



ANARCHISM OR SOCIALISM?

(A nonsensical question
that misrepresents history)



A brief explanation of an oversimplified and often false binary, by Offshoot Journal

**Anarchism and socialism are not mutually exclusive.
Why did we start talking like they were?**

IN MANY DISCUSSIONS among contemporary leftists, you may hear debates about anarchism as opposed to or in opposition to socialism (**this happens with communism, too**). Despite the frequency and normalization of this discourse, the premise of this conversation is wrong.

First and foremost, it's essential to understand that the socialist movement consisted of different factions of thinkers, groups, and tendencies who believed their ideas were best. Anarchism, for instance, finds some of its most pronounced origins in "the First International"

The First International was an organization of delegates meeting to address the needs of workers from various countries. Socialists of different backgrounds came together in 1864 in London, and many ideas, disagreements, and shifts were developed.¹

One of the splits that emerged within the International centered around the vision of **Karl Marx**, while others centered around the beliefs of **Mikhail Bakunin**. Prominent personalities, ego, and scandal led to a beef that (unfortunately) still characterizes leftist factions today.



¹ See Robert Graham's *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke it: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement* for a detailed history.



What did they disagree on? Some socialists wanted to work through government, political parties, and the state to seize power. Other socialists saw this as a corruptible reformist effort. Instead, they argued for building socialism from below through direct action, federations, and the expropriation of the means of production. The different sides agreed capitalism had to go and that the state itself was a looming threat, but struggled to find unity in their respective approaches.

This created the division we now know between statist socialism and libertarian socialism, which came to be known as Anarchism. [Note: “**Libertarian**” should not be confused with the modern-day appropriation of the term by right-wing laissez-faire capitalists who use the word libertarian for their purposes.]

Libertarian had a different meaning and context then; to this day, some anarchists still hold onto the libertarian-socialist label. Furthermore, some participants of the International faced repression for using the term “anarchist.” [Note: this term was **first embraced by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**]. Self-identifying anarchists of this period began calling themselves such to set themselves apart from other socialists, but this did not mean that they were no longer socialists themselves. Understanding this history also helps clarify the origins of libertarian, or, anarchist communism.



Other
kind of
libertarian.

DON'T TREAD ON ME

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

Far too often, you may read historical materials juxtaposing anarchism versus socialism. You may be surprised to read scholarly work that falls into this trap. Though not necessarily malicious, these false divisions are **misrepresentations** we should reject, no matter the radical histories we align ourselves with. **Though some may not know, plenty of others should know better.**

This isn't an effort to reignite debates over the "real" interpretation of socialism or fall in line behind deceased cults of personality. There's enough of that already, and widespread promotion of the false socialism (or communism) vs. anarchism binary shows too many people don't actually know what they're arguing about.

Anarchists fought in and influenced many world revolutions we admire, including those in Mexico, China, Cuba, Russia, and more. However, because of the false binary, among other issues, their contributions have been erased and often suppressed.



THE BIG PICTURE:

Just because someone is an anarchist doesn't mean that they're not a socialist or a communist. Anarchism is a part of the historical socialist movement. Although some anarchists may no longer identify as socialists or communists, that doesn't erase those around the world who were and still are.

Our ideas about what anarchism, socialism, communism, and much more mean are shaped by outside forces. Different thinkers, revolutionaries, reactionaries, and governments have influenced our relationships with these words. Our respective relationships with them are based on propaganda. Therefore, it's important to ask yourself what that relationship is and why when you read any person's (past or present) opinion about any of these terms. Context always matters!

Despite intense confrontations, a man like Karl Marx—who is the antithesis of anarchism in many people's minds—was influenced by anarchists like the aforementioned Proudhon. Anarchists like Carlo Cafiero (a follower of Bakunin) were influenced by and had correspondence with Marx, and Marx said that Cafiero's understanding of the infamous *Capital* was above others (there are also libertarian Marxists, too!). It's good to take many different ideas and find truth in synthesizing different analyses.

Despite tensions, the relationships between members of the First International were complicated and fraught. Relationships between thinkers, writers, and revolutionaries have been and remain complex. These people organized together, fought and wrote together, disagreed with each other, and at times, some splintered off. But we in the present don't have to inherit their past disagreements. Instead, we can understand the dynamic history of their relationships to create a better understanding of everything then and everything now.

