

Second Thought does not understand authoritarianism

A brief anarchist response to a Leninist propaganda piece

M. K.

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Every once in a while, authoritarian leftists put out a ‘new’ rehashing of Engels’ *On Authority*, complete with all of its misrepresentations, distortions and almost comical confusion. At this point, there have been more in-depth anarchist refutations of this work than I could keep count of, each masterfully dismantling it from various different angles. That being said, this is not the aim of this article. What I’m more interested in are the secondary points that JT Chapman of Second Thought made around and in support of his word-for-word quoting of Engels, as just like a snowball rolling down a hill, these regurgitations gather about them newer arguments each time they’re made, ones more appealing to the modern mind than analogies about cotton spinning mills and authoritarian steam.

At the start of his video essay, he gives us a definition of authoritarianism being the “*favoured or enforcing [of] strict obedience to authority, especially that of the government, at the expense of personal freedom,*” although he somehow seems to find it so bad and lacking in “political commitment” that it can be essentially boiled down to “when you want people to follow the rules.” Following in Engels’ footsteps of creating confusion where there need be none, he decides to put together his own definition of authoritarianism in an effort to include how (most) people “generally use the term”; as a synonym for totalitarian, a way to demonize a system that is different than their own, regardless of the facts.

Ignoring the fact that by his new definition a slave cannot call his master authoritarian, it is apparent to any critical viewer that JT has set the tone not for a level-headed, academic discussion of authoritarianism, but one steeped in rhetoric and ideology. This is made even more obvious given how the only time anarchists are mentioned is in the context of abolishing bedtime. For the most part of his video, he addresses liberals’ objections to statist ‘socialism’ by highlighting their hypocrisy in opposing things like the USSR’s secret police, but not their countries’ “plainclothes officers”, condemning gulags but not batting an eye at the US’ current day prison labour (slavery) system as legitimised by the 13th Amendment, etc.

Of course, there’s not much contention to be found here as anarchists have always recognised and criticized this liberal double-standard. However, even in this relatively uncontroversial portion of his essay, JT’s propagandistic intentions are laid bare. He draws the worrying conclusion that in contrast to the US’ police annual killing of around 1000 people, Chinese police have only murdered two people since 2019, based only—and I kid you not—on the unfinished Wikipedia list of killings by law enforcement officers in China. Apparently, JT is unaware that many slaughters at the hands of the police go widely undocumented even in the US, let alone a country as large as China. And with the PRC’s grim record of media censorship in mind, it is laughable to expect Wikipedia to maintain an accurate record of every single act of lethal violence China’s state apparatus subjects its citizens to, especially when they are informed primarily by news reports.

Make no mistake, whenever authoritarians like JT bring up the West’s use of secret police, detention centres, mass censorship and state sanctioned torture of suspected

‘terrorists’, they do so not in vehement condemnation of the state’s monopoly on violence (as anarchists would) but in an attempt to justify the ‘material necessity’ of similar measures being employed by their state-capitalist governments of choice, under the guise of proletarian liberation. In Chapman’s own words, “these things may not be morally correct, but, like it or not, they are necessary. And that is something that every system has agreed on.” Keep this in mind next time you hear from Leninists about how the CNT-FAI had labour camps: they bring them up not for you to condemn as the horrendous mistakes they were, but to accept them as necessary.

He carries on: “I would love nothing more than to see an alternative work, but it never has.” Indeed, it never has, if we were to ignore the successes of the anti-authoritarian Zapatistas in defending the gains of their revolution for almost 3 decades without a state-apparatus, the CNT-FAI’s remarkable military might that exceeded all expectations in the midst of the Spanish civil war, the ongoing struggle of the anti-authoritarian Kurds in Rojava against ISIS across a territory more than twice as big as Israel, and the earlier triumphs of the Ukrainian Makhnovshchina in the face of both Red and White Army opposition. Given all of these examples of anti-authoritarian resistance being defended through purely bottom-up means with no need for mass surveillance nor censorship (indeed, the Makhnovists allowed Bolshevik publications to be distributed in many of their regions even during the height of their tensions), how could authoritarians like JT come to the conclusion that “nothing else has ever worked”?

Here we get to the meat of his argument: “every revolution, including bourgeois revolutions like the American one, are authoritarian by default,” Second Thought asserts before gracing us with a verbatim reading of the relevant part of Engels’ “brilliant little piece”, *On Authority*. His entire ramble can be debunked with the following statement: self-defence is not authoritarian. In the words of Errico Malatesta, anarchists “recognise violence only as a means of legitimate self-defence; and if today they are in favour of violence, it is because they maintain that slaves are always in a state of legitimate defence.” It is as ‘authoritarian’ for the proletariat to violently rebel against the might of the ruling class in defence of their own liberty, as it is for a slave to violently attack his master in an attempt to gain his freedom: not at all. Unfortunately for our dogmatic Leninists, even such elementary logic is not something they’ll ever agree to as doing so would go against Prophet Engels’ incoherent babbling, upon which most of their theoretical assumptions of “necessary authority” are based.

JT then continues on with his point about the censorship of “reactionary outlets” while unsurprisingly—and in typical Leninist fashion—keeping the term wonderfully vague so that anyone whom the “People’s State” dislikes, from the fascistic bourgeoisie to libertarian socialists can fit the bill of a reactionary and therefore be brutally censored by the enlightened elite of untouchable vanguardists. Finally, he closes with a last stupidly confident assertion that

“This anti-authoritarian stance is very much a Western thing, and I think the reason for that is that we here in the imperial core are in a very privileged position. We can hold these naïve beliefs because we don’t have any skin in the game.”

Marxist-Leninists love to use this argument to dismiss any legitimate criticisms of authoritarian ‘socialist’ states as coming from a place of privilege and patronisation, made in an attempt to put down the liberatory efforts of those whose skin isn’t white. Contrary to the authoritarians’ caricature of anarchists as relatively comfortable, Starbucks Latte drinking Twitter users, massive contributions to historical and contemporary anarchist thought and experiments have come from parts of the world like Ireland, Spain, the Ukraine, Egypt, Italy, Syria, South Africa, Korea, China, Japan, Peru, the Caribbeans, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and more [a good starting point on the subject is *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Post-Colonial World, 1870-1940*].

At this point, it must have become abundantly clear to any honest reader that authoritarian leftists are either wilfully deceptive or so entrenched in their ideology that any and all facts that contradict what their most sacred texts assert with little to no evidence are immediately dismissed as “naïve utopianism” or part of a CIA plot to foil the upcoming revolution. I write this article not to Second Thought nor his audience of loyal Leninists, but as a differing perspective for those who find themselves on the fence, genuinely interested in learning more about the anarchist currents of leftism, our history and theory, successes and failures, all independent of the distortions and lies spread by authoritarians with a vested interest in discrediting our voices today, in the hopes of completely silencing them tomorrow.

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