom, where individual liberty and liberty at each level of social organization. This view of free organization is contrasted to organizations “founded from top to bottom” and are based on “violence and the principle of authority.” Bakunin clarifies this idea of the “principle of authority” a little later on.

Because of this freedom, Bakunin calls for rejecting the “historic right of the State,” emphasizing the autonomy of each level of organization, as well as the right for them to disassociate.

7. Recognition of the absolute right of each nation, great or small, of each people, weak or strong, of each province, of each commune, to complete autonomy, provided its internal constitution is not a threat or a danger to the autonomy and liberty of neighboring countries.
8. The fact that a country has been part of a State, even if it has joined that State freely and of its own will, does not create an obligation for that country to remain forever so attached. No perpetual obligation could be accepted by human justice, the only kind of justice that may have authority amongst us, and we shall never recognize other rights or duties than those founded upon liberty. The right of free union and of equally free secession is the first, the most important, of all political rights, the one right without which the federation would never be more than a centralization in disguise.

Interestingly here, Bakunin recognizes “human justice” as “the only kind of justice that may have authority amongst us.” Likewise, he also presents a limit to the autonomy of the people and communes as being conditioned on it being “not a threat or a danger to the autonomy and liberty of neighboring countries.”

As we know Bakunin is adapting his language for his audience here, we can understand these sections in light of his other comments. By “human justice,” Bakunin means precisely “the realization of freedom through equality.” This “authority” then can clearly be distinguished from the other sense Bakunin is advocating against, which inherently implies unfreedom and inequality, which is especially clear from the overall context of this passage denouncing the right of states and championing free association. Likewise, the limit placed on autonomy here of not threatening others is, again, ultimately no limit at all for Bakunin, since he sees freedom as being *expanded* in the equal freedom of others, rather than restricted by it.

The ideas of disassociation and secession being brought forward in the 1860s easily brings to mind the American Civil War and the Confederacy. Unsurprisingly though, while Bakunin is sympathetic to the idea of secession, he has little love for this state fighting on the side of slavery, seeing this flaw as demolishing any other virtue they might have had. Still, he is not uncritical of the Northern states and the capitalist system they brought in the place of slavery, with Bakunin arguing this only replacing explicit slavery with one *de facto* slavery.

The internal political organization of the Southern states was, in certain respects, even freer than that of the Northern states. It was only that in this magnificent organization of the Southern states there was a black spot, just as there was a black spot in the republics of antiquity; the freedom of their citizens was founded upon the forced labor of slaves. This sufficed to overthrow the entire existence of these states.

Citizens and slaves – such was the antagonism in the ancient world, as in the slave states of the new world. Citizens and slaves, that is, forced laborers, slaves not *de jure* but *de facto* [not in law but in fact], such is the antagonism in the modern world. And just as the ancient states perished through slavery, the modern states will likewise perish through the proletariat.

Later in this speech, Bakunin presents a much more detailed critique of the state, especially as it is presented by the French philosopher Rousseau in his defense of democratic states governed by the sovereignty of the “general will.”

Bakunin criticized this idea as ultimately illusory, denying the people the ability to manage their own affairs, while also assuming they are capable enough to elect people to rule over others. If the people were really so prudent and just that they could be trusted with this, that there would be no need for the state. It would be reduced down only to its essential functions, losing its “political character” as Engels might term it, to become “a sort of central accounting bureau at the service of society.” This stands in contrast with what the defenders of the state *actually* view it as. They implicitly view the masses as stupid, ignorant, and incompetent, needing some people of superior intelligence to rule over them like sheep.

In the process of this critique, Bakunin gives us a much clearer sense of what he means by the “principle of authority.”

Any logical and straightforward theory of the State is essentially founded upon the principle of *authority*, that is, the eminently theological, metaphysical, and political idea that the masses, *always* incapable of governing themselves, must at all times submit to the beneficent yoke of a wisdom and a justice imposed upon them, in some way or other, from above. Imposed in the name of what, and by whom? Authority which is recognized and respected as such by the masses can come from three sources only: force, religion, or the action of a superior intelligence. As we are discussing the theory of the State founded upon the free contract, we must postpone discussion of those states founded on the dual authority of religion and force and, for the moment, confine our attention to authority based upon a superior intelligence, which is, as we know, always represented by minorities.

The principle of authority then is the idea behind it, justifying authority as actually practiced and exercised. Essential to this idea is that the people, incapable of ruling themselves, need to be ruled “from above.” This power can be exercised in various different ways, and different theories of the State may try to justify it in different ways. Still, we are left with some minority putting itself

above the masses. This includes democratic states supposedly ruled by the “social contract” or “free contract,” but which really turns out to be this kind of technocratic justification.

Bakunin is rather critical of democratic government, but he is also careful to point out that this does not mean he prefers monarchy. In fact, he recognizes democratic governments as still superior. However, the basis of this superiority is still on the degree to which people can exercise freedom against these governments.

Let no one think that in criticizing the democratic government we thereby show our preference for the monarchy. We are firmly convinced that the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy. In a republic, there are at least brief periods when the people, while continually exploited, is not oppressed; in the monarchies, oppression is constant. The democratic regime also lifts the masses up gradually to participation in public life – something the monarchy never does. Nevertheless, while we prefer the republic, we must recognize and proclaim that whatever the form of government may be, so long as human society continues to be divided into different classes as a result of the *hereditary* inequality of occupations, of wealth, of education, and of rights, there will always be a class-restricted government and the inevitable exploitation of the majorities by the minorities.

The State is nothing but this domination and this exploitation, well regulated and systematized.

This gives us a rather clear view of Bakunin’s understanding of the nature of the state. Domination and exploitation are its essential and defining features, but now at a systematic level.

These are interesting points to keep in mind in contrast to Engels. Both Engels and Bakunin seem to view the state as something fundamentally tied to class, or is “class-restricted” as Bakunin describes here. However, Bakunin seems to believe that the State, working on this principle of authority, is inherently tied to the *exploiting* class, with the minority ruling over the majority. For Bakunin, the state is nothing but regulated and systematized exploitation and domination. For Marx and Engels, the fighting force the workers create to combat this exploitation and domination is *also* a state or “revolutionary dictatorship.” Even they recognized differences between this kind of “state” and others though, and later moved away from calling this type of organization a “state” at all.

Also interesting is that Bakunin appears to present the state as a *consequence* of class divisions. Bakunin says that, “so long as human society continues to be divided into different classes” there must also be a class-based government. Class division is therefore what necessitates the state. Recall that in his letter to Cuno, Engels accused Bakunin of believing the opposite, saying that “Bakunin maintains that it is the *state* which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital *only by favour of the state.*” At least here, this does not appear to be the case.

If Marx and Engels were to take issue with this Bakunin quote, I believe it would be over him saying that these class divisions are a result of “hereditary inequality.” While they are a component of this of course, as Marx would agree, Bakunin tended to put far more emphasis on this fact than Marx. They had a rather intense and public disagreement on this point which are almost entirely ignored in modern discourse about the two.²²

Bakunin does seem to believe that, even as class divisions produce the state and might even be the original source, the state also produces class divisions in a symbiotic relationship. This happens not only by the very fact that a privileged part of the population is set up as rulers, but because the practice of ruling corrupts and solidifies these relations into class relations. This solidification specifically tends to be the point Bakunin focused on, and ties into why he focused so much on inheritance in connection to class.

Bakunin argues that, supposing there were some society that believed it could not manage its own affairs and needed rulers, then some small part of the population would be selected from among them with the personal capacities, talents, interest, and circumstance that made them best fit to rule. Thus we have a division between the masses who submit themselves to these officials they elected, and that small minority of people selected for being the most exceptional among them.

Equality between people in this case could not be maintained. This minority of people, through the practice of governing, will develop in ways and come to view themselves as fit to govern, having already been assumed to be elected for their superiority.

Nothing is as dangerous for man’s personal morality as the habit of commanding. The best of men, the most intelligent, unselfish, generous, and pure, will always and inevitably be corrupted in this pursuit. Two feelings inherent in the exercise of power never fail to produce this demoralization: *contempt for the masses, and, for the man in power, an exaggerated sense of his own worth.*

From this, they will act in ways to reproduce and entrench this power. Bakunin’s critique of authority here is not merely moral, but practical because of the actual kind of society it produces. The moral corruption that comes with it is one directly produced by the material social relation.

²² This conflict especially came to a point at the Basel Congress of the First International. Marx took Bakunin’s call for the abolition of inheritance in the program of the Alliance as an argument that the social revolution needed to *start* with this abolition. Bakunin made no such claim. Against this imagined position, Marx argued that inheritance laws, like all juridical realities, were a consequence of the economic basis of society, and could only truly be abolished by attacking that basis. Calling to start the social revolution with the abolition of inheritance would therefore be “false in theory, and reactionary in practice.” Against this, Bakunin agreed that juridical laws arise out of the economic base, but adds that these laws then become the basis for reinforcing and expanding these economic systems. The fight against inheritance is therefore a necessary part of the fight against that economic base. In the end, the Congress did not accept either Marx or Bakunin’s position, but while Bakunin simply failed to win an absolute majority due to a large number of abstentions, Marx’s proposal was actively voted against. For more, see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 19-23.

The moral system Bakunin advocated for, and therefore also argued for the kind of social system required for it and which creates it, is one built on “respect for humanity.”

All human morality – and we shall try, further on, to prove the absolute truth of this principle, the development, explanation, and widest application of which constitute the real subject of this essay – all collective and individual morality rests essentially upon *respect for humanity*. What do we mean by respect for humanity? We mean the recognition of human right and human dignity in every man, of whatever race, color, degree of intellectual development, or even morality.

The “respect for humanity” is, exactly as it says, extended to all humanity, irrespective of race.

This is not to say Bakunin consistently practiced this. Far from it, as Bakunin was an anti-Semite. He would denounce certain individuals for being Jewish, stereotype them as wealthy bankers, and tended to treat them collectively as a single unit engaged in a conspiracy to control the world through commerce. He would see in his genuine conflicts with certain Jewish individuals, such as with Karl Marx or Nikolai Utin, a conflict with Jews in general.

This clear racism from Bakunin is disgusting, unjustifiable, and entirely incompatible with his explicitly stated principles. Bakunin was a self-contradictory figure, denouncing racism and colonialism and championing the self-determination of minorities in one breath, only to then turn around and write off an entire ethnicity. I highly recommend Zoe Baker’s [“Bakunin was a Racist,”](#) which details the various incidents of Bakunin’s antisemitism, its relation to his overall thought and argument, and its relation to the rest of the anarchist movement.

Anarchism might ideologically champion human liberation, but by no means perfectly embodies it and throughout its history has had to deal with internal racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, and so on.²³ This must not be whitewashed. While there is a great deal of insight which can be learned from studying the socialists of the past, our commitment remains first to human emancipation itself, to “truth, justice, and morality as the basis of [our] conduct toward each other and toward all men, without regard to color, creed, or nationality.”²⁴ Bakunin himself did not expect anarchists to become “Bakuninists,” as if we followed men and not ideas, and emphasized that against any expert we must still reserve the right to criticize and verify.

Returning back to “Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism,” Bakunin holds that respect for humanity should be extended to all, including the genuinely wicked. He believed we can and should respect others this way, even when we needed to defend ourselves against them with violence.

But if this man is stupid, wicked, or contemptible, can I respect him? Of course, if he is all that, it is impossible for me to respect his villainy, his stupidity, and his brutality; they are repugnant to me and arouse my indignation. I shall, if necessary, take the

²³ *Means and Ends*, p. 78-79

²⁴ [General Rules of the International Working Men’s Association](#); also quoted by Zoe Baker within “Bakunin was a Racist.”

strongest measures against them, even going so far as to kill him if I have no other way of defending against him my life, my right, and whatever I hold precious and worthy. But even in the midst of the most violent and bitter, even mortal, combat between us, I must respect his human character. My own dignity as a man depends on it.

This respect for humanity shaped Bakunin's thought on how we should respond to anti-social behavior. He is not opposed to violence, even killing someone else when necessary as a matter of self-defense.

However, outside of these cases where violence is necessary, he did not think even the wicked person should be mistreated. Out of his respect for their humanity, he supported rehabilitative justice. This too extends from his materialist understanding of humanity, and the way we are shaped by our social conditions and environment.

Nevertheless, if he himself fails to recognize this dignity in others, must we recognize it in him? If he is a sort of ferocious beast or, as sometimes happens, worse than a beast, would we not, in recognizing his humanity, be supporting a mere fiction? NO, for whatever his present intellectual and moral degradation may be, if, organically, he is neither an idiot nor a madman – in which case he should be treated as a sick man rather than as a criminal – if he is in full possession of his senses and of such intelligence as nature has granted him, his humanity, no matter how monstrous his deviations might be, nonetheless really exists. *It exists as a lifelong potential capacity to rise to the awareness of his humanity, even if there should be little possibility for a radical change in the social conditions which have made him what he is.*

Take the most intelligent ape, with the finest disposition; though you place him in the best, most humane environment, you will never make a man of him. Take the most hardened criminal or the man with the poorest mind, provided that neither has any organic lesion causing idiocy or insanity; the criminality of the one, and the failure of the other to develop an awareness of his humanity and his human duties, *is not their fault, nor is it due to their nature; it is solely the result of the social environment in which they were born and brought up.*

What is Authority (1870 or 1871)

“[What is Authority](#)” was written in either [1870](#) or [1871](#), and is a portion of a larger unfinished work from Bakunin called *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*. This would be published posthumously in 1882 as part of [God and the State](#), which was meant to be Part II of Bakunin's longer book.

Given that this is one of Bakunin's longest treatments on the concept of authority directly, which is precisely what we hope to analyze here, I believe it's appropriate to dedicate a bit more time

to explaining and interpreting this essay in full, whereas in other cases I have simply highlighted certain especially relevant passages and scattered references to authority.

“What is Authority” begins within the middle of *God and the State*, so some additional context is required. In the previous sections, Bakunin argued in favor of a materialist view of humanity and the world, which he was drawing in contrast to the view presented by the idealists. In particular, Bakunin was arguing that the idea of God, an absolute and supreme master, was incompatible with human liberty. They, on the other hand, claimed to be simultaneously championing God *and* liberty.

Bakunin considers this self-evidently absurd, perhaps even purposefully so. However, he concedes that a possible reason for this is that they may be using the word “liberty” very differently, especially because they keep trying to combine it with authority. Bakunin makes his distaste for authority very clear, saying it is “a word and a thing which we [materialists and revolutionary socialists] detest with all our heart.”

This leads into a more general discussion of the exact meaning of these terms.

Perhaps, too, while speaking of liberty as something very respectable and very dear, they understood the term quite differently than we do, as materialists and revolutionary socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, authority—a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the necessary concatenation and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? Indeed, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden, but is even impossible. We may misunderstand them or still not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them, because they constitute the basis and very conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts, so that even when we believe that we disobey them, we do nothing but demonstrate their omnipotence.

Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But there is nothing humiliating in that slavery, or, rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery supposes an external master, a legislator outside of the one whom he commands, while these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, as much physically as intellectually and morally. We live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing—we are not. From where, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

Bakunin has proposed one sense of the word authority: the inevitable power of the natural laws (i.e. scientific laws, mathematical laws, etc., not the moral natural laws of someone like Thomas Aquinas, which are not inevitable). Tying things back to his previous defense of materialism, he reaffirms that these laws do indeed govern both the physical *and* social worlds. Humanity is not

an exception to them. The “authority” of these laws is so absolute that revolt against them is “not only forbidden, but is even impossible.”

Bakunin’s rhetorical moves from here on are a bit difficult to decipher, very clearly playing with contradiction on purpose. He affirms that we are “absolutely the slaves of these laws,” only to then affirm that “it is not slavery at all.” The key difference here being that, while slavery supposes an external legislator, the laws of nature are something inherent to us. They are “not outside of us; they are inherent in us.”

Despite the name of the essay, Bakunin does not seem to be focused on giving a clear or even a consistent definition of authority then. Rather, he is wrestling with the idea throughout, leading to some apparently contradictory statements, describing the type of authority he accepts, only to then affirm his rejection of all authority. This is something like an apagogical argument, where Bakunin continually tries to grant certain plausible or acceptable forms of authority, only for him to undermine them and show how they do not actually help the authoritarians out. The effect of this is a rather evocative essay, but a fair bit messy in ways that might have been cleared up had he ever completed it rather than having a draft published posthumously.

Continuing on, Bakunin has argued that the material laws of the universe are unbreakable. What room is left for liberty? Bakunin gives this answer:

With regard to natural laws, only one single liberty is possible to man—that of recognizing and applying them more and more all the time, in conformity with the goal of collective and individual emancipation or humanization which he pursues.

Before, Bakunin recognized that it is the idealist who cannot speak of liberty without simultaneously adding the word authority. With regard to the power of natural laws, this appears to be true. Human agency consists in the knowledge and application of the universe. This is true both for the individual person and for people collectively. The “authority” of natural laws here becomes the foundation of our liberty. We exist by these laws, and exercise our liberty in utilizing them.

The irony is that, while the idealist was looking for a way to harmonize authority and liberty, Bakunin has provided an apparent answer. However, they are unable to accept this answer, precisely because it would also require them to adopt a materialist worldview!

These laws, once recognized, exercise an authority which is never disputed by the mass of men. One must, for instance, be at base either a fool or a theologian or at least a metaphysician, jurist, or bourgeois economist to rebel against the law by which 2×2 makes 4. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, unless one has recourse to some subterfuge that is still based on some other natural law. But these rebellions, or, rather, these attempts at or foolish fancies of an impossible revolt, only form a rare exception; for, in general, it may be said that the mass of men, in their daily lives, let themselves be governed by good

sense—that is, by the sum of the natural laws generally recognized—in an almost absolute fashion.

In the exact opposite of what we might expect, the idealists here are the ones rebelling against authority, while Bakunin mocks the attempt. Early in *God and the State* he listed rebellion as one of the essential conditions of human development. Here he is hesitant to even call the denialism a rebellion in the proper sense.

Still, this brings up an important aspect for how our liberty can actually utilize these laws. To be able to utilize them, we need to recognize them. Ignorance then becomes a real limit on our liberty, caused either because of the failures of our education system, or because the laws have not yet been discovered.

Once people are able to recognize these laws for themselves though, they are able to practice them in liberty. They no longer need to be directed when to do this or that, because they will know for themselves how this law works and when to apply it. Any attempt at imposing the “correct” way to do this with authority, as some external legislator, will be despotic and harmful to this liberty.

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any foreign will, whether divine or human, collective or individual.

We have here something like a more typical definition of liberty for the materialist anarchist, and by implication, a more typical definition of authority in its negation.

If authority is understood so broadly that it includes the natural laws, then liberty is compatible with this authority in a way, and is even included in the definition here. As Bakunin stated before, we exist because of and through these natural laws. The idea of “obeying” the inevitable natural laws here should be understood in this sense, accurately recognizing and applying them.

But for the anarchist, authority more typically refers, and perhaps more accurately, to this externally imposed foreign will. This description seems very similar to Engels’ definition of authority as “the imposition of the will of another upon ours.” It also raises similar questions about what exactly it means for a will to be “imposed.” Thankfully, Bakunin goes straight from here in giving a clear example of this.

Suppose an academy of learned individuals, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose that this academy is charged with the legislation and organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it only dictates to society laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science.

When Bakunin describes imposition here, he has in mind what he described as a “tutelary government,” similar to how he previously described the idea of representative democracy as, in

theory, a rule by “superior intelligence.” In this type of scenario, instead of people understanding and applying the natural laws on their own, a group of experts have taken state power for legislating and organizing society, and make people do what they judge as best by force. This is a benevolent dictatorship of the most enlightened people; pure technocracy.

For the sake of argument, Bakunin supposes that this really is achieved somehow, and that this academy of rulers really are entirely benevolent and educated with the most up to date scientific theories.

Bakunin gives three general reasons for opposing this.

Firstly, our scientific knowledge is too limited to carry this out in the first place, and they would end up doing more harm than good, especially thanks to how complex the real world is beyond what these experts could know. They would “condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life always remaining infinitely greater than science.”

Secondly, because this tutelary government would train people not to think for themselves, but to mindlessly obey the dictates of their legislation, it would necessarily make people ignorant. They would have no real understanding of what they are doing, but would do it just because it was ordered. They could not even learn from their mistakes, because they could only act as they are directed. It would be “a society, not of men, but of brutes.”

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this system not only corrupts the ruled by making them ignorant, but also corrupts the rulers both morally and intellectually thanks to their privileged position in society. Even if it begins as a benevolent dictatorship, as was granted before, the practice and habit of ruling will turn it into an institute dedicated to maintaining and expanding its own power and privilege. This state, controlled by this privileged class of rulers, will try to entrench itself rather than wither away.

A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by no longer occupying itself with science at all, but with quite another business; and that business, the business of all established powers, would be to perpetuate itself by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

Because this corruption comes from the very practice and habit of ruling, it does not matter how the members of this ruling body are chosen. Even if the people were rotated with universal suffrage, we would still see a tendency toward a distinct and oligarchic class. This would be a new aristocracy, not by legal right, but as a matter of fact.

These critiques, especially the latter two focused on the state's corrupting effects upon both the working class and rulers, are commonly used by anarchists as a critique of state socialism, well beyond Bakunin.²⁵

When Bakunin speaks of foreign wills imposing themselves, he has something like this in mind. A group of people, effectively always a minority of the population, have been able to appropriate for themselves a privileged position over the majority, and by virtue of that position claim and exercise a right to command and dominate them backed by coercive means. This is the type of thing Bakunin has in mind when discussing "external legislation," and it is implicitly involved when he is rejecting authority.

Consequently, no external legislation and no authority—one, for that matter, being inseparable from the other, and both tending to the enslavement of society and the degradation of the legislators themselves.

This seems like a fairly conclusive statement and rejection of authority by Bakunin.

However, Bakunin seems to contradict this rejection of authority in the very next paragraph.

Does it follow that I drive back every authority? The thought would never occur to me. When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and verification.

This is perhaps the most frequently quoted portion of this essay, and perhaps of *God and the State* as a whole, often referred to as the "authority of the bootmaker." It is also frequently misunderstood, especially when removed from the overall context of the essay or Bakunin's tricky rhetorical approach.

With that context, we have a better idea of how Bakunin will consider different senses of authority, accepting one potential meaning only to push back against it in another sense, such as agreeing that we are "enslaved" by natural laws only to then say it is "not slavery at all."

Here we have a similar approach. While he just declared that authority is inseparable from an external legislator, he now seems to consider the case where they *are* separated, or at least appear to be. The expert, apart from any legislative power, can still be called an "authority" in some sense. They are an "authority" in their field, and may speak "authoritatively" about their

²⁵ Zoe Baker, "[Means and Ends: The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power](#)". Note the similar title to her book cited above, *Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States*. When I refer to *Means and Ends*, I am referring to the book rather than this essay unless stated otherwise.

subject. Bakunin recognizes this and, like natural laws, appears to see it as a necessary limit of our animal nature.

But this type of “authority,” freely accepted, stands in stark contrast to when it is combined with the power of external legislation. Instead of being fixed to some position demanding blind obedience, the anarchist free thinker does not assume this person is infallible, and consults several sources, going where the weight of the evidence leads.

The anarchist then should not be taken as a simple contrarian, rejecting something merely because it has been said by experts. The anarchist is not obligated to deny that the world is round or reject the effectiveness of vaccines simply because “that’s what *they* want you to think,” adopting a blind faith in “alternative facts” and seeking out quacks. On the contrary, the anarchist is grateful for expert testimony, and gives that appropriate weight. But the anarchist nevertheless retain their “right to criticism and verification.” They are dedicated to the truth, not to this or that expert, who they recognize as fallible humans just like themselves.

The authority of the bootmaker turns out to me more like the authority of natural laws than we might expect at first. Bakunin emphasized the internal nature of the natural laws before, removing any “humiliation” in its authority, in contrast to the “external master.” We might think that this distinction does not work in the case of the expert, since they are still another person, whether listened to voluntarily or not. But Bakunin disagrees, saying that the way things are “imposed” here is still strictly internal.

I bow before the authority of exceptional men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

In a free society, it is not the experts who impose themselves on us, but our “own reason.” The “authority” they have is purely a consequence of our own recognition of their knowledgeability and our own ignorance. As Bakunin recognized earlier, our ignorance of natural laws is a real limit on our liberty. When the expert shares this knowledge, they actually become a way of *expanding* our own liberty in this respect.

Separated from legislation, the expert is only able to appeal to their own knowledge to get others to listen to them. But there is no universal expert, and each expert will find themselves relying on the expertise of others on other matters.

This seems to bring out another contrast between types of “authority.” Before we distinguished things on the basis of being external or internal. Here we see another aspect though: “fixed and

constant authority” against the “continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.” Before the experts of the technocratic state were charged with the legislation and organization of society thanks to the “right” tied to their position and office and power of coercive enforcement. It was a one-way relationship of domination between rulers and ruled. In a free society this relationship becomes more mutual.

Supposing, for the sake of argument, that a “universal man” really did exist who was an expert in all fields, like an omniscient God, Bakunin still maintains we would need to “drive that man out of society” if they sought to impose their authority. All the criticisms of the tutelary government resurface here. Not only could we mistake the charlatan for a real genius, but granting authority as “privileges or exclusive rights” would have the same corrupting effects on both the genius and the people they rule.

As Bakunin begins to conclude, he summarizes his position on how he accepts the “authority of science” as the only legitimate authority.

In summary, then, we recognize the absolute authority of science, because science has no other object than the mental reproduction, well thought out and as systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and the social worlds, these two worlds constituting, in fact, only one single natural world. Apart from this legitimate authority, uniquely legitimate because it is rational and in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, despotic and deadly.

The idea of an anarchist recognizing a “legitimate” authority seems surprising. But just as before we saw Bakunin adapted his language to argue for a “United States of Europe,” he seems to be adapting his language to the idealists here. They had been the ones at the start who could not speak of liberty without adding in the word authority.

While Bakunin detests this kind of terminology, he has worked out a sense here where it might be acceptable to him, and likely *unacceptable* to the authoritarians, precisely because it is “in harmony with human liberty.”

Bakunin pushes his discomfort further and, in a text critiquing God and the Church, tries to make his point by adopting this language as well.

In our church—if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which I so detest: Church and State are my two *bêtes noires*—in our church, as in the Protestant church, we have a head, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, more consistent even than the Protestants, we do not wish to suffer a pope, nor council, nor conclaves of infallible cardinals, nor bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ is distinguished from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this—that the latter is a personal being, while ours is impersonal; the Christian Christ, already fully realized in an eternal past, presents himself as a perfect being, while the fulfillment and perfection of our Christ, science, are always in the future:

which is equivalent to saying that they will never be realized. Therefore, in recognizing no absolute authority but that of *absolute science*, we in no way compromise our liberty.

Bakunin is very clearly and consciously trying to subvert authoritarian language for his anti-authoritarian purposes. While he dedicates this paragraph to do this for the church, it should be remembered he is trying to do this same thing in a much longer form with authority here.

This is reflected in his final words, which reemphasizes the acceptance of this “authority of absolute science” or the “authority of fact” which is held in contrast to the “authority of right.” But while one paragraph states his acceptance of authority in this strange sense of the term, Bakunin drops this again for his preferred jargon and returns to affirming his rejection of all authority, indicating that his preferred and more typical meaning of the term indicates this kind of constant, fixed, involuntary, coercive, claimed right of an external master, seen socially as a minority ruling class which dominates and exploits the majority.

We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of right; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming straight away an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us, as I believe I have sufficiently shown, slavery and absurdity.

In short, we reject all legislation, all authority, and every privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even that arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can only ever turn to the advantage of a dominant, exploiting minority and against the interests of the immense, subjugated majority.

It is in this sense that we are really Anarchists.

The Jura Federation’s Sonvilier Circular

In September 1871, the General Council of the IWA (the First International), of which Marx and Engels were members, orchestrated a secretive conference in London in place of the annual Congress, which was the normal way for the IWA to pass rules and regulations, pass resolutions, and appointing the General Council. As Engels described it, the conference “was a compromise and was not provided for in the rules.”²⁶

This opportunity was used by the General Council to attempt to pass a number of anti-anarchist resolutions, including their 9th resolution officially endorsing the formation of political parties and conquest of state power. As Engels privately admitted in a letter to Liebknecht in January 1872, the “Conference resolutions have no necessary binding force, since a conference is, in itself, an illegal mechanism, justified only by the gravity of the situation.”²⁷ Publicly however, Engels and

²⁶ [General Council Minutes, Vol 4](#), p. 270, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 86

²⁷ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 296, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 86

the General Council treated these resolutions as binding on any organizations within the IWA that disputed their legitimacy.²⁸

In November 1871, the Jura Federation of the IWA published a critique of the General Council's called the "[Sonvilier Circular](#)." It was written by some prominent early anarchists such as James Guillaume. In the Circular, the Jura Federation argues that the General Council, by claiming greater authority for itself, had acted "contrary to the very essence of the International, which is only an immense protest against authority." It especially cited how the [General Rules of the IWA](#) defined its end as "the protection, advancement, and complete emancipation of the working classes." This goal of emancipation was seen as proof that opposition to authority was central to the rules they had all agreed to, and the clear stated intent of the association.

In the Circular, we can also see a similar line of analysis of authority given by Bakunin. For example, it points to inevitable corruption that comes with authority:

If there is one incontrovertible fact, borne out a thousand times by experience, it is that authority has a corrupting effect on those in whose hands it is placed. It is absolutely impossible for a man with power over his neighbours to remain a moral man.

While this also recognizes power as a *morally* corrupting force, it also provides material analysis about how the practice of ruling shapes social relations and undermines their stated aims of liberation. This method is not only critiqued as inconsistent with their ends, but also as an inappropriate means to achieving those ends. By placing themselves in a position of authority, they will recreate this system of authority through the practice and exercise of that power.

As the Circular put it:

We are not accusing the General Council of criminal intent. The personalities who make it up have found themselves succumbing to a fatal necessity: in good faith and to ensure the success of their own particular doctrine, they have sought to introduce the authority principle into the International; circumstances appeared to encourage this tendency and it strikes us as quite natural that this school, whose ideal is *the conquest of political power by the working class*, in the wake of recent developments, should have thought that the International should amend its original organization and become a hierarchical organization directed and governed by a Committee.

But while we can understand such tendencies and such actions we are nonetheless compelled to combat them, on behalf of the Social Revolution, which we pursue, and its program: "Emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves," free of all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers.

²⁸ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 259; also see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 128

This condemnation of authority being extended to even that which has been “elected and endorsed by the workers” indicates agreement with Bakunin’s critique of representative democracy, as distinguished from delegation itself or the advice of relevant experts.

This is affirmed as the Jura Federation does not demand for the General Council to be destroyed, but instead given its proper non-authoritarian role within the structure of the IWA and respecting the autonomy of the organizations that make it up.

We ask for the retention within the International of that principle of autonomy of the Sections which has been the basis of our Association thus far; we ask that the General Council, whose powers have been rendered unnatural by the Basel Congress’ *administrative resolutions*, should revert to its natural function, which is the function of a simple correspondence and statistical bureau; and we seek to found the unity some aim to build upon centralization and dictatorship, upon a free federation of autonomous groups.

Taken together, we can certainly see the type of analysis of authority that is in harmony with what we’ve seen from Bakunin. We also see, rather directly, socialism being presented as “an immense protest against authority,” somewhat similar to how Engels described the anti-authoritarians launching a “regular crusade against what they call the principle of authority.”

We also see the construction of the kind of society and organization which authority is contrasted to, namely one based on autonomy and “free federation.” Like Bakunin, they wished for a society that was controlled “from the circumference to the center.” The center, in this case, being the General Council, which would not wield authority with the right or power to command, but function as a “correspondence and statistical bureau.”

Malatesta’s “Anarchy” and “Organization”

Errico Malatesta was an Italian anarchist who had been involved with the movement from its inception, and rather prolific in his writing on and development of anarchist theory. While much of his writing comes after “On Authority” was published, he gives us a good window into a more polished version of early anarchist thought, including how it understood authority.

Anarchy (1891)

In his essay “[Anarchy](#)” (1891), Malatesta begins by defining his terms. In particular, he is focused on understanding the words “anarchy” itself and its relation to other terms like “government” or “state.” He defined anarchy this way:

The word Anarchy comes from the Greek and its literal meaning is without government: the condition of a people who live without a constituted authority, without government.

This is, clearly, largely a negative definition, describing anarchy as an *absence* of something. In particular, there is an absence of “constituted authority” which is identified with “government.” By looking at how Malatesta described government, we can also better understand authority.

Malatesta is also very particular in describing anarchy as an absence of *government* rather than an absence of *the state*. He believes the word “state” is a bit more vague, so prefers the term he finds more exact. In the process of explaining this, he provides the definition of the state he considers equivalent to “government,” and therefore to “constituted authority.”

Anarchists, including this writer, have used the word State, and still do, to mean the sum total of the political, legislative, judiciary, military and financial institutions through which the management of their own affairs, the control over their personal behaviour, the responsibility for their personal safety, are taken away from the people and entrusted to others who, by usurpation or delegation, are vested with the powers to make the laws for everything and everybody, and to oblige the people to observe them, if need be, by the use of collective force.

In this sense the word State means government, or to put it another way, it is the impersonal abstract expression of that state of affairs, personified by government: and therefore the terms abolition of the State, Society without the State, etc., describe exactly the concept which anarchists seek to express, of the destruction of all political order based on authority, and the creation of a society of free and equal members based on a harmony of interests and the voluntary participation of everybody in carrying out social responsibilities.

We can see the ways that constituted authority is expressed through various institutions here. In particular, authority here represents denying people self-management, with this instead being taken over by some other group who command others backed by force. In other words, it is marked by *domination*, and is understood in contrast to a society of free and equal individuals working together voluntarily.

This contrast is important because it indicates that the anarchists are trying to indicate a particular *kind* of social relation which they do not see as necessary for cooperation itself.

Malatesta emphasizes this himself when considering other meanings of “the state,” and therefore how defining anarchism as being anti-state, instead of anti-government, may lead to misunderstanding.

Thus the word State is often used to describe a special kind of society, a particular human collectivity gathered together in a particular territory and making up what is called a social unit irrespective of the way the members of the said collectivity are grouped or of the state of relations between them. It is also used simply as a synonym for society. And because of these meanings given to the word State, opponents believe, or rather they pretend to believe, that anarchists mean to

abolish every social bond, all collective work, and to condemn all men to living in a state of isolation, which is worse than living in conditions of savagery.

Anarchists directly deny that they are calling for a return to isolated production and putting an end to collective work or combined action.

Later on, Malatesta elaborates more on how we should understand government or authority more directly. In particular, he tries to distinguish between a “metaphysical” understanding of government to the anarchist one.

What is government? The metaphysical tendency which in spite of the blows it has suffered at the hands of positive science still has a strong hold on the minds of people today, so much so that many look upon government as a moral institution with a number of given qualities of reason, justice, equity which are independent of the people who are in office. For them government, and in a more vague way, the State, is the abstract social power; it is the ever abstract representative of the general interest; it is the expression of the rights of all considered as the limits of the rights of each individual. And this way of conceiving of government is encouraged by the interested parties who are concerned that the principle of authority should be safeguarded and that it should always survive the shortcomings and the mistakes committed by those who follow one another in the exercise of power.

For us, government is made up of all the governors; and the governors — kings, presidents, ministers, deputies, etc. — are those who have the power to make laws regulating inter-human relations and to see that they are carried out; to levy taxes and to collect them; to impose military conscription; to judge and punish those who contravene the laws; to subject private contracts to rules, scrutiny and sanctions; to monopolise some branches of production and some public services or, if they so wish, all production and all public services; to promote or to hinder the exchange of goods; to wage war or make peace with the governors of other countries; to grant or withdraw privileges ... and so on. In short, the governors are those who have the power, to a greater or lesser degree, to make use of the social power, that is of the physical, intellectual and economic power of the whole community, in order to oblige everybody to carry out their wishes. And this power, in our opinion, constitutes the principle of government, of authority.

Like Bakunin, Malatesta recognizes that the metaphysicians seem to be using these words to mean something different than the anarchist. The former describe the government in a more vague way, mixed in with the ideals they hope to achieve. This seems to be a way that makes the government a kind of good force by definition, necessarily fighting for the general interest and upholding justice.

By contrast, the anarchist gives a more materialist definition of government, focused on who makes it up and its characteristic actions and function. The government is composed of the

governors that make it up, i.e. those who use physical, intellectual, or economic social power to make others carry out their wishes. We might also refer to them as the “ruling classes” maintaining and exercising a system of class domination and exploitation. This includes things like taxes, regulating, punishing, waging war, and monopolizing production, such as in the form of private property.

A bit later on, Malatesta describes government and these various methods of coercion in a bit more detail.

Throughout history, just as in our time, government is either the brutal, violent, arbitrary rule of the few over the many or it is an organised instrument to ensure that dominion and privilege will be in the hands of those who by force, by cunning, or by inheritance, have cornered all the means of life, first and foremost the land, which they make use of to keep the people in bondage and to make them work for their benefit.

There are two ways of oppressing men: either directly by brute force, by physical violence; or indirectly by denying them the means of life and thus reducing them to a state of surrender. The former is at the root of power, that is of political privilege; the latter was the origin of property, that is of economic privilege. Men can also be suppressed by working on their intelligence and their feelings, which constitutes religious or “universitarian” power; but just as the spirit does not exist except as the resultant of material forces, so a lie and the organisms set up to propagate it have no *raison d’être* except in so far as they are the result of political and economic privileges, and a means to defend and to consolidate them.

Malatesta describes two of the three forms of social power he referenced before as fundamental, and relates it to the various kinds of ruling classes.

The most directly brutal and violent forces, and is related to “political privilege” of politicians, the police, military, etc. There is also the indirect force of controlling the things people need to live, and being able to force others into submission through that control. This is “property” or “economic privilege,” and seems to especially refer to figures like landlords and capitalists today.

Importantly, this is again not the *mere* existence of violence or control over some resource, but this being used explicitly as a way of maintaining the “rule of the few over the many” or ensuring that “dominion and privilege” remain in the hands of these ruling classes over the others. This is, again, a system of class hierarchy, relations of domination and exploitation, which the government is systematically maintaining through these various means.

Intellectual power remains as the odd one out here, and seems to broadly refer to ways that people are being manipulated, lied to, and defrauded. It is the dominant ideology of the ruling class keeping people in line. Malatesta gives this type of manipulation as secondary importance, since it is mainly a way of bolstering the social power of the other two kinds. Propaganda is engaged in, not for its own sake, but for justifying something else. Malatesta identifies

institutions built on this type of power as being the church or universities, but we could easily see how it might extend to other institutions like the press, entertainment industries, social media, etc. This too is not a condemnation of the *existence* of education or press in and of itself, but a recognition of the way, especially in a society dominated by the other forms of ruling classes, becomes their tool and even a center of power in its own right.

Malatesta does not believe government is static, and the ruling classes using these types of power can take various forms. In the process of describing this, he also elaborates on the origin of government, and how he sees it within modern capitalist society.

He begins with this in its most basic form:

In sparsely populated primitive societies with uncomplicated social relations, in any situation which prevented the establishment of habits, customs of solidarity, or which destroyed existing ones and established the domination of man by man — the two powers, political and economic, were to be found in the same hands, which could even be those of a single man. Those who by force have defeated and intimidated others, dispose of the persons and the belongings of the defeated and oblige them to serve and to work for them and obey their will in all respects. They are at the same time the landowners, kings, judges and executioners.

Government is able to establish itself when the solidarity between people is replaced by domination of man by man. This government, given the relative simplicity of the situation, is able to consolidate this power into very few hands. A king can be considered both as a ruler, commanding an army, but also as a landlord, literally the lord of the land, demanding tribute and the payment of taxes. Thus both physical and economic power are in the hands of a single man and institution.

The question of which came first here is also somewhat pointless because of the way these forms of power are mutually reinforcing. Physical force is used to take control of key resources, and control of those resources is the basis of that force's strength.

This sort of relation is only maintained in a relatively simple society. The more complex things become, the more unstable this kind of situation is, and the more necessary it becomes for these different forms of power to form distinct classes. These rulers are united to some respect in their common interest in ruling, but each is left with supreme rule in their own respective area, however things are divided up, to exploit others as much as they can and order others around as they see fit.

In this way, the property owning class is distinguished from the political class. Furthermore, because the owning class controls these key resources and scope of society they dominate, they become the more powerful of the ruling classes as well, with the political rulers being reduced to the enforcers of their rule.

Thus, in the shadow of power, for its protection and support, often unbeknown to it, and for reasons beyond its control, private wealth, that is the owning class, is

developed. And the latter, gradually concentrating in their hands the means of production, the real sources of life, agriculture, industry, barter, etc., end up by establishing their own power which, by reason of the superiority of its means, and the wide variety of interests that it embraces, always ends by more or less openly subjecting the political power, which is the government, and making it into its own gendarme.

This phenomenon has occurred many times in history. Whenever as a result of invasion or any military enterprise physical, brutal force has gained the upper hand in society, the conquerors have shown a tendency to concentrate government and property in their own hands. But always the government's need to win the support of a powerful class, and the demands of production, the impossibility of controlling and directing everything, have resulted in the re-establishment of private property, the division of the two powers, and with it the dependence in fact of those who control force — governments — on those who control the very source of force — the property-owners. The governor inevitably ends by becoming the owners' gendarme.

This remains a key point of Malatesta's view of government, especially in its modern form as we tend to distinguish government from the private sector. For Malatesta, the economic aspects, and by extension the property-owning classes, are the more fundamental, since they control the very material source upon which state power rests. The material mode of production also necessitates the creation of such a class due to the increased size and complexity of society. It is not an arbitrary act of will by the state, as if capitalists only had this property at the state's favor, even if of course it does exercise some influence in the way of certain legal and juridical forms, or may impose certain relations through conquest.

Malatesta believes this is especially evident within capitalism. The state predates capitalism, so capital cannot explain the origin of the state itself. But capitalism has influenced, at points even through revolution, the form of the state that exists, and remains the more fundamental force in this society.

But never has this phenomenon been more accentuated than in modern times. The development of production, the vast expansion of commerce, the immeasurable power assumed by money, and all the economic questions stemming from the discovery of America, from the invention of machines, etc., have guaranteed this supremacy to the capitalist class which, no longer content with enjoying the support of the government, demanded that government should arise from its own ranks. A government which owed its origin to the right of conquest (divine right as the kings and their priests called it) though subjected by existing circumstances to the capitalist class, went on maintaining a proud and contemptuous attitude towards its now wealthy former slaves, and had pretensions to independence of domination. That government was indeed the defender, the property owners' gendarme, but the kind of gendarmes who think they are somebody, and behave in an arrogant manner towards the people they have to escort and defend, when they don't rob or

kill them at the next street corner; and the capitalist class got rid of it, or is in the process of so, doing by means fair or foul, and replacing it by a government of its own choosing, consisting of members of its own class, at all times under its control and specifically organised to defend that class against any possible demands by the disinherited. The modern Parliamentary system begins here.

The control the property-owning classes have over the government is not an accident then, nor is it solved through reforms or universal suffrage, which only gives the people the illusion of sovereignty. The property owner's control is based on its control over this material mode of production the state finds its source of life in. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that the political rulers really tried to exercise control against the owning classes, or if democracy became something more than mere illusory control, the owning-classes would use their control of these resources to bring the government back in line or replace it with one of their own liking.

Electoralism is a false hope, diverting the activity of the most oppressed population into a doomed project. The government cannot be reformed away from oppression, because that is its most essential and defining characteristic.

The basic function of government everywhere in all times, whatever title it adopts and whatever its origin and organisation may be, is always that of oppressing and exploiting the masses, of defending the oppressors and the exploiters: and its principal, characteristic and indispensable, instruments are the police agent and the tax-collector, the soldier and the gaoler — to whom must be invariably added the trader in lies, be he priest or schoolmaster, remunerated or protected by the government to enslave minds and make them docilely accept the yoke.

This is not to say the government cannot adopt other functions too, some of which are generally beneficial to society. A society that is *too* awful will undermine even the government's own power as it could not long survive, just like how only the still living may get sick. Thus the government will recognize and enforce certain basic rights, and organize certain useful services like a post office, roads, hospitals, etc., even while ultimately motivated by a desire for domination. To a certain extent, this takes place in the regulation of the activities of the proper-owners themselves, who are in competition between themselves, or stepping in to act as mediator between them and the rulers to prevent the exploited from taking matters into their own hands. Its fundamental purpose remains the same.

All of this is a natural and inevitable consequence of social relations built on competition, with conflicting interests where one can only gain at the expense of another.

He looks forward to the future society, as our social instinct grows and becomes more universal, based on the principle of solidarity. In a system based upon the appropriate harmony of interest, where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Rather than seeing our liberty limited by others, we would find it expanded through them.

Solidarity, that is the harmony of interests and of feelings, the coming together of individuals for the wellbeing of all, and of all for the wellbeing of each, is the only environment in which Man can express his personality and achieve his optimum development and enjoy the greatest possible wellbeing. This is the goal towards which human evolution advances; it is the higher principle which resolves all existing antagonisms, that would otherwise be insoluble, and results in the freedom of each not being limited by, but complemented — indeed finding the necessary *raison d'être* in — the freedom of others.

This stance clearly parallels what we saw in Bakunin, as in his *Revolutionary Catechism* where the freedom of each was expanded and confirmed in others. Malatesta believes this is only fully possible in a society which has abolished these types of class divisions and the antagonisms that come with them.

This society of solidarity is incompatible with the state as an institution of class domination and exploitation. Malatesta is therefore rather dismissive of those authoritarians who believe socialism is compatible with the state. If we abolished class divisions, the state will either need to reestablish them or it will die out.

Organ and function are inseparable terms. Take away from an organ its function and either the organ dies or the function is re-established. Put an army in a country in which there are neither reasons for, nor fear of, war, civil or external, and it will provoke war or, if it does not succeed in its intentions, it will collapse. A police force where there are no crimes to solve or criminals to apprehend, will invent both, or cease to exist.

Similar to Bakunin's analysis of the corruption that comes with being placed in a position of authority and the exercise of power, Malatesta believes a so-called socialist state would see its leaders act in ways that maintain their privileged status within society.

A government, that is a group of people entrusted with making the 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.

Unwilling to relinquish its power, this new "socialist" government would still need to appeal to some part of the population for support, capturing key resources, and recreating this class division and system of oppression and exploitation.

The government, constituted authority, is therefore destructive to a real socialist society. Malatesta additionally believes that the certain essential functions the government does carry out now can be done, likely even better, in anarchy, including large-scale production that

requires combined action. Instead of state association or capitalist association, a society based on the harmony of interests would have “associations which, inspired by a love of one’s fellow beings, or by a passion for science, or more simply by the desire to enjoy oneself and to be applauded.”

Voluntary associations of this kind already exist, and would take on a much larger role at a world-wide scale, if not for the obstacles presented by the state and private property or the impotence people feel in the vast exploitation carried out by a few. Malatesta points as well to the example of railways, which can be done on a voluntary basis in a society where the work is made enjoyable and people feel the need for them.

Of course for this to be possible there would need to be some measure of administration. Malatesta agrees that combined action requires some degree of coordination between people, and therefore needs people given the task of facilitating this cooperation. He is careful to warn against the authoritarian tendency to equate administration with government, with constituted authority.

Of course in every large collective undertaking, a division of labour, technical management, administration, etc., is necessary. But authoritarians clumsily play on words to produce a *raison d’être* for government out of the very real need for the organisation of work. Government, it is well to repeat it, is the concourse of individuals who have had, or have seized, the right and the means to make laws and to oblige people to obey; the administrator, the engineer, etc., instead are people who are appointed or assume the responsibility to carry out a particular job and do so. Government means the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few; administration means the delegation of work, that is tasks given and received, free exchange of services based on free agreement. The governor is a privileged person since he has the right to command others and to make use of the efforts of others to make his ideas and his personal wishes prevail; the administrator, the technical director, etc., are workers like the rest, that is, of course, in a society in which everyone has equal means to develop and that all are or can be at the same time intellectual and manual workers, and that the only differences remaining between men are those which stem from the natural diversity of aptitudes, and that all jobs, all functions give an equal right to the enjoyment of social possibilities. Let one not confuse the function of government with that of an administration, for they are essentially different, and if today the two are often confused, it is only because of economic and political privilege.

Malatesta then seems to make a clear distinction between authority and someone entrusted with the commission of administration. This is not merely a change in names either, but many material distinctions, namely the ways in which authority involves the seizing of power and a *right* to command, based on economic and political privilege, in contrast to something done on a voluntary basis. As described here, it is a distinction between the delegation of power and the delegation of work.

Likewise, Malatesta is also careful to distinguish authority, as well as the anarchist conception of freedom, from truly anti-social acts that destroy the freedom of others, as if anarchists must respect the “liberty” to own slaves. To hold this view, he says, is to completely misrepresent the anarchist position.

And what of the police and of justice? Many suppose that if there were no carabinieri, policemen and judges, everyone would be free to kill, to ravish, to harm others as the mood took one; and that anarchists, in the name of their principles, would wish to see that strange liberty respected which violates and destroys the freedom and life of others. They seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again, because of a respect for the freedom of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas! ... of course it is easier to brush them off with a shrug of the shoulders than to take the trouble of confuting them.

The freedom we want, for ourselves and for others, is not an absolute metaphysical, abstract freedom which in practice is inevitably translated into the oppression of the weak; but it is real freedom, possible freedom, which is the conscious community of interests, voluntary solidarity. We proclaim the maxim do as you wish, and with it we almost summarise our programme, for we maintain — and it doesn't take much to understand why — that in a harmonious society, in a society without government and without property, each one will want what he must do.

We have here then another clarification. Malatesta earlier agreed with Bakunin's position from the *Revolutionary Catechism* that the “freedom of each not being limited by, but complemented... the freedom of others.” This does not however imply that anarchists embrace this “metaphysical, abstract freedom” to do absolutely anything, including the oppression of the weak. It is “real freedom,” found in the equal freedom of others, that they support and champion.

To achieve anarchy, Malatesta believes we have one path forward: violent revolution by the people, doing away with both the state and the economic class division upon which it is built.

In order to solve the social problem for the benefit of everybody there is only one means: to crush those who own social wealth by revolutionary action, and put everything at the disposal of everybody, and leave all the forces, the ability, and all the goodwill that exist among the people, free to act and to provide for the needs of all.

We struggle for anarchy, and for socialism, because we believe that anarchy and socialism must be realised immediately, that is to say that in the revolutionary act we must drive government away, abolish property and entrust public services, which in this context will include all social life, to the spontaneous, free, not official, not authorised efforts of all interested parties and of all willing helpers.

Of course there will be difficulties and drawbacks; but they will be resolved, and they will only be resolved in an anarchist way, by means, that is, of the direct intervention of the interested parties and by free agreements.

Organization (1897)

Just like Bakunin's thought should not be taken as representative of all anarchism, neither should Malatesta's, or any other individual thinker. There was, within anarchism, competing conceptions about what non-authoritarian relations would look like. This debate is generally characterized as being between the organizationalists and the anti-organizationalists.

The anti-organizationalists did not oppose people working together in any sense. Rather they argued for smaller and temporary "affinity groups" and informal social networks to carry out large scale actions. Thus they still endorsed combined action while rejecting "organization," or perhaps what we might now call institutions. What they opposed was the advocacy for larger-scale and more formal federations advocated for by the organizationalists, viewing it as hindering individual initiative.²⁹

This appears to have been a minority view among early anarchists,³⁰ and largely seems to have come from bad experiences within the First International thanks to the actions of the General Council.³¹

Malatesta was an organizationalist, and in his argument against the anti-organizationalists, we can see him elaborate more on the distinction he saw between organization and authority in his essay "[Organization](#)."

The fundamental error of the anarchists opposed to organization is to believe that organization is impossible without authority—and, once that hypothesis has been accepted, they would rather give up any organization than accept a modicum of authority.

Now, that organization, meaning association for a specific purpose and adopting the forms and means required in order to achieve that purpose, is a fundamental pre-requisite of living in society strikes us as self-evident. The isolated man cannot live even the life of a brute: other than in the tropics and when the population is exceedingly sparse, he cannot even feed himself; and remains, without exception, incapable of achieving a standard of living any better than the beasts'. Obligated, therefore, to combine forces with other people, and actually finding himself united with them as a result of the prior evolution of the species, he must either defer to the will of others (be a slave), or impose his own will on others (be an authority figure), or live in fraternal agreement with others for the sake of the greater good of all (be a partner). None can escape this need: and the most extravagant

²⁹ *Means and Ends*, p. 171-210

³⁰ *Means and Ends*, p. 86

³¹ *Means and Ends*, p. 179

anti-organizers are not only subject to the overall organization of the society in which they live, but—even in purposeful acts in their own lives, and in their wrangles with organization—they come together and share the tasks and *organize* together with those of like mind and employ the means that society places at their disposal... provided, of course, that these are things genuinely wanted and enacted, rather than just vague, platonic aspirations and dreams dreamt.

Malatesta here identifies combined action then not merely as a requirement for a modern factory, but even the most basic kind of society with very rare exceptions for survival.

Malatesta recognizes people can combine forces in different ways. In authoritarian relations, this is a relation between the authority figure and the slave. This is understood in contrast to fraternal and mutually beneficial agreements between partners. Authority then is not identified with combined action as such. While Malatesta does describe it as something “imposed” while the other one “defers,” this is not merely someone acquiescing to the requests of another. Something is being imposed in a way distinct from them merely coming to an agreement. Thus we have a distinction between authority and free agreement, and this is a distinction even the anti-organizers would recognize.

This feeds into his view of anarchy, which builds on this distinction between imposing one’s wishes and voluntarily working with others or following the advice of experts.

Anarchy signifies *society organized without authority*, authority being understood as the ability to *impose* one’s own wishes and not the inescapable and beneficial practice whereby the person who best understands and is most knowledgeable about the doing of something finds it easier to have his opinion heeded and, in that specific instance, serves as a guide for those less capable.

He later elaborates on this identifying authority with coercion, indicating that what is being “imposed” here is *coercively* imposed, presumably through the same methods he had indicated in the essay “Anarchy” (i.e. physical, economic, and intellectual social power).

Malatesta recognizes the possibility of making this distinction as fundamental to anarchism itself, because otherwise anarchists really would need to oppose any sort of social organizing which is necessary for human life itself.

As we see it, authority is not only not a pre-requisite of social organization, but, far from fostering it, is a parasite upon it, hindering its evolution and siphoning off its advantages for the special benefit of one given class that exploits and oppresses the rest. As long as a harmony of interests exists within a community, as long as no one is inclined or equipped to exploit others, there is no trace of authority. Once internal strife comes along and the community is broken down into winners and losers, then authority arises, being naturally vested in the stronger, and helping to confirm, perpetuate, and magnify their victory.

That is what we believe and that is why we are anarchists; if, instead, we believed that organization without authority is unfeasible, we would rather be authoritarians, for we would prefer authority—which hobbles and stunts existence—to the disorganization that renders it impossible.

Authority here is once again associated with class rule, where one set of people are privileged and which “exploits and oppresses the rest.” Non-authoritarian relations are also marked by a harmony of interests in our relations and the absence of exploitation.

Malatesta also concedes that, if this type of distinction were not recognized, it would be impossible to do something like run a railway without authority.

Besides, how things turn out for us is of little account. If it were true that the engineer and engine-driver and station-master simply had to be authorities, rather than partners performing certain tasks on everybody’s behalf, the public would still rather defer to their authority than make the journey on foot. If there was no option but for the post-master to be an authority, anyone in his right mind would put up with the post-master’s authority rather than deliver his own letters.

In which case... anarchy would be the stuff of some people’s dreams, but could never become reality.

From here, Malatesta considers more critiques of the anti-organizationalists, such as the ways in which the absence of organization actually increases the ability of authoritarian individuals to impose themselves on others. But this is mostly irrelevant to our discussion of Engels. For now, it is enough to recognize that anarchists, including the anti-organizationalists, had not rejected combined action as such, even when there was debate over what its proper form in a free society should look like.

Other Examples

Much space here has been given to rather detailed analysis of a few authors. While I believe the views presented here by Bakunin, the Jura Federation, and Malatesta are largely consistent with the broader anarchist movement, it can be useful to briefly consider several examples from anarchists around the world to demonstrate this consistently. Here I intend to briefly consider select quotes from other early anarchists that seem to express similar views.

To begin, the French geographer Élisée Reclus presents this familiar idea of authority in his essay “[Anarchy](#)” (1894):

This sacrosanct system of domination encompasses a long succession of superimposed classes in which the highest have the right to command and the lowest have the duty to obey. The official morality consists in bowing humbly to one’s superiors and in proudly holding up one’s head before one’s subordinates. Each person must have, like Janus, two faces, with two smiles: one flattering,

solicitous, and even servile, and the other haughty and nobly condescending. The principle of authority (which is the proper name for this phenomenon) demands that the superior should never give the impression of being wrong, and that in every verbal exchange he should have the last word. But above all, his orders must be carried out. That simplifies everything: there is no more need for quibbling, explanations, hesitations, discussions, or misgivings. Things move along all by themselves, for better or worse. And if a master isn't around to command in person, one has ready-made formulas—orders, decrees, or laws handed down from absolute masters and legislators at various levels. These formulas substitute for direct orders, and one can follow them without having to consider whether they are in accord with the inner voice of one's conscience.

Between equals, the task is more difficult but also more exalted. We must search fiercely for the truth, discover our own personal duty, learn to know ourselves, engage continually in our own education, and act in ways that respect the rights and interests of our comrades. Only then can one become a truly moral being and awaken to a feeling of responsibility. Morality is not a command to which one submits, a word that one repeats, something purely external to the individual. It must become a part of one's being, the very product of one's life. This is the way that we anarchists understand morality. Are we not justified in comparing this conception favorably with the one bequeathed to us by our ancestors?

Authority here is presented as the "right to command," paired with a similar duty of the subordinated to obey. Reclus decries how this conception of the principle of authority shapes each party's character, behavior, and conception of morality. This is contrasted to the anarchist system "between equals," where we gain a better and more honest respect for ourselves and for others.

But Reclus, while condemning authority, also makes sure to contrast his definition of authority from other potential definitions. This can also be seen in his essay "[The Modern State](#)" (1905):

Just as property is the right of use and abuse, so is authority the right to command rightly or wrongly. This is understood well by the masters and also by the governed, whether they slavishly obey or feel the spirit of rebellion awakening. Philosophers have viewed authority quite differently. Desiring to give this word a meaning closer to its original one, which implied something like creation, they tell us that authority resides in anyone who teaches someone else something useful, and that it applies to everyone from the most celebrated scholar to the humblest mother. Still, none of them goes so far as to consider the revolutionary who stands up to power as the true representative of authority.

Everyone has the right to speak the language that they want to speak, and to give to the words the meaning which they have personally chosen; but it is certain that, in the popular discourse, the word "authority" does have the same meaning as that given to it by Poseidon commanding to the tempests: "And thus, I order! No reason,

my will suffice!” Since, the masters never talked any other way. Is it not established that the “cannon is the reason of kings”? And isn’t the “raison d’état” distinguished precisely because it is not reason? It places itself outside of vulgar humanity, it commands the just and the unjust, the good and evil as it wishes.

Authority is once again presented as a right to command, similar to the right of property, and is backed up ultimately by the violence, “the reason of kings.” All authority is denounced, but this is done while clarifying against those who identify authority as “anyone who teaches someone else something useful.” Reclus appears to have met people who have used authority this way.

However, he seems to have never met someone who would go to such an extreme as to paint the revolutionary fighting authority as an authority. This relation is marked by violence, true, but this is violence ultimately stemming from this class division, with the ruling class establishing themselves as an authority. The rebel resisting that imposition is not trying to do the same thing to the rulers, as if two kings were struggling for one throne, but a resistance to authority itself.

Reclus explicitly defends the anarchist usage of authority as something matching the popular usage of the term, including how it is used by the authorities themselves. The anarchist meaning of authority is technical and should not be confused with other meanings or uses of the word, but it is also rooted in an already existing widespread usage.

The American black anarchist Lucy Parsons’s lecture “[The Principles of Anarchism](#)” (~1905-1910) gave the following definition for Anarchy:

Absence of government; disbelief in and disregard of invasion and authority based on coercion and force; a condition of society regulated by voluntary agreement instead of government.

Anarchy is again described as opposed to authority, which is inherently connected to coercion and force, and contrasted to a system of free and voluntary agreements.

Earlier we also see this analysis of government, of authority, being the concentration of power into the hands of the few to dominate the masses, even in representative democracies, always to function as an impediment to progress.

Parsons argues that anarchism, by arguing for the removal of impediments to progress through intellectual development by science and the removal of physical barriers like property and the physical brutality of the state. Instead, things will be controlled by the people who use them.

Vested rights, privileges, charters, title deeds, upheld by all the paraphernalia of government—the visible symbol of power—such as prison, scaffold and armies, will have no existence. There can be no privileges bought or sold, and the transaction kept sacred at the point of the bayonet. Every man will stand on an equal footing with his brother in the race of life, and neither chains of economic thralldom nor menial drags of superstition shall handicap the one to the advantage of the other.

Property will lose a certain attribute which sanctifies it now. The absolute ownership of it—"the right to use or abuse"—will be abolished, and possession, use, will be the only title. It will be seen how impossible it would be for one person to "own" a million acres of land, without a title deed, backed by a government ready to protect the title at all hazards, even to the loss of thousands of lives. He could not use the million acres himself, nor could he wrest from its depths the possible resources it contains.

People have become so used to seeing the evidences of authority on every hand that most of them honestly believe that they would go utterly to the bad if it were not for the policeman's club or the soldier's bayonet. But the anarchist says, "Remove these evidences of brute force, and let man feel the revivifying influences of self-responsibility and self-control, and see how we will respond to these better influences."

There is a clear similarity here in these forms of domination identified as we saw in Malatesta regarding intellectual, economic, and physical coercion.

The Russian-American anarchist Emma Goldman described anarchism similarly as well with regard to different "dominions" in her essay "[Anarchism: What It Really Stands For](#)" (1910). She also contrasts this to the order that would be created by "free grouping" and collective ownership:

Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth; an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.

Goldman believed the aims of anarchism could only be achieved through a revolution. She saw this revolution as primarily coming from the strength of the working class organized in its own syndicalist labor unions, building up its strength by exercising direct action against authority, with one of its ultimate tools being the General Strike.

In France, in Spain, in Italy, in Russia, nay even in England (witness the growing rebellion of English labor unions), direct, revolutionary, economic action has become so strong a force in the battle for industrial liberty as to make the world realize the tremendous importance of labor's power. The General Strike, the supreme expression of the economic consciousness of the workers, was ridiculed in America but a short time ago. Today every great strike, in order to win, must realize the importance of the solidaric general protest.

Direct action, having proven effective along economic lines, is equally potent in the environment of the individual. There a hundred forces encroach upon his being, and

only persistent resistance to them will finally set him free. Direct action against the authority in the shop, direct action against the authority of the law, direct action against the invasive, meddlesome authority of our moral code, is the logical, consistent method of Anarchism.

Will it not lead to a revolution? Indeed, it will. No real social change has ever come about without a revolution. People are either not familiar with their history, or they have not yet learned that revolution is but thought carried into action.

The Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin describes anarchism as similarly opposed to authority. He began his submission on [Anarchism to the Encyclopedia Britannica](#) (1910) like this:

ANARCHISM (from the Gr. *an*, and *archos*, contrary to authority), the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government — harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.

We see once again anarchy being described as “contrary to authority” which means there is no “obedience to any authority,” which is then contrasted to a system of free agreements.

The Russian-American anarchist Alexander Berkman as well connects this idea of authority to force and violence. This can be seen in his book [Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism](#) (1929):

What is the thing we call government? Is it anything else but organized violence? The law orders you to do this or not to do that, and if you fail to obey, it will compel you by force. We are not discussing just now whether it is right or wrong, whether it should or should not be so, just now we are interested in the fact that *it is* so — that all government, all law and authority finally rest on force and violence, on punishment or the fear of punishment.

Why, even spiritual authority, the authority of the church and of God rests on force and violence, because it is the fear of divine wrath and vengeance that wields power over you, compels you to obey, and even to believe against your own reason.

Wherever you turn you will find that our entire life is built on violence or the fear of it. From earliest childhood you are subjected to the violence of parents or elders. At home, in school, in the office, factory, field, or shop, it is always some one's *authority* which keeps you obedient and compels you to do his will.

The right to compel you is called authority. Fear of punishment has been made into duty and is called obedience.

Once again, we have authority presented as being based on “force and violence,” extending not only to the law but also the church and the factory. Authority is also characterized here especially as something fixed as a *right*, specifically as the “right to compel you.”

This idea of authority is reaffirmed when Berkman summarizes the idea of communist anarchism:

Politically, then, man will recognize no authority which can force or coerce him. Government will be abolished.

Economically he will permit no exclusive possession of the sources of life in order to preserve his opportunity of free access.

Monopoly of land, private ownership of the machinery of production, distribution, and communication can therefore not be tolerated under Anarchy. Opportunity to use what every one needs in order to live must be free to all.

In a nutshell, then, the meaning of Communist Anarchism is this: the abolition of government, of coercive authority and all its agencies, and joint ownership-which means free and equal participation in the general work and welfare.

But while Berkman rejects authority, he is still careful to distinguish this from cooperation. Berkman describes the difference between the “unhealthy” organization based upon this idea of compulsion, i.e. by authority, and the “healthy” one built on voluntary agreement.

Capitalist society is so badly organized that its various members suffer: just as when you have pain in some part of you, your whole body aches and you are ill.

There is organization that is painful because it is ill, and organization that is joyous because it means health and strength. An organization is ill or evil when it neglects or suppresses any of its organs or members. In the healthy organism all parts are equally valuable and none is discriminated against. The organization built on compulsion, which coerces and forces, is bad and unhealthy. The libertarian organization, formed voluntarily and in which every member is free and equal, is a sound body and can work well. Such an organization is a free union of equal parts. It is the kind of organization the Anarchists believe in.

Still, while Berkman has recognized governmental authority as a kind of “organized violence,” he does not identify it with *all* organized violence as such. For example, violence is also used by the oppressed in their resistance to the violence of the government, especially as seen within certain stages of a revolution.

Organized violence is perhaps more characteristic of the government though, since it is establishing and maintaining a coercive relation within a coercive society. Anarchy, by contrast, is not marked by this kind of relation. The violence it uses is in response to and resistance of the

violence of the state, while anarchy itself is characterized by peace and freedom. The violence that is used in resistance to the government is carried out with this in mind.

“Suppose your system is tried, would you have any means of defending the revolution?” you ask.

Certainly.

“Even by armed force?”

Yes, if necessary.

“But armed force *is* organized violence. Didn’t you say Anarchism was against it?”

Anarchism is opposed to any interference with your liberty, be it by force and violence or by any other means. It is against all invasion and compulsion. But if any one attacks *you*, then it is *he* who is invading you, he who is employing violence against you. You have a right to defend yourself. More than that, it is your duty, as an Anarchist, to protect your liberty, to resist coercion and compulsion. Otherwise you are a slave, not a free man. In other words, the social revolution will attack no one, but it will defend itself against invasion from any quarter.

Besides, you must not confuse the social revolution with Anarchy. Revolution, in some of its stages, is a violent upheaval; Anarchy is a social condition of freedom and peace. The revolution is the *means* of bringing Anarchy about but it is not Anarchy itself. It is to pave the road for Anarchy, to establish conditions which will make a life of liberty possible.

But to achieve its purpose the revolution must be imbued with and directed by the Anarchist spirit and ideas. The end shapes the means, just as the tool you use must be fit to do the work you want to accomplish. That is to say, the social revolution must be Anarchistic in method as in aim.

Revolutionary defense must be in consonance with this spirit. Self-defense excludes all acts of coercion, of persecution or revenge. It is concerned only with repelling attack and depriving the enemy of opportunity to invade you.

Although I have only been able to review a small number of authors, and certainly could have added even more even from the material cited here, I hope these selections can be taken as fairly representative of the anarchist movement as a whole, and will refer to the general tendencies within these definitions as the standard anarchist meaning.

The Standard Anarchist Definition of Authority

From the above examples, we can see certain common elements in the anarchist understanding of authority.

Authority is primarily associated with the imposition of coercive relations, leveraging some form of physical, economic, or intellectual social power as ways to make others carry out their wishes and materially benefit the privileged party. In other words, it is seen in relations marked by domination and exploitation of the oppressed. The specific type of authority depends on, among other things, the type of social power that is used to compel the compliance of the subordinated party, such as a politician passing laws backed by physical strength in contrast to capitalist managers giving orders backed by their control over key resources as their property.

In this respect, authority is held in firm distinction to voluntary relations or free agreements, such as the advice of experts voluntarily followed. The mark of authority is not mere compliance with the wishes of another, but the method through which that compliance is achieved. Because of this, authority is also not identified with organization or administration itself, since non-authoritarian relations are possible here too. When anarchists have described things like experts or the laws of nature as forms of authority, they do not seem to believe it is something it is possible for anarchism to oppose or abolish entirely, and must be accepted to some extent, even if somewhat reluctantly.³²

While authority can manifest at the interpersonal level, it is most clear when considered at the social level with certain authoritarian institutions. This manifests as class divisions between the rulers and the ruled. The specific kind of ruling class they belong to again depends on the particular form of social power they specialize in and the way it manifests, e.g. as a prime minister or as a CEO. This privileged position they hold through this power also manifests in the form of a right, imposing the duties on others.

By extension, the absence of this kind of class relation is also seen as an absence of authority, removing a hierarchical relation to be replaced with a kind of equality. This equality is especially marked by the kind of leveling achieved in collective ownership of the means of production in a classless system, as well as what might be called an “equality of freedom” found in non-domination and the absence of class barriers to opportunity and the establishment of horizontally-structured organizations that does not delegate power away from its membership.³³

Authority is also identified as the *imposition* of this coercive relation, looking to establish, maintain, reinforce, or expand this system of class domination and exploitation, which is contrasted to the *resistance* to this imposition. The anarchists seem to understand imposing in the third sense of the term I had offered when analyzing Engels’ use of the word imposition. Anarchists recognized a material, functional difference, tied in with its class analysis, between kinds of violence used in favor of this class division and what is used against it. We’ve seen this extending back even before the publication of “On Authority” in Bakunin.

³² I have in mind here especially the analysis given by Shawn Wilbur regarding Bakunin’s “What is Authority,” found [here](#) and [here](#), which elaborates on the ways Bakunin seems to detest submission even to the “authority” of the bootmaker. While Bakunin expressed his gratitude towards expert authority, recognizing their usefulness, this is seen as something of a compromise due to the limits of his own reason. Gaining a scientific understanding of something yourself is seen as preferable to merely trusting the word of another, even if we cannot avoid doing the latter on many issues.

³³ *Means and Ends*, p. 66-68

Given the above, we could reconstruct a standardized anarchist definition of authority as something like this: ***Authority is a social relation of domination or exploitation coercively imposed by one party onto others, claiming a right to command or forbid, or exercise some similar privilege, backed by means of physical, economic, or intellectual power, especially when found in a systemic or institutional form and when considered in contrast to free agreement, expert advice, the inevitable laws of nature, or resistance to this imposition.***

I hope that readers find this definition to accurately reflect how authority was discussed previously. We have also seen several related ideas discussed, such as the “principle of authority” to describe the underlying ideas and justifications for authority based on the masses being incapable of self-management.

While I will call this “the anarchist definition,” this should not be understood as claiming this definition is *unique* to the anarchists. On the contrary, anarchists defended their use as being the most common sense of the word, as when people refer to “the authorities.” Likewise, I do not mean to imply that all anarchists are in agreement about the nature and definition of authority, only that these are common features that might find broad acceptance.

It is also clear from our analysis that anarchists do indeed reject all authority *in the relevant sense of the term*. However, they have also recognized that there are other senses of the terms, broader meanings, which would *not* be rejected, or at least which they do not expect to be abolished even after an anarchist revolution. This can be seen in Bakunin recognizing the “legitimate” authority of science.

Anarchists then are not merely reacting to a word, as if their position were based on avoiding jargon because it “sounds bad.” The anarchist position can be expressed without relying on this definition of authority. Anarchists have nonetheless typically adopted this meaning not only for propagandistic purposes, being the most easily expressible to members of the working class, but also because it allows for a more careful distinction in identifying what they fundamentally oppose.

Evaluating Engels’ Definition of Authority

Engels defined authority as “the imposition of the will of another upon ours.” He intended for this definition to be “in the sense in which the word is used here,” i.e. by the anti-authoritarian socialists. If Engels succeeded in doing what he claimed, this definition should agree with the anarchist definition.

At first glance, it does seem to agree. We have seen several anarchists define authority as a kind of imposition, like with Malatesta. However, Engels has left what it means to “impose” something rather vague. When anarchists have used the word “impose,” they have also typically clarified what they mean by that, saying something is being *coercively* imposed, or surrounding context makes it clear it is *involuntarily* imposed. If Engels meant “impose” in this same qualified

sense, then his definition really does agree. But the possibility remains open that he meant it in a broader way that the anarchists did not intend.

We are left with two options then. Either Engels' definition agrees with the standard anarchist definition or it does not. Both present crucial issues for his argument.

If Engels intends for his definition of authority to be broader than the anarchist one, then Premise 1 of his syllogism is false. Anarchism would not actually require socialists to reject all authority in the sense that Engels is defining it. Engels' argument would be nothing but a strawman, claiming the anarchists hold a position they never claimed.

But if Engels intended for his definition to be consistent with the standard anarchist definition of authority, then it is immediately apparent that Premise 2 is false. Engels' main supporting evidence for the necessity of authority is the need for administration with combined action and the need for revolutionary violence, both of which were explicitly contrasted to the definition of authority and cannot be logically derived from the definition provided.

If Engels is just switching between these definitions as needed to make his argument work, then the whole thing is invalid, being based on an equivocation fallacy.

[Aristotle said](#) that "the least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold." This certainly seems true for Engels. Not only does his definition of authority fail, but recognizing this immediately destroys the rest of his argument. Anarchists do not contradict themselves by opposing authority while advocating for combined action in production, nor by advocating for a revolution which, against Engels' claim, they did realize required violence. Nor are they merely changing the names of things to avoid this issue, since they are pointing to real material distinctions in the things themselves. Engels is arguing against a strawman.

This critique of "On Authority" is so obvious and so commonly pointed out by anarchists, modern Marxists have needed to rewrite Engels' argument to defend his essay. These alternative interpretations usually come in two forms.

The first version presents "On Authority" as an argument not about why socialists need authority during and after the revolution, but about how the word "authority" itself is meaningless and should be dropped from our vocabulary entirely. The word is meant to have no scientific value, and anarchists are only confusing things by trying to introduce it into their analysis (as would, by implication, anyone arguing that socialists really do need authority).

The second version reads "On Authority" not as an argument about how the word "authority" is meaningless, but about what a proper definition of authority is. Engels is meant to be critiquing the standard anarchist definition of authority and asserting his own definition against it as scientifically superior.

Both of these interpretations essentially reduce Engels' argument to a semantic point, assuming that Engels is aware of the standard anarchist definition of authority and is actively rejecting it, either all together or to be replaced by something better. Both positions disagree with what we

have actually seen: Engels thought he defined authority in the sense anarchists were using it, and just got it wrong. They are trying to salvage Engels' argument by replacing it with the kind of argument the Marxist thinks he *should* have made, had he not just been strawmanning his opponents.

Strangely enough, it is not uncommon to see online Marxists argue for *both* interpretations simultaneously, despite the fact that they are clearly mutually exclusive. Either the word is meaningless, or it is meaningful. Not both. Either the term should be abandoned as scientifically useless, or it should be embraced as scientifically useful. Not both.

Typically this is done by someone switching back and forth between whichever interpretation is useful to them at the moment. When they are on the defensive and being denounced as "authoritarian," it is useful to claim that the word is meaningless. But when they are on the attack and want to critique anarchism, it is useful to champion authority and denounce the anarchists as unscientific.

This is naturally more evident in online discourse than anything close to actual rigorous scholarship, but is worth addressing since it is common enough. To take a paradigmatic example of this behavior, it can be seen in the Medium blog post "[On Authority: Mistakes of Interpretation](#)."

A lot of anarchists will, in responding to [Engels' On Authority](#), say that his points are all good and well, but that that's not what they mean when they talk about authority — this is a rebuke ("rebuke," rather) so common and orthodox [it can be found in Bakunin](#). This supposed response is laughable, as, firstly, Engels directly ridicules it in the text itself (one would be inclined to think they never even bothered to properly read it at all...):

"When I submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians, the only answer they were able to give me was the following: Yes, that's true, but there it is not the case of authority which we confer on our delegates, but of a commission entrusted! These gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves. This is how these profound thinkers mock at the whole world."

[...]

[...] and more seriously, this attempt at wriggling out of Engels' critique (a smarmy, vapid attempt [worthy of a theologian](#)) shows that the anarchist has entirely missed the point. Engels is not saying that their definition of authority is wrong, per se, and that the Marxists' is right, but rather that the entire category of authority, so employed, is meaningless: we Marxists are not arguing for one definition against another, but rather, we are arguing against the entire concept as a legitimate basis for the analysis of social and economic forms at all. This is why [the Marxist](#)

[conclusion](#) is that '[t]he errors of the *authoritarians* and the errors of the *libertarians* are in principle equally metaphysical'; authority is a subjective measure, in any analysis, and subjectivity can never be the basis of an objective science (and if we are not attempting to elevate political action to a science, then what is the point? We may as well be ethicists!). If anarchists are anti-authoritarian, and Marxists are opposed to anarchists, then that must mean Marxists are pro-authoritarians, or at least pro-authority in certain circumstances; so runs the naïve line of thinking not just of many anarchists, but of a great many would-be Marxists too. Thus, the label of the "authoritarian left."

Here we can see the first interpretation of Engels, where authority is meaningless. The author denies they are "arguing for one definition against another" but instead is "arguing against the entire concept." They want the word to be given up all together. Even the limited claim of being pro-authority "in certain circumstances" is unacceptable, and this critique is directed even at "a great many would-be Marxists" who self-identify as authoritarian.

The author has made at least three major errors here.

Firstly, they seem to believe that Bakunin's "What is Authority" was written in response to Engels' "On Authority." This is false, as anyone who looks at the date each was written can tell, listed conveniently at the top of the very pages this author links. What part could this author even have *confused* for an address to Engels here? He is not mentioned at all, and no part seems even superficially relevant to this section. (One would be inclined to think this author never even bothered to properly read Bakunin at all...)

Secondly, the anarchist that Engels addresses in this passage is *not* arguing "that's not what we mean when we talk about authority," so Engels is not arguing against this "orthodox" rebuke within the essay. Rather, the anarchist Engels imagined has, with no further argument, merely denied that the delegate counts as an authority because they called it something different. *That* is what Engels means by people thinking "that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves." The imaginary anarchist here has made a distinction without a difference. No material difference has actually been shown between the things beyond the label arbitrarily applied to it.

Perhaps if Engels had given this anarchist more time than a single sentence to elaborate on why they were distinguishing between authority and an entrusted commission, they might have given an answer challenging how Engels defined authority. But he didn't, and his rebuke only works because he didn't since he is accusing them of merely changing the names of things. If the anarchist can appeal to features beyond a name change, then they are not acting as if changing the names of things changes the nature of that thing. Rather, they would be pointing to real differences already in things, and changing their names (if this could even be considered a change) to match.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this passage in no way can be read as an assertion that authority is a meaningless term or subjective that needs to be abandoned. It is hard to make this

point more clear than simply directing you to reread the couple of sentences again. It simply isn't there.

It also isn't anywhere else in "On Authority," and in fact is explicitly rejected. Engels defines what authority means at the start of the essay. "Authority, in the sense in which the word is used here, means: the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination." He cannot think the term itself is meaningless because he gave its meaning.

Nor could we argue that Engels thinks authority is meaningless or useless for scientific analysis, because he tries to use it within his own analysis. Why spend so much time showing how combined action requires authority if the concept is meaningless? Why, if Marxists are not arguing for being pro-authority "in certain circumstances," does Engels argue that socialism will "restrict authority solely to the limits within which the conditions of production render it inevitable?" Why should we think "all Socialists are agreed that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution" if there is no such thing as authority? Why claim that "a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is" if there is no such thing as authoritarianism? Marx similarly used the concept of authority in *Capital*, such as when he claimed that "Division of labour within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men, that are but parts of a mechanism that belongs to him."³⁴ Do Marxists believe that Marx is being unscientific here?

No, neither Marx nor Engels believed authority was a meaningless term that should be jettisoned from scientific works. The author is just making this up as a way to distance Marxism from the label 'authoritarian,' which they explicitly encourage their fellow Marxists to do.

This argument is in fact so flimsy that the author cannot even maintain it for long. After denying that Marxists are arguing for "one definition against another," they go on to do exactly this, arguing why the Marxist objective analysis of authority is superior to the supposedly moralistic anarchist one:

The anarchist view of authority is dripping in ethicism — indeed, it is, fundamentally, a moralising definition and stance (as is anarchism as a whole, of course) — so when they see Marxists critique them, they assume, implicitly or explicitly, that it is their ethics that are being criticised; a second-order critique, of the form "X is Y" (where Y is a positive moral value and X is the concept of authority), as opposed to theirs, which takes the form "X is Z" (where Z is a negative moral value) [...] The Marxist critique does not occur at the level of second-order ethics: it occurs at the level of the first-order; it rejects the application of moral criteria to authority in the first place. This is one of the general points Engels was trying to get across when he despaired that '[h]ave these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?': yes, authority is needed in order to fight and win a revolution, including the kind the anarchists want to wage; does this make them, or us, morally bad agents for doing so? Who cares!

³⁴ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 14, sec. 4

That is a liberal discussion for liberals to have; read what you will into the fact, therefore, that it is one that anarchists are desperately interested in.

Here we can see the second interpretation of Engels, where authority is meaningful. The author no longer wants the term to be entirely rejected, and is instead only objecting to “the application of moral criteria to authority in the first place.” The anarchists are meant to have a “moralising definition” that is “second-order,” which is being contrasted to the superior “first-order” analysis Marxists do, presumably with a non-moralizing definition.

The claim from just a paragraph earlier has been entirely abandoned then. No longer does this author hold that “we Marxists are not arguing for one definition against another, but rather, we are arguing against the entire concept as a legitimate basis for the analysis of social and economic forms at all.” Now Marxists are meant to be using authority in “first-order analysis” to make social claims like “yes, authority is needed in order to fight and win a revolution.” So much for the meaninglessness of authority!

The analysis here is incredibly sloppy though, and not just because of the bizarre algebraic expressions used to express the idea of “authority is good” vs “authority is bad.” The author tries to draw support for this reading of “On Authority” from Engels’ question “have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?” Engels here is not talking about any kind of distinction in moralizing definitions here. Rather, he is, as we have seen, trying to call out the anarchist position as contradictory, denouncing authority while calling for a revolution that would involve “authoritarian means” of violence. The author would have done a better job trying to draw from Marx’s [“Political Indifferentism”](#) instead, although even there Marx is not making any point about how terms are being defined.

It is certainly true that anarchists have tended to engage in moral analysis more commonly than Marxists have, since they have a particular taboo against it. We have seen several anarchists comment on the morally corrupting nature of authority for example. But this does not imply that the anarchists have a moral *definition* of authority. The existence of a “second-order” analysis does not mean a “first-order” analysis has been abandoned. A detective may investigate a murder scene to give a purely objective and scientific account of what happened *in addition* to believing that the murder was immoral. Likewise, someone can give a scientifically descriptive definition of slavery while also holding that slavery is morally wrong.

The fact that someone holds moral positions is not enough to conclude that this belief has tainted the objectivity of their work. Perhaps a moral nihilist argument against anarchism could be made, but that would be an entirely separate argument from “On Authority.” And such an argument would need to account for moral nihilist anarchists!

Furthermore, at no point does the author ever provide what exactly the anarchist definition of authority is meant to be, so we have no way of examining it as moralizing or not. No non-moralizing Marxist definition is ever provided either for that matter. Just like the beginning, where the author confused ridicule for an argument, they are hoping to rely on the same tactic here and merely denounce anarchism as moralizing and consider their job done.

To take a stab in the dark at what they might mean, perhaps this author imagines that anarchists define authority as something like “violence used for evil,” whereas the Marxist is simply recognizing it as “violence.” A distinction like this would open up what constitutes “authority” to much more subjective considerations. As we have seen though, anarchists have not defined authority this way. When anarchists have distinguished what they mean by authority away from things like administration or violence, it has not been by *merely* pointing to ethical differences, but to social relations, functions, sources, methods, and so on. Typically the things pointed to are also central concepts within Marxist scientific analysis as well, such as class differences and oppression found in forms of domination and exploitation.

If anarchism must fall on charges of “ethicism” on these grounds, then it is dragging Marxism down with it. We are all liberals now.

All of this is detracting from the fact we are meant to be talking about Engels’ thoughts on authority, and not the confusions of a random blog post author. I have highlighted their argument not to pick on them, but as a representative example of the state of online discourse about “On Authority.” Even the essay’s own defenders often have interpretations of what Engels is saying wildly different from what we find in the actual text, even while they chide others for not having read it. This is part of the reason why I have also been careful to lay out Engels’ argument in the most clear form possible. Neither of these interpretations make sense in the context of Engels’ syllogism.

I anticipate not everyone will agree with my own reading of Engels’ argument, especially given the number of places I have called out areas where he is vague and lacks scientific precision. It is entirely possible that someone more familiar with the Marxist corpus than myself will find answers for this, or connect it to other areas of his thought I had not considered. I have put in a fair amount of effort to seek out these readings though, and I at least needed to address the two most common alternative interpretations I have found.

In summation, Engels has provided a vague definition of authority based on an undefined term of “imposing.” Engels believed his definition was consistent with how anarchists use the term. Superficially, it is, as some anarchists have described authority as a kind of imposition. However, this was only one element in how anarchists understood authority, meaning Engels was actually using the term in a much broader sense which was sometimes inconsistent with how anarchists used the term.

Because he misunderstood what anarchists were objecting to about authority, he was led into thinking they were contradicting themselves when they did not oppose some things he thought they should, or even believed they opposed certain things which they did not. From reading the anarchists themselves, we have been able to reconstruct a definition of authority not too far removed from every-day usage which conforms to the kind of distinctions anarchists made.

Premise 1 of Engels’ syllogism is therefore false, given his definition of authority. Anarchists did not oppose authority in the sense Engels gave to the term, which would even characterize a

revolution against the authorities as “authoritarian.” Engels’ argument can reasonably be considered debunked at this point.

This is not to say that anarchism has been proven correct while Marxism has been proven wrong either, but only that Engels did not properly understand or accurately represent the subject of his critique in this essay, which was an extremely new tendency when he wrote it, and that a real solid Marxist critique would need to go beyond Engels. As I quoted Simoun Magsalin at the start of this, “Any anarchist worth their black banners can demolish the weak foundations on which Engels built “On Authority” and no Marxist who has done the work of engaging with both the Marxist and anarchist canons would cite this weakest of Engels’ texts in critiquing anarchism.”

To this end, I intend to push this point still further. I previously argued that “On Authority” fails not only because it does not accurately represent anarchism, but to make its attempted critique work it also needs to adopt points of view that undermine Marxism itself. We have just witnessed one example of the kind of highly confused and self-contradictory analysis it has produced, as well as how attempts at rejecting the legitimacy of something like the anarchist understanding of authority appears to require rejecting class oppression, which would of course destroy a central pillar of Marxist thought.

I intend to fully tear apart “On Authority” and explore and expose these weaknesses wherever they can be found. It is important that this critique continues, not only to further debunk its claims, but to show the ways in which it is actively harmful, even to the Marxists themselves. The mistakes derived from his erroneous definition are just the beginning.

Socialist Future: Anarchism Combined Action and the “Authority” of Machines

Engels asked us to “adopt entirely the point of view of the anti-authoritarians.” By this he means that, as a thought experiment, we may assume that a socialist revolution has been successful, the capitalists have been “dethroned,” and that, in accordance with what the anarchists propose, the instruments of labor are now collectively owned by the workers who regularly occupy and use them (e.g. the mines to the miners, the farms to the farmers, the factories to the factory workers, etc.). To this extent, Engels has accurately represented anarchist thought, especially given his focus on Bakunin as he was part of the collectivist movement in contrast to the Proudhonian mutualists.³⁵

The crux of Engels’ argument is that combined action, i.e. tasks that require the coordinated and simultaneous actions of multiple people, requires someone or some group to do the coordinating, such as making schedules. Without this, certain tasks are impossible by the very

³⁵ *Means and Ends*, p. 23; Mutualists agreed upon collective ownership of workplaces, but argued against collective land ownership at the Basel Congress of the IWA in 1869.

nature of the activity, such as operating a factory. In socialism, this would need to be settled through measures like a majority vote or assigning the task of coordinating to some delegate.

Anarchists generally do not dispute this reasoning, and in fact have made this point themselves. For example, in James Guillaume's "[Ideas of Social Organization](#)" (1876) agrees that certain lines of production, especially ones that need to use "complicated and expensive machinery," will require collective labor:

[I]t is evident that collective labor is imposed by the very nature of the work and, since the tools of labor are no longer simple individual tools but machines that must be tended by many workers, the machines must also be collectively owned.

This is the exact same reasoning Engels used to show the necessity of combined action at the start of "On Authority."

Guillaume also agrees that administration will be needed in these lines of production, which will also require certain delegates be assigned with the task of coordinating people so they can work in concert:

So long as they conform to the principles of justice and equality, the administration of the community, elected by all the members, could be entrusted either to an individual or to a commission of many members. It will even be possible to separate the different administrative functions, assigning each function to a special commission. The hours of labor will be fixed not by a general law applicable to an entire country, but by the decision of the community itself; but as the community contracts relations with all the other agricultural workers of the region, an agreement covering uniform working hours will probably be reached.

He recognized that "the same observations" regarding "management, hours of labor, remuneration, and distribution of products" will "apply also to industrial labor."

None of these points seem to be areas of disagreement between Engels and the anarchists then. The real question then is not "Will we need delegates for administrative tasks?" but rather "Does the existence of administrative functions contradict anarchist principles?" If certain tasks like making a schedule inherently involve authority according to the standard anarchist definition, then anarchists cannot condemn authority while supporting the kinds of activities that make these tasks necessary.

We do already have a strong indication for what this anarchist response would look like, since in the process of analyzing the anarchist definition of authority we have seen several distinctions made between authority and administration. Engels partially referenced this in "On Authority" when the "most rabid anti-authoritarians" distinguished between granting authority and a commission entrusted. To avoid the charge of simply changing the name of things then, we should further analyze what material basis is making the things themselves distinct.

Further, Engels has argued that not only delegates but the complex machinery itself would have authority in socialism. However, Engels' argument here seems to inherently connect this authority to that of the delegate. Presumably then if the authority of the delegates is disproven, then so is the machine's authority.

At the very beginning we saw how some Marxist scholars, such as Robert C. Tucker, noted that Engels appears to be contradicting Marx when he asserts that machine industry is inherently despotic in relation to the workers. I believe this is not only inconsistent not only with Marx, but also with Engels himself. Both are rather emphatic that a defining feature of socialism is that workers are no longer dominated by their own means of production as they are within capitalism.

Anarchist Combined Action

Engels' argued that some activities, like running a factory, requires combined action, and therefore requires organization, and therefore requires authority because of the need to settle certain administrative tasks like scheduling.

As was briefly covered before, some anarchists did reject what they called organization. However, these anti-organizationalists seemed to use the word differently from what Engels means here. They did not reject combined action and advocated for building a network of smaller "affinity groups" who would work together and coordinate their activities by "free agreement." What they rejected was larger and more formal organizations, like federations. Most anarchists however appear to have been organizationalists. They also believed in free agreement, but saw no contradiction between this and building larger federations. In either case, anarchists believed in combined action.

Engels appears to have more "organizationalist" anarchists in mind. He takes it for granted that anarchists intend to have factories and systems of delegates within anarchy. His argument is not asserting that anarchists reject organization, but that they do not and therefore contradict themselves because "a certain authority, no matter how delegated" exists whenever there is combined action. If Engels' argument is successful then, it should apply also to the anti-organizationalists and even to the more modern anarcho-primitivists who want to abolish factories. As he made clear in his [letter to Theodore Cuno](#), Engels believed his argument would apply even in a society of two people.

We can break down the response to Engels' argument here into two basic questions. The primary question that must be answered is whether combined action by "free agreement" really involves no authority according to the standard anarchist definition. If it does not, then Engels argument is demolished. He has misunderstood and misrepresented their stance. Secondly, we can address how anarchists, especially organizationalist anarchists, expected anarchy to look like and the principles at play that would allow for large-scale combined action, like in a factory.

Because of this focus, I will not give too much attention here to the anti-organizationalist position. This is partially because I am personally in favor of organization and more familiar with that anarchist position. But it is also because that is the more relevant form of anarchism that Engels is addressing within “On Authority.” I do not intend to imply that the anti-organizationalist position does not merit serious study and consideration. To make up for this lack of attention, if any readers want to explore anti-organizationalist anarchism in this period more, I recommend checking out Luigi Galleani’s [The End of Anarchism?](#) (1925) as well as Zoe Baker’s newly published work on early anarchist history [Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States](#) (2023), which I have been citing throughout this paper as well as several of her other essays.

A relationship based on free agreement is meant to be without authority. As we have seen, authoritarian relationships are marked by being, in a fundamental sense, involuntary. They have been coercively imposed by one party claiming a right to command another party, establishing a kind of relation of domination or exploitation. The coercive power that establishes may not only be physical, but also economic or even intellectual.

The essence of a free agreement then is voluntary association, an expression of that person’s individual liberty. Without any kind of coercive imposition, two or more people may decide to interact and work together to do something and continue working together as long as their agreement continues.

Against Engels’ claim then, authority is not necessary for a society of two people. They may need to make some accommodations for the other and make some compromises as they come to agreement, but this compromise can be reached voluntarily rather than through coercive methods. If two people want to play a game of tennis, they may need to negotiate what time they will meet, but this doesn’t need to be settled by one of them pulling a gun on the other.

It is also important to keep in mind that anarchists have a holistic notion of freedom. Anarchists recognized authority as coming not only in direct forms of physical violence, but also indirect forms of control of key resources to force others into submission. In modern capitalism, this latter form of authority is often styled as “voluntary.” Anarchist free agreement then should be understood not only in contrast to the authoritarian notion of a technocratic and absolute state directing society from the center, but also to so-called “liberalism” and its play at “voluntary” contracts when the means of production have been strictly controlled by the capitalist class.³⁶

³⁶ Malatesta elaborates on this in his critique of liberalism within [Anarchy](#): “The methods from which the different non-anarchist parties expect, or say they do, the greatest good of one and all can be reduced to two, the authoritarian and the so-called liberal. The former entrusts to a few the management of social life and leads to the exploitation and oppression of the masses by the few. The latter relies on free individual enterprise and proclaims, if not the abolition, at least the reduction of governmental functions to an absolute minimum; but because it respects private property and is entirely based on the principle of each for himself and therefore of competition between men, the liberty it espouses is for the strong and for the property owners to oppress and exploit the weak, those who have nothing; and far from producing harmony, tends to increase even more the gap between rich and poor and it too leads to exploitation and domination, in other words, to authority. This second method, that is liberalism, is in theory a kind of anarchy without socialism, and therefore is simply a lie, for freedom is not possible without equality, and real anarchy cannot exist without solidarity, without socialism. The criticism liberals direct at government

Marx shared this critique of so-called voluntary labor under capitalism. Marx presents the involuntary relation underlying it like this in [Capital](#):

Capitalist production, therefore, of itself reproduces the separation between labour-power and the means of labour. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the condition for exploiting the labourer. It incessantly forces him to sell his labour-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour-power in order that he may enrich himself. It is no longer a mere accident, that capitalist and labourer confront each other in the market as buyer and seller. It is the process itself that incessantly hurls back the labourer on to the market as a vendor of his labour-power, and that incessantly converts his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. In reality, the labourer belongs to capital before he has sold himself to capital. His economic bondage is both brought about and concealed by the periodic sale of himself, by his change of masters, and by the oscillations in the market-price of labour-power.³⁷

Anarchists have generally agreed with much of Marx's analysis of capitalism.³⁸ As we saw, anarchists emphasized the inherent connection between freedom and equality, including the

consists only of wanting to deprive it of some of its functions and to call on the capitalists to fight it out among themselves, but it cannot attack the repressive functions which are of its essence: for without the gendarme the property owner could not exist, indeed the government's powers of repression must perform increase as free competition results in more discord and inequality.

"Anarchists offer a new method: that is free initiative of all and free compact when, private property having been abolished by revolutionary action, everybody has been put in a situation of equality to dispose of social wealth. This method, by not allowing access to the reconstitution of private property, must lead, via free association, to the complete victory of the principle of solidarity."

³⁷ *Capital*, Vol. 1, ch. 23

³⁸ Bakunin especially agreed with this insight from Marx's *Capital*. Bakunin gave a rather flattering review of Marx's work in his essay "[The Capitalist System](#)." He seemed to have this argument from Marx in mind when he wrote this: "*M. Karl Marx, the illustrious leader of German Communism, justly observed in his magnificent work Das Kapital that if the contract freely entered into by the vendors of money — in the form of wages — and the vendors of their own labor — that is, between the employer and the workers — were concluded not for a definite and limited term only, but for one's whole life, it would constitute real slavery. Concluded for a term only and reserving to the worker the right to quit his employer, this contract constitutes a sort of voluntary and transitory serfdom. Yes, transitory and voluntary from the juridical point of view, but nowise from the point of view of economic possibility. The worker always has the right to leave his employer, but has he the means to do so? And if he does quit him, is it in order to lead a free existence, in which he will have no master but himself? No, he does it in order to sell himself to another employer. He is driven to it by the same hunger which forced him to sell himself to the first employer. Thus the worker's liberty, so much exalted by the economists, jurists, and bourgeois republicans, is only a theoretical freedom, lacking any means for its possible realization, and consequently it is only a fictitious liberty, an utter falsehood. The truth is that the whole life of the worker is simply a continuous and dismaying succession of terms of serfdom — voluntary from the juridical point of view but compulsory in the economic sense — broken up by momentarily brief interludes of freedom accompanied by starvation; in other words, it is real slavery.*"

opposition to class divisions and the system of property it is built upon. Anarchists therefore advocated for “real freedom” which required collective ownership of the means of production.³⁹

Anarchists viewed freedom and equality, found in this system of free agreements and collective ownership, as the basis of a real society. It forms a system of solidarity, recognizing and expanding our own freedom through others. Anarchists did not then see their opposition to authority as an opposition to socialization or combined action. On the contrary, they saw freedom as their true foundation in contrast to the false basis of authority. This idea is clearly expressed by Emma Goldman in “[Anarchism: What It Really Stands For](#)”:

In destroying government and statutory laws, Anarchism proposes to rescue the self-respect and independence of the individual from all restraint and invasion by authority. Only in freedom can man grow to his full stature. Only in freedom will he learn to think and move, and give the very best in him. Only in freedom will he realize the true force of the social bonds which knit men together, and which are the true foundation of a normal social life.⁴⁰

Because these are voluntary social relations, they are formed precisely because the various parties involved see it as within their own interests and actively pursue it. This, rather than authority, gives their association a much more durable basis. Whereas Engels only sees the limitations that come with having to accommodate to the existence of others (at least when debating with the anarchists), they countered by emphasizing this very real expansion of our capacities through these free social relations.

This connects to how we saw anarchists viewed the freedom of each as dependent on the freedom of all. The domination and exploitation of anyone, even when not aimed directly at us, not only at least threatens our own freedom, but actively limits it since it harms this system of free association that expands our own liberty. Hence Bakunin’s conclusion that “Man is really free to the extent that his freedom, fully acknowledged and mirrored by the free consent of his fellowmen, finds confirmation and expansion in their liberty.”⁴¹

³⁹ Zoe Baker notes in *Means and Ends* (p. 83-84) that anarchists generally envisioned anarchy as having four main components: (1) Collective ownership of the means of the land, raw materials, and means of production, with management of material based upon occupancy and use as possessions without any exploitation, (2) self-management for workplaces and communities where people have an equal say in collective decisions, (3) replacing markets with a system of decentralized planning, and (4) replacing the rigid division of labor, eliminating or sharing unpleasant tasks, and a significant reduction of the working day.

⁴⁰ This same idea, elaborated on as a relation between positive and negative liberty, can also be seen in Emma Goldman’s “[The Individual, Society and the State](#)”.

⁴¹ Quoted above. While Bakunin argued the freedom of others does not act as a limit on ours, this did not mean he believed we did not need to act in a way that respected that liberty. Quite the opposite. Other anarchists have made similar points, recognizing this equality of liberty as a kind of limit. See [Malatesta: Life and Ideas](#), p. 40: “So freedom for everybody and in everything, with the only limit of the equal freedom for others; which does not mean—it is almost ridiculous to have to point this out—that we recognise, and wish to respect, the “freedom” to exploit, to oppress, to command, which is oppression and certainly not freedom.”

With this, we seem to have sufficiently answered our first question and demolished Engels' central argument against anarchism. Thanks to our more accurate understanding of the anarchist notion of authority, we are also able to recognize forms of social interaction that do not coercively impose relations of domination and exploitation. Instead, a system built upon free agreement and collective ownership, upon freedom and equality, finds its durable basis in solidarity.⁴² Anarchists are not so naive to think that people will never have conflicting desires. In fact, such a world would seem to conflict with the very idea of freedom. But they did believe that these disagreements could be resolved without authority in the relevant sense of the term by use of free agreements.

Having established the real possibility of anarchist combined action, we may now analyze how some anarchists imagined this might take shape at a large scale in more formal federations and system of delegates.

Anarchists emphasized the freedom found in anarchy and the pluralism of organizational forms we should expect from it according to people's circumstances and particular drives. Anarchists therefore, when describing things at a larger scale, tended to emphasize certain general principles expected to be common to these organizations, like an opposition to authority. As Malatesta described in his "[Anarchist Programme](#)" (1920), anarchists propose:

Organisation of social life by means of free association and federations of producers and consumers, created and modified according to the wishes of their members, guided by science and experience, and free from any kind of imposition which does not spring from natural needs, to which everyone, convinced by a feeling of overriding necessity, voluntarily submits.

The idea of a world organized along anarchist principles has been expressed by Bakunin before in his "Revolutionary Catechism" (1866), but is expressed in a bit more detail in his "[National Catechism](#)" (1866). There he argued that any "countries" after the Revolution would need to recognize certain principles, the first of which were these:

1. That it is absolutely necessary for any country wishing to join the free federations of peoples to replace its centralized, bureaucratic, and military organizations by a federalist organization based only on the absolute liberty and autonomy of regions, provinces, communes, associations, and individuals. This federation will operate with elected functionaries directly responsible to the people; it will not be a nation organized from the top down, or from the center to the circumference. Rejecting the principle of imposed and regimented unity, it will be directed from the bottom up, from the circumference to the center, according to the principles of free federation. Its free individuals will form voluntary associations, its associations will form autonomous communes, its communes will form autonomous provinces, its provinces will form the regions, and the regions

⁴² For more on anarchist values, the critique of modern capitalist society, and vision of an alternative society, see *Means and Ends*, ch. 3 (p. 61-96).

will freely federate into countries which, in turn, will sooner or later create the universal world federation.

2. Recognition of the absolute right of every individual, commune, association, province, and nation to secede from any body with which it is affiliated.

We have a conception here then where free agreement provides the basis of this system, built from the bottom up by the free people themselves. These associations can federate into larger organizations following principles that respect the individual liberty on which the system is building. This is done by maintaining autonomy within these organizations, where power is not given to any elected functionaries, and the right to disassociate from these organizations, meaning the federation depends on continued voluntary consent.

Just as an individual might disassociate from the group, the group may disassociate from an individual if they were judged as unreliable or antagonistic to the group's purposes. For example, Peter Kropotkin responds in [*The Conquest of Bread*](#) (1892) to claims of how authority is necessary to avoid "loafers" who refuse to work.

Let us take a group of volunteers, combining for some particular enterprise. Having its success at heart, they all work with a will, save one of the associates, who is frequently absent from his post. Must they on his account dissolve the group, elect a president to impose fines, or maybe distribute markers for work done, as is customary in the Academy? It is evident that neither the one nor the other will be done, but that some day the comrade who imperils their enterprise will be told: "Friend, we should like to work with you; but as you are often absent from your post, and you do your work negligently, we must part. Go and find other comrades who will put up with your indifference!"

This way is so natural that it is practiced everywhere nowadays, in all industries, in competition with all possible systems of fines, docking of wages, supervision, etc.; a workman may enter the factory at the appointed time, but if he does his work badly, if he hinders his comrades by his laziness or other defects, and they quarrel with him on that account, there is an end of it; he is compelled to leave the workshop.

The unity achieved by this is meant to be much stronger, precisely because people are able to recognize it as within their own interest. In a world based on solidarity, where there is greater harmony of interest thanks to the abolition of class distinctions and property, as well as the impossibility of exploitation, this is much easier to achieve.

Ideally this unity of purpose of people within these organizations would also allow people to move more easily to unanimous consensus on a course of action, at least after a certain period of discourse. At an organizational level, it is still operating entirely in conformity with the will of its membership.

However, anarchists did not necessarily expect this to always be the case, and recognize there may be times when consensus may not be reached. Malatesta expressed the idea this way in a short dialogue [Between Peasants](#) (1884):

In practice one would do what one could; everything is done to reach unanimity, and when this is impossible, one would vote and do what the majority wanted, or else put the decision in the hands of a third party who would act as arbitrator, respecting the inviolability of the principles of equality and justice which the society is based on.

Should people not utilize their right to disassociate, unresolvable disagreements could be settled by other methods which people would recognize and voluntarily comply with. This could include utilizing majority vote or handing over the matter to an arbitrator. Presumably it could also involve any number of other measures too, like flipping a coin depending on the issue at hand. Malatesta expected this kind of situation to be rare, and typically apply to less important matters though as experience teaches people the best manner of doing something.

Even when utilizing a vote, anarchists maintained their opposition to democratic government. They made clear their opposition to “rule by the majority,” even if they believed that these systems always in practice reduced to the rule of some elite minority. We see this, for example, in Malatesta’s comments [About the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists](#):

It is well known that anarchists do not accept majority government (*democracy*), any more than they accept government by the few (*aristocracy, oligarchy, or dictatorship by one class or party*) nor that of one individual (*autocracy, monarchy or personal dictatorship*).

Thousands of times anarchists have criticised so-called majority government, which anyway in practise always leads to domination by a small minority.

The minority of a vote retain their right to persuade the majority to their side, and if they are unsuccessful, to disassociate if they consider the matter important enough.

If they decide to remain in the group however, in the spirit of solidarity, it is expected that it would be good practice for a minority to go along with the opinion of the majority, so long as this agreement is voluntary rather than compelled:

Certainly anarchists recognise that where life is lived in common it is often necessary for the minority to come to accept the opinion of the majority. When there is an obvious need or usefulness in doing something and, to do it requires the agreement of all, the few should feel the need to adapt to the wishes of the many. And usually, in the interests of living peacefully together and under conditions of equality, it is necessary for everyone to be motivated by a spirit of concord, tolerance and compromise. But such adaptation on the one hand by one group must on the other be reciprocal, voluntary and must stem from an awareness of need and of goodwill to prevent the running of social affairs from being paralysed by

obstinacy. It cannot be imposed as a principle and statutory norm. This is an ideal which, perhaps, in daily life in general, is difficult to attain in entirety, but it is a fact that in every human grouping anarchy is that much nearer where agreement between majority and minority is free and spontaneous and exempt from any imposition that does not derive from the natural order of things.

Good examples of anarchist decision making and relations to vote can be found in Zoe Baker's essay "[Anarchism and Democracy](#)," including several examples of anarchist organizations that used consensus decision making or used majority votes and where they found each to be appropriate.

But as Engels argued in "On Authority," the workers may not always be able to resort to majority votes. Some tasks will need to be taken on by certain individuals or committees, delegated with their own particular task. Anarchists appear to agree here, as we saw with Guillaume or in Bakunin's reference to elected functionaries, the Jura Federation's proposal of a correspondence and statistical bureau, or even Malatesta's suggestion of arbitration or previous distinction between government and free administration.

Delegates in anarchist systems are meant to act as informed go-betweens, who can speak and negotiate on behalf of some group of people, but crucially have no power to impose any decision they come to. Peter Kropotkin elaborated on this in the *Conquest of Bread* (1892) from the example of railways:

Railways were constructed piece by piece, the pieces were joined together, and the hundred divers companies, to whom these pieces belonged, came to an understanding concerning the arrival and departure of their trains, and the running of carriages on their rails, from all countries, without unloading merchandise as it passes from one network to another.

All this was done by free agreement, by exchange of letters and proposals, by congresses at which delegates met to discuss certain special subjects, but not to make laws; after the congress, the delegates returned to their companies, not with a law, but with the draft of a contract to be accepted or rejected.

There were certainly obstinate men who would not be convinced. But a common interest compelled them to agree without invoking the help of armies against the refractory members.

He had expanded on the nature of this system of delegation previously in [Words of a Rebel](#) (1885):

The question of true delegation versus representation can be better understood if one imagines a hundred or two hundred men, who meet each day in their work and share common concerns, who know each other thoroughly, who have discussed every aspect of the question that concerns them and have reached a decision. They then choose someone and send him to reach an agreement with other

delegates of the same kind on this particular issue. On such an occasion the choice is made with full knowledge of the question, and everyone knows what is expected of his delegate. The delegate is not authorised to do more than explain to other delegates the considerations that have led his colleagues to their conclusion. Not being able to impose anything, he will seek an understanding and will return with a simple proposition which his mandatories can accept or refuse. This is what happens when true delegation comes into being; when the communes send their delegates to other communes, they need no other kind of mandate. This is how it is done already by meteorologists and statisticians in their international congresses, by the delegates of railway and post administrations meeting from several countries.

Delegates, in contrast to a system of representative government or parliamentarianism, work as a way to facilitate correspondence and communication between the free assemblies. They lack any authority to command or forbid.⁴³

To prevent this from turning *into* an authoritarian system, anarchists proposed a number of measures, not only including decision-making power remaining in the hands of the people who elected these functionaries, being given instead a strict mandate, but also that the position is only held for fixed terms that regularly rotate, allowing many people to learn how to do the task themselves through practice, and making sure any delegate could be immediately recalled by the membership.

Various anarchist organizations have attempted to put these principles into practice, both for economic functions like running a factory, as well as for the purpose of defense with anarchist militias. Many syndicalist labor unions have often been built upon anarchist principles or with strong anarchist influences, such as the CGT in France, the CNT in Spain, the FAUD in Germany, or the IWW in the USA. Prominent anarchist militias have also included the Makhnovist Black Army during the Russian Revolution and the CNT's Defense Committees during the Spanish Civil War.

A federation built on these principles would conform with Bakunin's idea of a federation which is controlled "from the bottom up, from the circumference to the center." With this foundation, we can see how anarchists might propose to operate a factory with a system of free agreement and

⁴³ Zoe Baker in her essay "[Means and Ends: The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power](#)" emphasizes this lack of delegate power in her summary of anarchist communism: "*The end goal of anarchism — free or libertarian communism — is a stateless classless society in which workers collectively own the means of production and self-manage their workplaces and communities through councils in which everyone has a vote and a direct say in the decisions that affect them. These councils would coordinate action over large areas by associating together into a decentralised system of regional, national and international federations in which as many decisions as possible were made by the local councils themselves. This would be achieved through regular congresses at a regional, national and international level which would be attended by instantly recallable mandated delegates that councils elected to represent them. Crucially, delegates would not be granted the power to make decisions independently and impose them on others. Decision making power would remain in the hands of the council who had elected them.*"

non-authoritarian delegation. In other words, socialism is marked by the self-management of the workers themselves, rather than a class ruling over the workers.

None of this is to say anarchists demand people rely on these types of structures either for all decision making. Anarchists heavily emphasize the role of direct action and individual initiative as a way of advancing the emancipation of the working classes, and a relation to these types of organization that would rob the workers of this would be antithetical to anarchist methods and goals. Associations and federations should instead be viewed as tools the workers may utilize in this process, rather than an institution which is using them.

Engels argued that anarchists, by accepting a system of delegates and administration, have introduced authority into their organizations. Their only method of denying this, he imagined, was merely to refer to it by a different name without any real material distinction from forms of authority. We have seen here that this is false. When anarchists did believe in moral formal systems of delegation, anarchists distinguished these functions from authority, not arbitrarily, but through an understanding of voluntary association and free agreement, which was held to be and materially distinguished from authority.⁴⁴

Worker's Emancipation from the Machine

In our analysis of "On Authority," we saw that Engels argued that the material conditions of production which require combined action, such as a factory, itself has authority. Engels believes this is not merely a product of the specific mode of production we live in, but asserts that this "veritable despotism" exists "independent of all social organisation." Engels even describes the socialist factory as the worker to be, in a sense, condemned to hell.

We have also noted several ways this could be understood or connected with the rest of Marxist analysis.

If the authority of the machine just means that people need to adapt our actions to the particular conditions we find ourselves in, then anarchists fully recognize "authority" of this kind. But this not only does not meet the anarchist definition of authority, it doesn't even meet *Engels'* definition. If authority is "the imposition of the will of another upon ours," what ghost has possessed this machine that it has a will to impose?

Furthermore, our actions don't just need to conform to our material conditions when there is a machine involved, but to *all* circumstances. It is true that, for a power loom to operate, people must perform particular actions, but this is equally true of the spinning wheel. It needs power to spin, cotton has to be fed, waste needs to be removed, parts have to be replaced, and so on. This "authority" would exist independently of combined action, which would only be one form of it. Yet Engels presents the desire to abolish authority as a move from the power loom back to the spinning wheel. (Perhaps this is why he qualified it as only abolishing authority "in large-scale industry"?)

⁴⁴ For more on organizational anarchism, see *Means and Ends* ch. 7 (p. 211-248) on Mass Anarchism.

This seems to be closely related to what Bakunin recognized as the authority of the inevitable power of the natural laws. As we saw, Bakunin happily recognized the “authority” of these laws, but without giving up the basic elements of his anarchism. It seems that anarchists would similarly have no issue recognizing the “authority” of the spinning wheel's need to be fed cotton. This would obviously not qualify as authority by the more standard anarchist definition.

It seems that Engels view the authority of the factory machine and the authority of the delegate as inherently tied together in some fundamental way. Because the factory requires large-scale combined action, it requires administrators. And because Engels considers all administrators to be authorities, this means the factory itself requires authority, leading Engels to describe the machinery itself as despotic.

As we have also seen, Engels misunderstood what anarchists meant by their critique of authority. Anarchists are able to propose methods of combined action and administration that are consistent with their anti-authoritarianism. This undermines the central thrust of Engels' argument. If administrators need not be authoritarian, then the factory itself is not requiring authority. Any authority found in the factory would be dependent, not independent, of social organization.

While it's clear how Engels' argument fails as a critique of anarchism here, we have not yet fully explored the ways that it also undermines Marxism itself. We noted before how Engels' view of the authority of the machine in “On Authority” seems similar to, but still out of place from, more standard Marxist analysis. Marx and Engels were no strangers to describing the factory as despotic within capitalism, as workers have been turned into mere appendages of the machine. But applying this same argument to socialist production seems strange.

Furthermore, this form of “impersonal domination” seemed to be emphasized as not an inherent characteristic of the objects, but a consequence of the form of social organization. But here Engels emphasizes that the machine has authority “independent of all social organisation.” Unlike other places where Marx and Engels described the authority of impersonal objects and systems, this authority really is presented as an inherent characteristic.

This seems to be the most major way in which “On Authority” is inconsistent with Marxism. Anywhere else that I have been able to find Marx and Engels describing impersonal forms of domination, this has been a direct product of our forms of social organization, and it has been presented as a problem which socialism will solve. I have seen Marxists scholars appear to come to similar conclusions as well. Robert C. Tucker noted that Engels' argument “seems inconsistent with some of what we know of the thinking of Marx.” This appears accurate. Consider this section from Marx's [*Capital*](#) (1867):

The life-long speciality of handling one and the same tool, now becomes the life-long speciality of serving one and the same machine. Machinery is put to a wrong use, with the object of transforming the workman, from his very childhood, into a part of a detail-machine. [...] Here as everywhere else, we must distinguish between the increased productiveness due to the development of the social

process of production, and that due to the capitalist exploitation of that process. In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage.

[...]

Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this inversion for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality. By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour-power.⁴⁵

When Marx describes the machine as despotic, this is what he means. As we can see, this is a direct consequence of the system of capitalist exploitation. This alienation workers have from their own tools is directly derived from the worker's estranged labor, resulting in the worker being turned into a "mere living appendage" of a machine that dominates them.

Thanks to the machine, work is simplified, becoming its own form of drudgery. The workers are now attending to the machine that does the work rather than seeing it as the product of their own hands. Workers that previously were molded to specialize in one particular craft are now molded to attend one particular kind of machine, through this being molded to it. This is especially clear in factory labor, but is also generally true of *all* labor within capitalism. Since production is aimed at surplus-value rather than use-values, the worker has been reduced to the status of a tool himself. The factory just gives this a "technical and palpable reality."

This aspect of capitalism is one of the main things socialism seeks to abolish. The workers' emancipation is aimed not merely against the despotism of the capitalist, but the despotic machine, ending our estranged labor.

We also see this same idea in Marx's [Grundrisse](#) (1857-61):

In fact, in the production process of capital, as will be seen more closely in its further development, labour is a totality – a combination of labours – whose individual component parts are alien to one another, so that the overall process as a totality is *not* the *work* of the individual worker, and is furthermore the work of the different workers together only to the extent that they are [forcibly] combined, and do not [voluntarily] enter into combination with one another. The combination of this

⁴⁵ *Capital*, Vol. 1, ch. 15

labour appears just as subservient to and led by an alien will and an alien intelligence – having its *animating unity* elsewhere – as its material unity appears subordinate to the *objective unity* of the *machinery*, of fixed capital, which, as *animated monster*, objectifies the scientific idea, and is in fact the coordinator, does not in any way relate to the individual worker as his instrument; but rather he himself exists as an animated individual punctuation mark; as its living isolated accessory. Thus, combined labour is combination *in-itself* in a double way; not combination as a mutual relation among the individuals working together, nor as their predominance either over their particular or individual function or over the instrument of labour. Hence, just as the worker relates to the product of his labour as an alien thing, so does he relate to the combination of labour as an alien combination, as well as to his own labour as an expression of his life, which, although it belongs to him, is alien to him and coerced from him, and which A. Smith etc. therefore conceives is a *burden, sacrifice* etc. Labour itself, like its product, is *negated as the labour of the particular, isolated worker*.

Marx here is analyzing combined labor, equivalent to Engels' combined action, which in capitalist production is involuntary. Because the work is involuntary, the worker has become subordinated to a foreign will, which appears to be found in the machinery itself that they are made to serve as "an animated individual punctuation mark." Marx even notes how the factory appears to have its own animating will and mind, things necessary for it to appear as an authority according to Engels' definition.

But this apparent authority of the machine only exists because of our estranged labor in the production of capital. The labor is being involuntarily extracted from us as surplus-labor needed to create surplus-value. The authority of the machine is therefore *not* independent of all social organization, but is a direct result of it!

One would think that the bourgeois Engels was simply unable to escape the view of his class, and, like so many capitalists before him, took the laws of his particular mode of production to be eternal laws of nature. But this would be false since Engels absolutely knew better. Consider what Engels' wrote in [Anti-Dühring](#) (1877):

In making itself the master of all the means of production to use them in accordance with a social plan, society puts an end to the former subjection of men to their own means of production. It goes without saying that society cannot free itself unless every individual is freed. The old mode of production must therefore be revolutionised from top to bottom, and in particular the former division of labour must disappear. Its place must be taken by an organisation of production in which, on the one hand, no individual can throw on the shoulders of others his share in productive labour, this natural condition of human existence; and in which, on the other hand, productive labour, instead of being a means of subjugating men, will become a means of their emancipation, by offering each individual the opportunity to develop all his faculties, physical and mental, in all directions and exercise them

to the full — in which, therefore, productive labour will become a pleasure instead of being a burden.

What a change of tone from “On Authority”! The existence of a social plan, of combined action, is no longer seen as a sign of the worker’s slavery to the machine or anyone else. Quite the opposite, as the existence of this social plan actually puts an *end* to the worker’s subjection to the means of production. Engels goes out of his way to emphasize that this is true on the individual level. He agrees with the anarchists that social freedom can only be found when there is individual freedom, and that within socialist production the means of production have become a means of the workers’ emancipation!⁴⁶

This is the much more consistent and well-grounded position within Marxist thought on socialism, which seems to directly contradict “On Authority.” Perhaps there is some way that these positions could be brought in harmony. Engels has, after all, emphasized that authority is confined to different “spheres” in socialism. Perhaps socialism abolishes the factory’s authority of estranged labor in capitalist production, but retains it “with regard to the hours of work” for planning combined action. The authority of the factory could be abolished in one sense, but not in another.

This kind of response seems to have little hope though. The machine was only able to appear as an authority due to the estrangement the workers had from their labor and from each other when engaging in combined action within capitalist production. The relation of the workers to their delegates would need to be similarly estranged for the machine to take on this appearance of authority. This is no longer the case within socialism, the goal of which is the unalienated human being.⁴⁷

I wish Marxists the best of luck in squaring this circle if they can.

Capitalist Present: Anarchism and the “Authority” of the Revolution

Typically, when “On Authority” is cited for support by Marxists, the bulk of Engels’ argument is ignored. The connection between authority and coercion is too intuitive, too natural, for Marxists to deny it. If they were to insist that, after the emancipation of the working classes, socialist production will remain authoritarian in relation to the workers, too many uncomfortable questions are raised. The essay would stop being rhetorically useful for a quick dismissal of anarchism.

Instead, almost all discussion focuses on the need for violence in the revolution. “On Authority” is reduced from four pages down to a single paragraph and maybe two quips. A paragraph, we should note, where Engels assumed “all Socialists” already knew and agreed with his own position, and therefore did not require elaboration.

⁴⁶ Credit to [An Anarchist FAQ H.4.6](#) for pointing out this contradiction in Engels.

⁴⁷ Erich Fromm, [Marx’s Concept of Man](#), ch. 6

Engels is extremely confused by the anarchist stance, and even seems to present the Marxist stance as a way to placate them. The state which they hate so much will be destroyed, if only given enough time, and more permanently since this plan destroys the root cause of the state in the process.

But Engels conflates the necessity of the state with the necessity of using violence in a revolution. This is because, for Engels, *all* violence is authoritarian, and *any* organized fighting force on behalf of some class is a state (even if later Engels admits that this is not a state in the “true sense of the term”). For the proletariat, this is their own “dictatorship” which seizes the means of production from the capitalists and defends itself from counter-revolution. Since any such force would qualify as a state, the anarchists, by rejecting the state, must be rejecting violence itself. That they can do this while still calling for a revolution completely baffles Engels, who can only question whether anarchists have seen a revolution in the first place.

The answer is, of course, yes. Anarchists have seen revolutions, and engaged in many of them, including figures like Louise Michel in the Paris Commune, the very example of a revolution that Engels used. Bakunin, as the main target of Engels’ critique, had personally left to join the January Uprising in Poland in 1863, and in September 1870 launched a quickly defeated insurrection in Lyon.⁴⁸ Engels actually wrote “On Authority” while the idea of “propaganda of the deed” was becoming increasingly popular within the anarchist movement, supporting a whole series of violent and insurrectionary attempts.⁴⁹ As the anarchist movement grew, it would become more and more involved with revolutionary movements at larger scales, including the Makhnovist Black Army during the Russian Revolution or the CNT-FAI during the Spanish Civil War.

The anarchist support for insurrection and revolutionary violence was quite obvious, even at the time. Engels appears to have deliberately ignored or misrepresented this aspect of his opponents.

Engels’ error once again comes down to his fundamental misrepresentation of the anarchist critique of authority. While anarchists do recognize coercion as an essential element of authority, the use of coercive methods alone is not enough to qualify as authority. Authority for anarchists is not merely the use of certain methods (e.g. rifles, bayonets, and cannons), but coercion that fulfills a particular function of establishing and maintaining relations of domination and exploitation, imposing and exercising class privileges and monopolies.

Authoritarian violence is therefore quite unlike anti-authoritarian resistance. Whereas authority introduces coercion into the social relationship, invading the freedom and equality of others, the violence of resistance is a reaction against this invasion. It also serves precisely the opposite function. The aim of a slave rebellion is not the enslavement of the former masters, as if the system were kept in place but with people’s positions shuffled around, but the end of slavery itself.

⁴⁸ *Means and Ends*, p. 186

⁴⁹ *Means and Ends*, p. 186-210

Because of this relatively more narrow conception of authority, there is no contradiction in anarchists denouncing all authority while supporting violence used in self-defense, as in a revolution of the oppressed.

We have consistently seen anarchists recognize the role for violence when used to defend against invasion and the violence of the authoritarians, such as in Bakunin's "Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism," Malatesta's "Anarchy," Reclus' "Anarchy," and Alexander Berkman's *Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism*. To add one more clear example, Malatesta argued for this in his "[Anarchist Programme](#)" (1920):

Leaving aside the lessons of history (which demonstrates that never has a privileged class divested itself of all or some of its privileges, and never has a government abandoned its power unless obliged to do so by force or the fear of force), there is enough contemporary evidence to convince anyone that the bourgeoisie and governments intend to use armed force to defend themselves, not only against complete expropriation, but equally against the smallest popular demands, and are always ready to engage in the most atrocious persecutions and the bloodiest massacres.

For those people who want to emancipate themselves, only one course is open: that of opposing force with force.

It is also worth noting Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* who is often identified as an anarcho-pacifist or Christian anarchist, rejecting violence even in self-defense according to the Nazarene's command to "turn the other cheek," did not self-identify as an anarchist precisely because he saw it as calling for a violent revolution.⁵⁰ This can be seen in his essay "[On Anarchy](#)" (1900):

The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order and in the assertion that, without Authority there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. **They are mistaken only in thinking that anarchy can be instituted by a violent revolution.**

Clearly, while Tolstoy did consider anarchy as a proper goal, he disagreed with the anarchists, who he considered distinct from himself, precisely because they did recognize the need for violence. If we do include pacifists like Tolstoy among the ranks of anarchists, they were a small minority.

There is not a small amount of irony that he viewed the anarchists this way, given how frequently they are portrayed as dangerous bomb-throwing violent outlaws and bandits. As we have seen, Engels was incorrect both about how anarchists defined authority and whether they opposed violent resistance to oppression.

⁵⁰ Peter Kropotkin also listed Tolstoy as an example of an anarchist despite this lack of self-identification in his entry [Anarchism](#) for the Encyclopedia Britannica. For more on Tolstoy's pacifism, see [The Kingdom of God is Within You](#).

Perhaps one contributing factor in this is that Engels, like Marx in “Political Indifferentism,” was just recycling old arguments against Proudhon instead of actually engaging with the arguments put forward by the collectivist anarchists. Part of this confusion also seems to come from the anarchist call for “abstentionism.” We saw this before in Marx treating a call for “abstention from political activity” as equivalent to a rejection of the need for violence. Anarchists disputed this characterization even at the time. For example, Bakunin wrote this in a letter to Anselmo Lorenzo in May 1872:

The Marxians accuse us of intentionally ignoring political struggles, thus representing us falsely as a species of Arcadian, Platonic, pacifistic socialists who are in no way revolutionary. In saying this of us, they lie deliberately, for they know better than anyone that we too urge the proletariat to engage with the political question, but that the politics that we preach, absolutely populist and internationalist, not nationalist and bourgeois, has as its goal not the foundation or transformation of states but their destruction. We say, and all that we witness today in Germany and Switzerland confirms this, that their politics aimed at the transformation of states in the so-called populist sense can only end up in a new subjugation of the proletariat to the profit of the bourgeois.⁵¹

Elsewhere, Bakunin goes into a bit more detail about what he means by abstention and the anarchist approach to political activity.

It is not true then to say that we completely ignore politics. We do not ignore it, for we definitely want to destroy it. And here we have the essential point separating us from political parties and bourgeois radical Socialists. Their politics consists in making use of, reforming, and transforming the politics of the State, whereas our politics, the only kind we admit, is the total abolition of the State, and of the politics which is its necessary manifestation.

And only because we frankly want the abolition of this politics do we believe that we have the right to call ourselves internationalists and revolutionary Socialists; for he who wants to pursue politics of a different kind, who does not aim with us at the total abolition of politics—he must accept the politics of the State, patriotic and bourgeois politics; and that is to deny in the name of his great or small national State the human solidarity of the nations beyond the pale of his particular State, as well as the economic and social emancipation of the masses within the State.⁵²

Bakunin and the anarchists’ call for abstention from politics then could be more accurately understood as abstention from participating within *bourgeois* political institutions, first and foremost being the State. As an alternative, they advocated for building truly proletarian institutions outside of and opposed to the state and capital. It was not, as Marx and Engels would characterize it, a call for workers to ignore political matters.

⁵¹ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 16

⁵² G.P. Maximoff, [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism](#), p. 313-314; Also see *Means and Ends*, p. 168-171

Having seen that anarchists can both use violence and form larger organizational structures, it is unsurprising to see that these have been applied within revolutionary anarchist organizations. Nor would they consider such an organization to be a “state.” Just as Engels used a far broader definition of authority to include things anarchists would support, so too did he use a broader definition of the state (at least before he started advocating the word be replaced with “commonalty” with regard to the so-called “people’s state”).

Zoe Baker represents the anarchist understanding of the state like this:

Actual states are institutions that (i) perform the function of reproducing the power of the economic ruling classes; (ii) are hierarchically and centrally organized; (iii) are wielded by a minority political ruling class who sit at the top of the state hierarchy and possess the authority to make laws and issue commands at a societal level that others must obey due to the threat or exercise of institutionalized force.⁵³

In other words, authority as anarchists defined it is also an essential part of the state. The state is necessarily a hierarchical institution, concentrating power into the hands of the economic and political elites, in contrast to the “bottom up” forms of organizing we’ve seen from the anarchists.

The flaw in Engels’ reasoning then can once again largely be traced to this distinction in definitions. He misunderstood the anarchist critique of authority, and therefore also misunderstood their critique of the state by extension. This is also why Engels’ objection that anarchists want to get rid of the state “before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed” is similarly flawed. Anarchists did not only consider it important that we one day achieve a society without authority. They also believed that, to achieve such a society, we needed to actually put these ideas into practice today, prefiguring the world we want in the manner we organize now. Through the revolutionary and transformative practice of direct action, we develop the confidence, drive, skills, networks, and relations that allow this type of world to be born, “building the new in the shell of the old,” and to produce and reproduce the kinds of people fit to live within it.

If we were to introduce authority into our organizational structures, we would not only fail to achieve the society we want by utilizing ineffective means, producing a very different world than what we intended to build, but would ourselves be corrupted by engaging in the wrong kinds of practice, developing the wrong kinds of drives and capacities. Thus both the new socialist rulers and the people they rule over would be corrupted, recreating the system they sought to abolish. This, and not the existence of defensive violence, is the reason anarchists oppose utilizing state power.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Means and Ends*, p. 75-76

⁵⁴ *Means and Ends*, p. 45-60, 141-173; also see [“Means and Ends: The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power”](#). Anarchists especially focused on this inherent connection between the means used and the ends produced. To quote Malatesta’s [“Anarchist Programme.”](#) “[I]t is not enough to desire something; if one really wants it adequate means must be used to secure it. And these means are not arbitrary, but instead cannot but be conditioned by the ends we aspire to and by the circumstances in which the struggle takes place, for if we ignore the choice of means we would achieve other ends, possibly

Anarchist theory resonates with Audre Lorde's conclusion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."⁵⁵ Anarchists are not distinguishing between authoritarian and non-authoritarian violence merely on moral grounds, even if they do also happen to consider slavery immoral, but also upon this material class analysis and a theory of social change learned from the experience.

This is not to say that anarchists will accept organizations of any kind, so long as they have a reasonable claim of self-defense. For example, anarchists are overwhelmingly opposed to prisons. We have also seen the kind of organizational structure anarchists demand in a bit more detail above using free association and federation, which would also need to be adopted for questions of communal defense. We have seen the focus on rehabilitation and respect for humanity, even in situations when faced with situations where the choices are to kill or be killed. Anarchists recognize the need to respond to do anti-social acts, attacking the freedom and equality of others, but attempt to find proper responses that do not require the creation of an anti-social system. It would be worth having a more full discussion of anarchist "criminology," for lack of a better term.⁵⁶

For now, it is enough to point out that anarchists do recognize the need for violence within the revolution, and that, because they do not ignore class and the overall oppressive structure the workers find themselves in, do not contradict themselves in recognizing this. To quote Errico Malatesta:

We are on principle opposed to violence and for this reason wish that the social struggle should be conducted as humanely as possible. But this does not mean that we would wish it to be less determined, less thoroughgoing; indeed we are of the opinion that in the long run half measures only indefinitely prolong the struggle, neutralising it as well as encouraging more of the kind of violence which one wishes to avoid. Neither does it mean that we limit the right of self-defence to resistance against actual or imminent attack. For us the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate defence and are fully justified in rising without waiting to be actually fired on; and we are fully aware of the fact that attack is often the best means of defence....⁵⁷

By contrast, it is actually astonishing how *little* Engels discusses class within "On Authority." Even when he is describing a revolution, he fails to mention the existence of a ruling class that is being revolted against:

diametrically opposed to those we aspire to, and this would be the obvious and inevitable consequence of our choice of means. Whoever sets out on the highroad and takes a wrong turning does not go where he intends to go but where the road leads him."

⁵⁵ Audre Lorde's, "[The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House](#)"

⁵⁶ A good place to start would be [Classic Writings in Anarchist Criminology: A Historical Dismantling of Punishment and Domination](#). For a modern Marxist supporter of prison abolition, see Angela Davis' [Are Prisons Obsolete?](#)

⁵⁷ [Malatesta: Life and Ideas. The Anarchist Writings of Errico Malatesta](#), p. 42

A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists.

This description of a revolution is so neutral it could easily apply to the actions of the ruling classes themselves trying to put down the rebellion. The revolution here is seen as no different from any other war between states, between “one part of the population” and another, as each side uses violence to claim victory.

This is because, for Engels, class is irrelevant to authority. Authority is merely a matter of one party “imposing” itself on the other, and however Engels is defining this, he considers resisting oppression to be a form of imposing yourself on the oppressor. This is perhaps easy enough to understand when we ignore that overall context and class analysis. An individual case of revolutionary violence could certainly seem authoritarian, with the rebel holding an enemy combatant at gunpoint and demanding they surrender. The revolutionary, holding the enemy combatant at gunpoint and demanding they lay down their arms, would be “imposing” themselves upon the gendarme, acting as an authority to the authorities.

We have another irony here then that Marxists are so ready to compare anarchism unfavorably to liberalism because of supposed moralizing, but this class-blind view which equates the violence of a people against their oppression with oppression itself seems more familiar to the liberal. Because, by anarchist analysis, authority is deeply connected not only with coercion but also with imposing a social relation of domination and exploitation, the violent resistance against authority is not itself authoritarian. Anarchists viewed this as self-evident, as Reclus suggested that no one “goes so far as to consider the revolutionary who stands up to power as the true representative of authority.” But this is exactly the position that Engels advanced.

The point here is not to determine which definition is “correct.” Language is made up, and words can take on different meanings in different contexts. Engels is not wrong *per se* for considering all violence authoritarian. He can define his terms however he likes. But he is wrong in misrepresenting how *others* define their terms and misrepresenting their position as an extension of that.

Anarchists define their terms as they do out of convenience and for precision, not out of necessity, as if their point was merely semantic. If the anarchists needed to adopt the broader Marxist concepts of authority and the state, it would still be possible for them to express their same core position.

Consider [Errico Malatesta's letter to Luigi Fabbri from July 1919](#) regarding the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which some anarchists had been adopting after the Russian Revolution:

But perhaps the truth is simply this, that our Bolshevized friends intend with the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat” merely the revolutionary act of the workers in taking possession of the land and of the instruments of labor and trying to constitute a society for organizing a mode of life in which there would be no place for a class that exploited and oppressed the producers.

Understood so the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the effective power of all the workers intent on breaking down capitalist society, and it would become anarchy immediately upon the cessation of reactionary resistance, and no one would attempt by force to make the masses obey him and work for him.

And then our dissent would have to do only with words. Dictatorship of the proletariat should signify dictatorship of all which certainly does not mean dictatorship, as a government of all is no longer a government, in the authoritarian, historic, practical sense of the word.

Here we can see how, because of how these terms have been defined, Malatesta took a position much closer to that of Engels, even recognizing how this “state” would wither away once reactionary resistance had ended. This could be a “dictatorship” that he would support precisely because he would not consider it a dictatorship at all. It would include *all* the workers, not just the proletariat as Marxists understand them,⁵⁸ and would have no ruling class which can make laws for the masses.

Malatesta’s opposition to the Bolsheviks then was not rooted in them calling themselves a dictatorship, which as he points out would have only been a matter of semantics, but precisely because they do not match this conception. They would be a dictatorship, not of the “proletariat,” but of their party. He continues:

But the true partisans of the dictatorship of the proletariat do not understand the words so, as they have clearly shown in Russia. Obviously, the proletariat comes into it as the people comes into democratic regimes, that is to say, simply for the purpose of concealing the true essence of things. In reality one sees a dictatorship of a party, or rather of the heads of a party; and it is a true dictatorship, with its decrees, its penal laws, its executive agents and above all with its armed force that serves today also to defend the revolution for its external enemies, but that will serve tomorrow to impose upon the workers the will of the dictators, to arrest the revolution, consolidate the new interests and finally defend a new privileged class against the masses.

At the start of “On Authority,” Engels argued that anarchists oppose authority because the word “sounds bad.” Here we can see that is not the case. Malatesta’s position is not based on how words “sound,” but upon an actual theory of practice and organizing. If anarchists needed to express themselves like the Marxists, describing the kind of “dictatorship” they want to achieve

⁵⁸ For discussion of how various anarchists used the term “proletariat,” see *Means and Ends*, p. 70-71.

anarchy, they could do so. They typically do not do this, not only because it is a terrible rhetorical strategy, but because it is misleading and makes their terminology less precise.

We can actually even see an example of this in Bakunin prior to the publication of “On Authority.” On at least two occasions he described the kind of revolutionary organizations he wanted to organize as kinds of “dictatorships”: his [April 1870 letter to Albert Richard](#), and his [June 1870 letter to Sergey Nechayev](#). Both letters are being addressed to state socialists, which is part of the reason he did this, contrasting the “overt” dictatorships they supported to his “secret” or “invisible” ones. While these letters are sometimes used in bad faith as supposed evidence of Bakunin’s conspiracy to consolidate power in himself within the First International, the actual letters make it clear that precisely what makes these organizations different from the over ones is that they worked, not by issuing orders or commands to the masses, but through persuasion and organizing, lacking any kind of privileged position, and therefore “does not threaten the liberty of the people.”⁵⁹ Bakunin’s position here is not meaningfully different from what he has expressed elsewhere except in jargon, and his motive for using this jargon here is also clear when we consider his target audience.

Anarchists are not opposed to the existence of an armed force *per se* then, and in fact seem to call for one to carry out an insurrection. If that is enough to qualify as a “state” or a “dictatorship” in the eyes of some, then anarchists might object for the sake of clarity, but they are not disturbed by a word “sounding bad.” Anarchists in fact have considered the material conditions that have caused the state to arise. Against the Marxists however, the anarchists seem to emphasize the dialectical relation between the state and the economic ruling classes, rather than seeing it purely as an outgrowth of those classes. Anarchists recognized the need for violence within a revolution, and this did not contradict their demand that workers focus on abolishing authority, abolishing the force that dominates and exploits them, as quickly as possible.

Because of the anarchist theory of the unity of means and ends, anarchists emphasized that the revolutionary organizations we form to fight against the oppressors must not be built upon the “principle of authority” itself, as this would render it unsuitable and incapable of realizing an anti-authoritarian society. Instead, even if it were successful in overthrowing the existing regime, it would not produce socialism but would instead recreate new systems of domination and exploitation, or reintroduce the old ones. Instead, revolutionary organizations must prefigure in form the type of society we want to achieve, built upon the principles of free agreement and federation.

Conclusion

Anarchism is not based on a rhetorical trick, as if it were reacting to a mere word. Anarchists are not reflexively condemning something merely because they have been told “that this or that act is *authoritarian*.” Anarchists, in describing their position as opposition to all authority, are

⁵⁹ *Means and Ends*, p. 313-321

summarizing a more complex and nuanced position. On the one hand, it expresses their opposition and critique of modern society and the various forms of oppression that are characteristic to it. On the other hand, it also indicates the method of organizing they believe is most effective in combating it, looking to achieve a “society of friends” based on the equal freedom of all, united in solidarity.

From the beginning, anarchists have carefully and materially distinguished and contrasted authority from free agreement and called for revolution, fully expecting violence to be involved in this conflict because of the inherently violent nature of the state and class society. These distinctions rather easily allow anarchists to address Engels’ main objections about the need for administrative tasks, such as scheduling, to make combined action possible and the need for force within a revolution. If necessary, anarchists have been capable of expressing this even while adopting Marxist or other forms of authoritarian language. They generally choose not to do so precisely because it is less scientifically precise and rhetorically misleading, instead consistently presenting the movement for the emancipation of the working classes as an “immense protest against authority.” Their position was also not only semantic, but led them to take materially distinct positions from the state socialists and Marxists, such as their opposition to the seizure of state power.

Engels did not seriously engage with anarchist theory as it actually existed. Instead he took a slogan, the opposition to the principle of authority, and then imposed his own upon it. Instead of seeing what positions they held, he deduced what positions he believed they should hold based on this reading. When he discovered the positions they actually held were different from what he believed they should hold, he blamed them rather than recognize his error. “On Authority” is not an isolated incident in this regard, and a more full history of the conflict between the anarchists and the Marxists within the First International.⁶⁰

The reliance on “On Authority” for the past 150 years is illustrative of how anarchist theorists continue to be ignored or misrepresented instead of being confronted on their own terms. What is especially troubling about these critiques is that so often that doing so requires Marxists to abandon their own position, rejecting class analysis as moralizing or undercutting their own emancipatory vision of socialism. A real Marxist critique of anarchism cannot merely quibble over the definition of terms, but must strike at this real position, as well as the theory of practice that underlies it, which requires seriously engaging with its theoretical content.

In this regard, “On Authority” fails on nearly every level. It fails not only to seriously challenge any anarchist position, but even fails the Marxists themselves by misleading them on their own theory.

⁶⁰ [The First Socialist Schism](#) is an especially useful resource for this history. Originally I had intended a section of this paper to be dedicated to recounting this history and showing the development and persistence of Engels’ confusions. This history is rather complex and often the more interesting portions have more tangential relations to “On Authority,” and should likely be considered in a separate paper.